



Your Voice for Public Health

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Testimony in support of H.21 presented to the Joint Committee on Revenue

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Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Geoff Wilkinson, and I am the executive director of the Massachusetts Public Health Association (MPHA).

MPHA is the state's leading advocacy organization for public health. Our membership includes community health workers, nurses, doctors, municipal officials, environmentalists, and academics, all committed to our mission of improving the public's health, establishing health care as a human right, and achieving optimal community, personal, and environmental health.

In addition to advocating for the DPH budget, we operate programs on childhood obesity prevention, environmental health, school health, correctional health, and emergency preparedness. We have particular interests in strengthening the public health infrastructure and eliminating health disparities. The common thread running through all of our work is a commitment to *preventing* injury and disease.

I am here today to testify in support of House 21, legislation filed by Governor Romney. MPHA, along with our colleagues in the Stop the Cuts Coalition, respectfully urges this committee to give H. 21 its favorable support and urges the Legislature as a whole to approve H. 21 as quickly as possible.

We believe that H. 21 is eminently just, fair, and practical – notwithstanding the Romney administration's about-face in response to national Republican pressure. It closes a variety of corporate tax loopholes, making the tax system more rational and equitable. And, of course, it raises much-needed revenue: \$170 million in FY 2006 and \$185 million every year thereafter.

As you will have heard today, this revenue is needed for a broad range of important social programs, from public education, to health care, to affordable housing. The MPHA supports its colleagues in seeking additional funding for these programs.

At the same time, we have a compelling case for the state to vastly increase its investment in public health. Clearly, investing in disease and injury prevention reduces misery and suffering, and it saves lives. It also saves money, by reducing unnecessary medical treatment and hospitalizations. Public health keeps kids in school and adults at work, reducing costs for business.

Vaccinations exemplify the enormous benefit of investing in public health. For every dollar spent on the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine, \$14 in direct costs and \$26 in societal costs are saved.

Despite these benefits, however, the Department of Public Health has experienced a 23 percent net cut since FY01. We have lost almost a quarter of our entire health department in four years, and

— if the budgets for public health hospitals are taken out of the equation — almost a third of core health promotion and disease prevention capacity. The impacts have been profound.

For years, Massachusetts led the nation in expanding access to health care and improving a number of health outcomes. However, last summer, the Boston Foundation and the Massachusetts Health Policy Forum published a report, *Funding Cuts to Public Health in Massachusetts: Losses Over Gains*, which contained several disturbing findings.

- Dramatic and disproportionate funding cuts to Department of Public Health programs have “imperiled” the state’s public health infrastructure and resulted in “deteriorating levels of public health service.”
- Health disparities based on race, ethnicity, and social class are increasing.
- Inadequate resources are being devoted to unglamorous but crucial public health functions, such as data collection, analysis, and reporting.
- Two national studies have documented plummeting state support for public health in Massachusetts. We led the nation (with Colorado) with the largest drop in state funding from FY02 to FY03, moving from 4th place to 22nd place nationally in one year.

In fiscal year 2005, the legislature restored nearly \$40 million to public health programs compared to FY04 – despite the governor’s recommendations to slash FY05 DPH funding by over \$30 million. We applaud the legislature’s leadership in providing enough funds to resume adult immunization programs that had been halted in FY04, to maintain school health services that the governor had zero funded, to protect substance abuse programs threatened with the loss of federal funds, and to make modest restorations in areas such as tobacco control, AIDS, and family health services.

This year, the governor’s House 1 budget provides essentially level funding for DPH. Level funding is not adequate or acceptable in light of the short and long term consequences of years of cuts. DPH suffered disproportionately high cuts compared to other departments of state government, and it suffers a disproportionately lower level of re-investment in House 1.

The governor’s recommendations could have tragic consequences for Massachusetts – for our families and loved ones. If the governor’s recommendation of level funding for immunizations were adopted, we would lose at least half of the current adult vaccine program. The state would be forced to dramatically reduce the availability of flu shots for seniors, or we would have to terminate adult pneumonia, hepatitis, and other vaccines again, with deadly results.

It’s a simple formula: Investing in public health saves lives and money. The more we invest in public health, the more diseases and injuries we prevent, and the more lives and money we save. With this in mind, we’d like to call your attention to five of MPHA’s top budget priorities, including several accounts that are largely outside of the public eye but which have major impact on the public’s health. They include:

School Health Services (4590-0250) Funding request: \$18 million. The enormous increase in the number of children with special health needs makes this program essential. Currently, this program directly funds 103 public school districts and 287 non-public and charter schools. We need at least \$4 million more this year than was provided in FY05. The governor has recommended level funding.

Immunizations (4580-1000) Funding request: \$29 million. This is the minimum level required to preserve current levels of flu, pneumonia, meningitis, and other adult vaccines, as well as provide

up-to-date pediatric and adolescent vaccines. I have attached detailed information about why the current level of \$25 million is inadequate even to maintain existing vaccine programs in the coming year.

State Laboratory (4516-1000) Funding request: \$11 million. This is the minimum required to maintain adequate tuberculosis and STD testing and clinical services, purchase necessary equipment and supplies, and provide laboratory support services to municipal health authorities. Amazingly, while Massachusetts recently ranked at the bottom of a national report card on emergency preparedness—with inadequate laboratory capacity cited as a key concern—the governor is actually recommending a slight cut in the State Laboratory Institute this year. Again, I have attached some detailed supporting information to my testimony.

Hepatitis C (4513-1114) Funding request: \$2.5 million. This funding is necessary to provide education, diagnosis, and treatment for this deadly “stealth epidemic” that affects over 110,000 Massachusetts residents, the majority of whom do not realize they carry and can transmit the virus. The legislature made a significant advance by restoring the hepatitis C line item in the FY05 budget. Now, it’s time to restore funds to these critical programs.

In addition, we support the priorities of our colleague organizations in the public health community and request that you:

- Fund AIDS services (4512-0250) at \$40.5 million, to provide critical education, diagnosis, and treatment services as a new drug-resistant strain of HIV threatens to increase the rate of new cases from the current nearly 1,000 per year;
- Fund smoking cessation (4590-0300) at \$11 million, to partially restore tobacco control programs and reduce growing youth access and addiction rates.
- Provide \$1 million for breast cancer research (4570-1500), to help determine the causes of this disease that strikes one out of seven women.
- Fund substance abuse (4512-0200) at \$54 million, to help prevent those suffering from drug addiction from clogging our criminal justice system.
- Fund prostate cancer education (4513-1112) at \$1 million, to encourage early detection and treatment of this deadly disease.
- Fund teen pregnancy prevention (4530-9000) at \$2 million, to help maintain Massachusetts’ nationally recognized status for having one of the lowest teen birth rates.
- Provide an additional \$11 million for the state’s share to lift the cap on MassHealth enrollment, \$17 million to provide coverage for legal immigrants, \$1.25 million for outreach and enrollment grants, and \$33 million for the state’s share of MassHealth oral health programs.

Thank you very much for your attention.

**Presented by: Geoff Wilkinson, Executive Director
Massachusetts Public Health Association**

