

November 23, 2020

Re: Fiscal Year 21 Budget Negotiations

Representative Aaron Michelwitz
Chair, House Ways and Means
State House, Room 243
Boston, MA 02133

Senator Michael J. Rodrigues
Chair, Senate Ways and Means
State House, Room 212
Boston, MA 02133

Representative Denise Garlick
Vice Chair, House Ways and Means
State House, Room 238
Boston, MA 02133

Senator Cindy Friedman
Vice Chair, Senate Ways and Means
State House, Room 208
Boston, MA 02133

Representative Todd Smola
House Ranking Minority Member
State House, Room 124
Boston, MA 02133

Senator Patrick M. O'Connor
Senate Ranking Minority Member
State House, Room 419
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Honorable Conferees,

As the Conference Committee considers the reconciliation of H.5151 and S.2955, “An Act making appropriations for the fiscal year 2021”, we at Children’s HealthWatch urge you to include several provisions that are critical to promoting the health and well-being of children and families. These provisions are more critical now than ever, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to deepen the public health and economic crises – both of which exacerbate pre-existing inequities – in Massachusetts and across the country and threaten the financial stability and health of thousands of families across our state.

As a nonpartisan network of pediatricians, public health researchers, and children’s health and policy experts committed to improving children’s health in America, we understand the harmful health and economic consequences of financial instability and material hardship, including housing instability and food insecurity. Our research demonstrates that children and their families need consistent access to financial resources, safe and affordable homes, nutritious food, and health care throughout their lifetime in order to thrive. Currently, the state has an opportunity to pass a comprehensive budget for the upcoming fiscal year that appropriately funds critical programs that respond to the realities of families with young children and supports their stability and well-being. We write today in strong support of the following provisions in the Massachusetts FY21 budget:

Priorities in the FY21 state budget that were included in the Senate budget:

- **Senate Outside Section 47, Coronavirus Emergency Notices to Quit.** This provision will ensure that tenants receive critical information with the “notice to quit” letter landlords must send prior to filing an eviction case. These notices can be confusing and intimidating, and this provision will ensure the notices make clear that the tenant has legal rights, and provides information about relevant protections as well as rental assistance information. It will also

provide important data about notices to quit statewide which will help guide housing policy and direct resources where they are most needed.

- **Senate Outside Section 48, Coronavirus Emergency Eviction Continuances.** This provision will ensure that tenants who are in the eviction process in court, who have been affected by COVID-19, and who have request rental assistance, be given a continuance of the court case to process the application, and that the court not enter judgment in the case until a decision on the application has been reached. The court will also be required to provide some data on these continuances.
- **Senate Outside Section 49, Eviction Diversion Initiative Data Collection.** This provision will require the administration and courts to provide data about evictions, notices to quit, rental assistance, and other Eviction Diversion Initiative programs, including numbers and types of cases filed, case outcomes, numbers of rental and mortgage assistance applications and outcomes, amount of funds awarded, time between application and decision, information related to hiring for programs, and other program data.
- **Senate Amendment 336, Ensuring Housing Protections During COVID-19.** In addition to providing additional funding to the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) program, this amendment will provide for certain eviction records to be shielded from the public database, ensuring that parties in these cases are not unduly prejudiced by having an eviction record, which can severely impair prospects for future housing. It also creates a task force to make recommendations relative to the Eviction Diversion Initiative.
- **Senate Amendment 389, Ensuring Access to All Forms of Rental Assistance.** This technical amendment to Senate Outside Section 48 will ensure that tenants who have sought all forms of rental assistance benefit from the court protections, not only those seeking Rental Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) assistance
- **Senate Amendment 271, SNAP Common Application.** Food insecurity projections from Feeding America released in October 2020 predict that Massachusetts will see the highest percent increase in food insecurity as a result of the pandemic. In order to combat food insecurity, reduce health care costs, and stimulate the local economy, please retain the SNAP Common Application amendment that was unanimously included in the Senate budget. This language directs the EOHHS to utilize existing funding to close the SNAP Gap in FY21 by streamlining application processes for MassHealth or the Medicare Savings Program and SNAP, a fully federally funded anti-hunger program. Closing the SNAP Gap is urgently needed to help low-income Massachusetts residents feed themselves and their families.
- **New line item 3000-1044, Reserve to Meet the Costs of Parent Fees for State Subsidized Early Education and Care Providers.** This provision allocates \$40 million to cover the cost of parent fees for those in subsidized care through 2021, simultaneously reducing financial burden and stress for both families and the child care sector. This funding will enable parents to maintain enrollment in care for their child, will reduce budget tradeoffs, and improve their ability to find or retain work, maintain housing, and have enough food to eat. Funding will also critically continue to stabilize child care providers.

Priorities in the FY21 state budget that were included in the House budget:

- **Line item 4408-1000, Lift Kids out of Poverty.** State cash assistance programs that serve families with children (TAFDC), elders and persons with disabilities (EAEDC) have been frozen for many years. Our lowest income households were struggling before the pandemic and are having an

even harder time now. This 10 percent grant increase is a critical step towards lifting our residents out of poverty.

- **Line item 7004-0102, Support for Homeless Individuals.** \$56,355,000 to support the homelessness program to assist individuals who are homeless or in danger of becoming homeless, including assistance to organizations which provide shelter, transitional housing and services that help individuals avoid entry into shelters or who successfully exit shelters
- **Line item 1201-0100, Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Program.** \$800,000 to support VITA sites. At VITA sites – typically located at community-based organizations – volunteers help low- income taxpayers access the Earned Income Tax Credit and other tax credits, allowing them to pay bills, cover essential and urgent needs, save, and plan for the future. VITA sites also offer financial education and link low-income taxpayers to other critical services, strengthening families and the local economy. VITA sites are a low-cost and high return activity offering up to 60 to 1 return on investment. Over 30,000 individuals are served by the 80 existing VITA sites, and the services that sites provide results in \$60M in tax credits for taxpayers. These sites will become more important than ever as we move toward economic recovery across the Commonwealth and those individuals impacted the most severely by the crisis will need adequate supports to ensure they are able to access all tools available for their recovery.

Based at Boston Medical Center, Children’s HealthWatch interviews caregivers of young children on the frontlines of pediatric care to understand how economic hardships impact the health of young children and their families and what policy improvements are necessary to alleviate these hardships. Based on our extensive research, we understand the harms of financial instability and material hardship, and thus write today in strong support of a FY21 budget that includes the above provisions.

Supporting the health and stability of children and families across our Commonwealth is necessary for its current and future prosperity and well-being. Decades of research show comprehensive, multi-sector strategies are necessary to reduce hardships, promote health equity, and achieve optimal health and economic outcomes. Children’s HealthWatch thanks House and Senate leadership for recognizing the role of housing, child care, food, and income in promoting the health and economy of families across the Commonwealth, and urge the Conference Committee to include the above provisions in their final version of the bill.

Sincerely,



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