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Coalition Urges Infusion of Federal Funding to Transform Massachusetts' Broken Local Public Health System

BOSTON, MA – Today, a coalition of public health, municipal, regional, state and academic leaders held a press conference on the State House steps, calling for an infusion of federal funding to transform Massachusetts' dangerously inadequate local public health system. The group is calling on the Legislature to invest 5% of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds coming to Massachusetts from the federal government – roughly \$251 million over 5 years – towards building a local public health system that is equitable, efficient and effective. The funding would be used to:

- Establish integrated, 21st century data systems
- Invest in workforce development to ensure that every community benefits from the expertise of trained professionals, and
- Eliminate the significant inequities in public health services and capacity between municipalities.

Following the press conference, members of the coalition testified at the virtual hearing held by the Legislature's Joint Committee on Ways and Means and the House Committee on Federal Stimulus and Census Oversight, which was focused on possible uses of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Funding in the areas of Health Care, Mental Health, Public Health and Human Services.

“Our local public health system is broken. It leaves people in small, rural communities and low-income urban communities without critical protections,” said **State Senator Jo Comerford**. “The Legislature must seize this once-in-a-generation opportunity to create an equitable 21st century local public health system that Massachusetts can be proud of.”

“There are more than 6 million people in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and public health touches the lives of every single one of them,” said **State Representative Denise Garlick**. “There is no more important work, no more valuable work, and no work that has more of a profound impact on the health and wellness of our residents. We must invest in this system, so that it can provide the protections we need.”

“Whether it's inspecting restaurants, protecting residents from substandard housing, or responding to cases of communicable disease, our local public health system is essential to keep Massachusetts residents safe,” said **State Representative Hannah Kane**. “It's time to invest the resources needed to create an effective system that efficiently delivers services in every community. If not now, in the aftermath of a pandemic, then when?”

“At its best, local public health is a vital public service that can reduce healthcare costs, improve the health of Massachusetts residents, and make our communities safer. As the pandemic exposed, our current local public health system is not functioning optimally or uniformly across the municipalities of our state,” said **Eileen McAnney, President of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation.**

“Recognizing these shortfalls, the Legislature should allocate some of the federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act to bridge the gap between the current system and what our residents expect and deserve.”

“The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that the tragic inequities of our local public health system are a matter of life-and-death,” said **Craig Andrade, Assoc. Dean for Practice at the BU School of Public Health and a member of the Brockton Board of Health.** “When a community is overwhelmed with cases, and staff are not able to quickly implement contact tracing, provide education and recommend isolation and quarantine, more people get sick and more people die. And because we currently fund local public health entirely at the municipal level, more of those avoidable illnesses and deaths occur in low-income communities, often communities of color. That is unacceptable, and it must change.”

“Organizing local public health services at the municipal level is inherently inefficient, especially for small towns,” said **Phoebe Walker, Director of Community Services for the Franklin Regional Council of Governments.** “Our regional model demonstrates that rural communities can come together effectively to ensure they all receive essential public health services, no matter how small or under resourced their town is.”

“Our health and safety should not depend on the color of our skin, the amount of money we make, or the zip code we live in,” said **Carlene Pavlos, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Public Health Association.** “The American Rescue Plan Act is the result of a public health crisis. It is a moral imperative that a portion of these resources be used to address the broken system in Massachusetts and to create an equitable, 21st century public health system.”

In addition to those quoted above, the following public health experts and community leaders also testified:

- Maddie Ribble, Director of Public Policy, MA Public Health Association
- Cheryl Sbarra, Executive Director, MA Association of Health Boards
- Mayor Brian Arrigo, City of Revere
- Tess Curran, Director of Health and Human Services, City of Fall River
- Damon Chaplin, Director, City of New Bedford Health Department
- Tierney Flaherty, Director of Intergovernmental Relations, Boston Public Health Commission
- Soloe Dennis, Assistant Health Commissioner, City of Springfield
- Barry Keppard, Director of Public Health, Metropolitan Area Planning Council
- Barbara L’Italien, Partners in Health

The Massachusetts Public Health Association (MPHA) is a nonprofit organization that promotes a healthy Massachusetts through advocacy, community organizing, and coalition building. We are leaders in the movement to create health equity by addressing the root causes of health and wellness. We promote policies that impact the major drivers of health outcomes, such as access to healthy food, safe affordable housing, and transportation. We also advocate for equitable public health services throughout the Commonwealth. To learn more, visit www.mapublichealth.org. ###