

Written Testimony
Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities
Boston, MA

November 19, 2019

Chairwoman Chang-Diaz, Chairwoman Khan, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of Children's HealthWatch, based at Boston Medical Center, in support of H.173/S.58: An Act relative to economic mobility for families with low-incomes. 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 know children and their families need enough financial resources to live in safe, stable homes, have access to childcare, and be able to afford basic needs without sacrificing expenditures necessary to thrive. We at Children's HealthWatch are concerned about the effects of economic hardships that families with young children across the Commonwealth face given our research and the research of others that links hardships with poor health outcomes. Currently, the state has opportunities to improve the health of young children and reduce economic hardship by enacting legislation that responds to the realities of families with young children.

The mission of Children's HealthWatch is to improve the health and development of young children by informing policies that address and alleviate economic hardships. We accomplish this mission by interviewing caregivers of young children on the frontlines of pediatric care, in urban emergency departments and primary care clinics in five cities: Boston, Minneapolis, Little Rock, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Since 1998, we have interviewed over 70,000 caregivers of children under four years of age, and analyzed those interviews to determine the impact of public policies on the health and development of young children. Based on this experience and expertise, we understand barriers to economic mobility and subsequent hardships that families face, and thus write today in strong support of H.173/S.58, which would address and mitigate these impacts.

Cliff effects are barriers to economic mobility for families:

Public assistance is an essential support for millions of working families whose earned incomes are too low to afford basic needs including food, housing, utilities, health care, and child care. However, as families move towards economic stability, increases in work hours or wages can trigger a reduction in or loss of benefits, resulting in a net loss of income. This phenomenon is known as the "cliff effect". Our research has demonstrated the harm that cliff effects and loss of program eligibility has on child health. We recently published research that shows when a family's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are reduced or lost as a result of increased income, their children are more likely to be in fair or poor health and at risk of developmental delays, and the family is more likely to experience hardships such as food insecurity and forgone healthcare.¹ This is a result of strained resources despite an increase in work income, which forces families to choose between basic needs. The subsequent experience of hardship has significant implications for the health, education, and economic stability of families and children across their lifespan.^{2,3} We know from our interview data that families want to and are often able to work; however, the cliff effect often forces families to choose between accepting an

increase in hours or wage and affording basic needs, further trapping them in a cycle of poverty and reliance on safety net programs.⁴

Across Massachusetts, families and individuals are struggling to achieve economic mobility as a result of a limited and expensive housing market, coupled with stagnated incomes and high costs of other basic needs such as childcare and food. H.173/S.58 would address this by improving access to assistance programs through the establishment of a telephone hotline, ensuring data transparency and system alignment to better understand successes of government programs and gaps in services, and direction to the Secretariats to study the impacts of minimum wage increases on cliff effects and accordingly make changes in assistance programs. Identifying ways to reduce barriers to programs across agencies and improve collaboration will promote systems change efforts that are necessary for improving financial stability and family health. We have found that when families are able to access multiple programs, specifically nutrition and housing assistance, their housing stability improves, which is strongly associated with better health outcomes.⁵ Closer coordination across agencies, however, is necessary to ensure efforts address cliff effects, and that families are able to access these supports when they need them the most.

This bill is necessary to ensure that when families increase their earnings, their health also improves. Supporting the health and development of children and families across our Commonwealth is essential to our state's current and future prosperity and well-being. Decades of research show comprehensive, multi-sector strategies that reduce poverty and hardships are necessary to achieve optimal health outcomes and financial stability. For these reasons, we strongly urge you to swiftly and favorably report this important piece of legislation out of committee.

Sincerely,



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¹ Ettinger de Cuba S, Chilton M, Bovell-Ammon A, Knowles M, Coleman SM, Black MM, Cook JT, Cutts DB, Casey PH, Heeren TC, Frank DA. Loss of SNAP is associated with food insecurity and poor health in working families with young children. *Health Affairs*. 2019;38(5):765-73.

² Sandel M, Sheward R, Ettinger de Cuba S, Coleman SM, Frank DA, Chilton M, Black M, Heeren T, Pasquariello J, Casey P, Ochoa E, Cutts D. Unstable Housing and Caregiver and Child Health in Renter Families. *Pediatrics*, 2018; e20172199 DOI: 10.1542/peds.2017-2199

³ Cook JT, Frank DA, Casey PH, Rose-Jacobs R, Black MM, Chilton M, Ettinger de Cuba S, Appugliese D, Coleman S, Heeren T, Berkowitz C, Cutts DB. A brief indicator of household energy security: associations with food security, child health, and child development in US infants and toddlers. *Pediatrics*. 2008;122:e867-e875. doi: 10.1542/peds/2008-0286

⁴ Thomas D. The Cliff Effect: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back-Policy Design as a Disincentive for Economic Mobility. *PublicINReview*. 2013;1(3):34-51.

⁵ Sandel M, Cutts DB, Meyers A, Ettinger de Cuba S, Coleman S, Black MM, Casey PH, Chilton M, Cook JT, Shortell A, Heeren T, Frank DA. Co-enrollment for Child Health: How Receipt and Loss of Food and Housing Subsidies Relate to Housing Security and Statutes for Streamlined, Multi-Subsidy Application. *Journal of Applied Research on Children*. 2015;5(2):Article 2.