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Chair Cronin, Chair Cahill, members of the Committee, I'm grateful to be here today to testify in support of S.1681/H.2580: An Act to protect the civil rights and safety of all Massachusetts residents. I want to thank Senators Eldridge and Miranda and Representatives Cruz and Sousa for your leadership in filing this bill.

My name is Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, and I am the Executive Director of Children's HealthWatch and a Research Associate Professor at Boston University School of Public Health. Children's HealthWatch is a network of pediatricians and child health researchers, which, over the last 27 years, has interviewed more than 80,000 parents with young children to understand the ways that public policy decisions impact child and family health outcomes.

In speaking with parents, we hear directly about the ways in which fear of deportation or immigration-related violence pushes families to be invisible. Families may disenroll from safety net programs, even when they are still eligible, and stop attending children's activities, going to the grocery store, sending their children to child care, or attending church.

In research, we call this phenomenon the "chilling effect", demonstrated repeatedly to harm children's and parents' mental and physical health. It is unacceptable to tolerate a society in which members of our community do not feel safe. We must not and cannot accept this as simply a "new" reality of our time, no matter who is in the Oval Office.

Children, in particular, bear these costs in unique and dangerous ways. Our research shows that following proposed changes to immigration and safety net policies under the first Trump Administration, children of immigrants were less likely to get the preventive health care they needed – jeopardizing early childhood health monitoring, vaccination, and chronic disease diagnosis and prevention--the building blocks for all future health outcomes. Ultimately, this makes our communities less healthy.

Immigration-related fear and violence are also devastating for mental health, causing children to regress developmentally. For those who have already been separated from their parent, or who live in constant fear of them being detained, imagine thinking: ***When will mom or dad be taken from me?*** Even children whose families are not directly targeted are traumatized, disrupting brain development with long-term negative effects on health.

Since the beginning of the second Trump administration only 11 months ago, we are already beginning to see chilling effects in our data; we measure "immigration status stress", using variety of situations like "I thought I could be deported if I went to



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social/government agency” and whether those situations had caused parents no, a little, or a lot of stress over the past year. We already see an uptick in the first 6 months of 2025 – in January to June 2024 compared to the same period in 2025, the prevalence of moderate or severe stress increased from 8% to 21% - a 144% increase.

While immigration policy is set at the federal level, Massachusetts leaders can and should do what is legally within their ability to ensure our vibrant immigrant communities feel safe and welcomed in this state. The bills before you today suggest specific decisions you can make to protect immigrant families, and recognize their right to live safe, healthy lives.

Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, PhD, MPH
Executive Director, Children's HealthWatch

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to testify here today in support of S.1681/H.2580.

My name is Charlotte Bruce, and I am the Director of Policy for Children's HealthWatch. I also lead the Healthy Families Tax Credits Coalition – a statewide network of more than 80 organizations and institutions dedicated to expanding access to refundable family tax credits in Massachusetts.

A major component of our coalition's work is promoting awareness and uptake of refundable tax credits. This includes helping immigrant and mixed status families file safely and confidently for support they're entitled to. Namely, the Child and Family Tax Credit, which the Legislature established last session and is available to immigrants who file taxes using an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN).

I'm speaking in strong support of the Safe Communities Act because right now, fear is actively preventing families from filing taxes, accessing free tax preparation services, and claiming tax credits.

Earlier this year, a data-sharing agreement between the IRS and ICE sent shockwaves through immigrant communities. This agreement breaks with long-standing federal precedent that tax information ***is private for all taxpayers*** and would not be used to target people for immigration enforcement. Even though parts of this agreement are now being challenged in court – including through a lawsuit led by one of our coalition partners – the damage is already unfolding. Our partners who run free tax prep services



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throughout the Commonwealth are hearing from families who are afraid that filing their taxes – something they want to do – could put them or their loved ones at risk.

We are also deeply concerned about the threats of ICE presence at free tax prep sites, which are often co-located in public spaces like libraries and community centers. Even the perception that immigration enforcement could appear at tax-filing locations is enough to keep families home. Many free tax prep sites – especially those that serve large immigrant populations – are considering alternative options to respond to this fear, like offering virtual appointments. However, recent cuts to the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program (VITA) line item limits their capacity to do so.

The consequences are far reaching. Fewer immigrant families filing taxes means children lose access to refundable tax credits. These credits improve children's health, reduce poverty, and help stabilize households – outcomes documented in decades of research. When families don't file, local communities also miss out on thousands of dollars – including federal dollars.

This is something that state policy can protect against. While ICE enforcement and agency data-sharing agreements are federal, the climate of fear around accessing local services is very much shaped by state and local policy.

This is why the Safe Communities Act is so critical. By ensuring that Massachusetts police cannot be deputized as federal immigration agents, and by prohibiting officers from inquiring about immigration status, you help restore a basic level of trust. Families need to know that interacting with community institutions and services – including tax preparers – will not put them in danger.

At a time of high costs of living and new eligibility restrictions on programs that help families, including our immigrant neighbors, meet basic needs, refundable tax credits are one of the few remaining tools families have to stay afloat. But families cannot access them, and our broader communities cannot benefit, if they are too afraid to file. Passing the Safe Communities Act is not only the right thing to do – it is an evidence-based strategy to protect our residents and support family stability.

Charlotte Bruce, MPH

Director of Policy, Children's HealthWatch