

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

July 23, 2021

RE: Written testimony in support of H.185/S.135

Chairman Gomez, Chairwoman Blais, 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 strong support of H.185/S.135: *An Act requiring the evaluation of governmental services on children and families of the Commonwealth.*

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. Over two decades of research at Children's HealthWatch has consistently shown that improving the health and well-being of children and families requires robust resources and supports across multiple domains including housing, nutrition, child care, utilities, and health care. We know that children and families do not live in siloes and program design, implementation, and evaluation are critical to adequately responding to the realities of children's lives and ensuring that all children have equal opportunities to thrive.

State agencies in Massachusetts serving children and families currently collect and analyze data – including disaggregated data – on program participation and outcomes, but these efforts are often focused only on a narrow set of variables within the domain of the agency itself. This siloed process limits the ability to understand how these programs operate together to support children and families and how outcomes are improved across sectors. In doing so, the Commonwealth misses opportunities to understand the landscape of programs and interventions that serve the needs of families with children, and coordinate strategies that target or improve interventions for children.

H.185/S.135 would improve our ability to respond to the complex realities of child and family life by utilizing modern data science to link data across systems and sectors. Applying the same methodology as the Commonwealth's Public Health Data Warehouse – a successful cross-sector database to explore the causes and consequences of opioid use disorder – this legislation would examine how government-funded child and family programs interact to affect multiple outcomes across the lifespan. This methodology exists in Massachusetts, and has been useful in planning successful public health interventions. Through better coordination and deeper understanding of access to services, health care utilization, school readiness and achievement, or employment and earnings, Massachusetts would be able to implement better policies and programs to address the needs of children and families – **informed by data**. Furthermore, creating opportunities to distinguish the effects of programs and policies by race, ethnicity, gender, region, and income through an annual report is a critical step toward examining the racial equity implications of policies and seeking opportunities to advance equity in Massachusetts.

As those who care for the health of the Commonwealth's children, we understand the vitally important role public policies and programs play for the health of children, particularly the youngest. We also know that these investments must be informed by robust data. This bill will enable agencies better coordinate, plan, and improve the health of children and families in Massachusetts. We urge you to swiftly and favorably report H.185/S.135 out of committee.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Megan Sandel', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Megan Sandel MD, MPH
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