Written Testimony
Joint Committee on Children Families, and Persons with Disabilities
Boston, MA
April 13, 2020

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 strong support of H.4622: “An Act to provide short-term relief for families in deep poverty”. 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 for children to thrive their families must be able to afford basic needs without sacrificing expenditures. We at Children’s HealthWatch are concerned about the economic hardships currently being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, including reports of families with young children across the Commonwealth struggling to afford rent, utilities, food, and health care. We urge the Legislature to take immediate action to respond to their realities and ensure families are able to meet basic needs and support health during and after this pandemic.

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. With over two decades of experience documenting the ways in which economic conditions and policy changes impact the health and learning abilities of infants and toddlers and their families, we know it is critical for the health and well-being of our state and nation to implement policies that provide resources to ensure all families are able to meet basic needs. Based on our extensive research, we understand the harms of economic hardships that families face, and thus write today in strong support of H.4622. This bill will provide immediate cash payments in the amount of the maximum monthly benefit for the household size to 30,000 families with children who receive Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) benefits, and 19,000 elders and persons with disabilities who receive Emergency Aid to Elders, Disabled and Children (EAEDC) benefits. Swift distribution of these cash payments will provide essential assistance to families and individuals that are struggling in the wake of COVID-19 and mitigate financial circumstances that may threaten families’ ability to access basic needs necessary for their health and well-being.

Children’s HealthWatch has found consistently across our and others' research that when families cannot afford basic needs, they experience significant hardships (such as food insecurity, housing instability, and energy insecurity) that have lasting adverse health and economic impacts across the life course.\(^1\,^2\,^3\,^4\) We also know that for those living in deep poverty, particularly children, this condition often persists over time as it is even more difficult for them to escape poor conditions and achieve economic mobility.\(^5\) Currently, the state has an opportunity to respond to worsened hardship and needs among families with the lowest incomes in our state who are greatest risk of these adverse condition.

The unprecedented economic disruption caused by COVID-19 has hit families with low incomes and communities of color particularly hard. Families with low incomes prior to the crisis were already
struggling to afford basic needs. The current crisis exacerbates this reality as their work hours and incomes have been disproportionately reduced. While many employees have shifted to a work-from-home model in response to social distancing guidelines, the Economic Policy Institute recently reported that only 9.2% of workers in the lowest quartile of the wage distribution can telework, compared to 61.5% of workers in the highest quartile. This disparity exists across racial lines as well, as communities of color disproportionately live in poverty and work in industries that are least able to work from home or have closed as a result of COVID, such as hospitality, service, and child care. While we have to prioritize slowing the spread of COVID-19, we also need to recognize the dire financial, health, hunger, and housing impact these containment measures are having on our neighbors with the fewest resources, and respond immediately to those needs. Research demonstrates that in emergencies, cash transfers, – such as the ones designated in H.4622 – are a rapid and cost-effective strategy to provide basic needs.

The most recent Great Recession demonstrated the ways in which families of young children with low incomes are not only disproportionately impacted by economic downturns, but also that it takes much longer for families currently facing financial hardships to recover from recession than others. While it is essential that sustainable policies are enacted to improve long-term health and well-being of Massachusetts residents, we recognize that families with low incomes also need rapid and immediate assistance to meet their current needs. H.4622 would address this need and offer critical support to those who require it most.

As those who care for the health of America’s children, we understand the vitally important role public policies and programs play for the health of children, particularly the youngest. We believe there is an urgent need to respond to the immediate threat of COVID-19 among low-income families, and strongly urge you to swiftly and favorably report H.4622 out of committee.

Sincerely,

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8 Ettinger de Cuba S, Bovell A, Coleman S, Frank DA. Diluting the dose: Cuts to SNAP benefits increased food insecurity following the Great Recession. Children’s HealthWatch. 2015.