

Task Force Outlines Immediate Needs to Fight Virus

Health Association Convened Task Force on Tuesday

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MARCH 20, 2020.....Citing heightened risks that low-wage workers and immigrants face during the coronavirus outbreak, a coalition of public health experts and activists called Friday for officials to ensure equity in the state's response to the virus.

Members of an emergency task force the Massachusetts Public Health Association convened on Tuesday said in a briefing that legislative and administrative action needs to go further to protect the most vulnerable residents.

They focused on four [key policies](#): ensuring immigrants can safely access COVID-19 testing and treatment, increasing access to quarantine for those experiencing homelessness, offering emergency paid sick time for all workers during the crisis, and temporarily pausing all evictions, foreclosures and termination of benefits.

The task force, whose requests were backed by dozens of groups, will continue to push on other topics such as protecting inmates, but hopes to see the policies enacted in the "very immediate future," said MHPA Executive Director Carlene Pavlos.

Policymakers in Congress and on Beacon Hill are surveying a wide range of responses to the unfolding crisis.

Many aspects of public life in Massachusetts have been shut down over the past two weeks as the number of confirmed cases [ballooned](#) from the single digits to more than 320. Schools are closed, restaurants and bars cannot host patrons for dine-in service, hotels have experienced a cascade of cancellations, and daycares will need to shut down on Monday.

While the impacts are widespread, speakers at Friday's virtual press conference — which drew more than 400 viewers on Zoom — warned that some Bay Staters still lack important protections.

Activists want lawmakers to expand available sick leave options for workers beyond the earned sick time required by a successful 2014 ballot question.

They called for immediate passage of emergency sick time legislation that would guarantee workers at least 15 days of job-protected paid leave for use to recover from illness or care for a family member, either during the COVID-19 outbreak or a future public health emergency.

The proposal would cap benefits at \$850 per week and would be paid by the state, not by individual employers.

"Low-wage workers are our first line of defense against COVID-19, but they're feeling the greatest economic impact of this outbreak," said Pablo Ruiz, deputy director of SEIU and a co-chair of the Raise Up Massachusetts coalition.

President Donald Trump on Wednesday [signed](#) legislation requiring employers with fewer than 500 workers to provide two weeks of paid sick leave, the costs of which will be offset by federal tax credits, for employees who are ill with COVID-19, are caring for someone afflicted, or must take care of children whose schools close.

Speakers also pushed for action to prevent evictions and foreclosures beyond steps [already taken](#) by Boston stakeholders and courts to pause removal proceedings.

City Life / Vida Urbana Executive Director Lisa Owens said while that progress is "a step in the right direction," it does not do enough to protect those who are further along in the eviction process. Tenants that already face execution orders from evictions could still wind up on the street, she said.

"Now is the time to increase the social safety net for everybody," Owens said. "No one should have to live in fear of displacement in a time when everybody is on high alert."

Housing Committee Co-chair Rep. Kevin Honan and Rep. Mike Connolly filed legislation last week that would mandate a statewide pause on eviction and foreclosure actions during the state of emergency.

In the third key policy priority the task force outlined, Karen Chen, executive director of the Chinese Progressive Association, said the state's increasing COVID-19 testing capacity needs to dedicate resources to areas with large immigrant populations and the local community health centers that serve them.

She also urged state leaders to take a firm stance against xenophobia and racism that has affected Asian-American communities in particular, referencing President Donald Trump's description of the illness as the "Chinese virus."

"In this environment of fear and stress, it's important that Governor Baker and other state leaders ensure that immigrants get tested without fear of exposure and other legal consequences," Chen said.

Another key hazard vulnerable populations face is the lack of space at homelessness and emergency shelters.

Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance Director of Programs and Planning Joyce Tavon said the roughly 5,400 individuals who stay in the state's homeless shelters every night experience crowded conditions with "no room for social distancing" as public health experts recommend.

Many are seniors with complex medical needs, she said, but facilities do not have space or money to provide quarantine and distancing opportunities to protect them — something Tavon said the Baker administration needs to address.

"They're highly vulnerable to contracting the virus and becoming critically ill from COVID-19, and their potential for transmission is great," she said. "What we have before us is not a homelessness problem but a public health problem."

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