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Public Health and Municipal Leaders Decry Governor Baker's Proposal to Weaken Critical Local Public Health Legislation

BOSTON, MA – Public health leaders and municipal officials from across the Commonwealth are condemning Governor Charlie Baker's decision not to sign transformative public health legislation and are urging the legislature to reject his proposed amendments to the bill. The Statewide Accelerated Public Health for Every Community (SAPHE 2.0) Act would overhaul the state's woefully inadequate local public health system and was passed unanimously in both the House (153-0) and Senate (39-0). Yesterday evening, the Governor returned the bill to the legislature with amendments that undermine the minimum public health standards established in the bill by making the standards optional.

"Last month both houses of the legislature voted *unanimously* to pass the SAPHE 2.0 Act," said **Carlene Pavlos, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Public Health Association**. "House and Senate leadership brought this bill to the floor in order to address the longstanding inequities and inefficiencies that have plagued the local public health system in the Commonwealth. By returning the bill with an amendment that eliminates consistent public health standards for all municipalities, the Governor is doubling down on the patchwork public health system that perpetuated inequities during the pandemic. Public health crises do not respect municipal boundaries. Every Massachusetts resident deserves basic public health protections no matter their race, income, or zip code. We urge the legislature to continue to lead on public health, reject these amendments, and return the SAPHE 2.0 Act to the Governor's desk."

SAPHE 2.0 creates minimum public health standards for every Massachusetts community, ensures a qualified workforce by credentialing public health workers, incentivizes municipalities to increase efficiency by sharing services, creates a uniform data collection and reporting system, and dedicates state funding to support local boards of health and health departments.

The bill implements the unanimous [recommendations](#) of the Special Commission on Local and Regional Public Health, issued in June 2019, as well as a [key recommendation](#) from the Report of the Joint Committee on COVID-19 and Emergency Preparedness and Management, which was issued in June 2022. The legislation also serves as a blueprint for the investments made in the recently enacted ARPA bill, which allocated over \$200 million for improvements to the local public health system.

"Through the Special Commission on Local and Regional Public Health, state and local leadership came together and acknowledged that the public health system in the Commonwealth had deficiencies and was no longer adequately serving our residents," said **Kevin Mizikar, Town Manager for Shrewsbury who represented the Mass. Municipal Association on the Special Commission**. "House 5104, as unanimously enacted in the house and senate, was the solution to those deficiencies. Local governments

need this framework to support, inform and modernize their actions that literally mean the difference between life and death for the residents we serve.

“The public health community has been working towards passage of SAPHE 2.0 for many years,” said **Cheryl Sbarra, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards**. “It is discouraging that the Governor would undermine the purpose of this legislation, which is to ensure that every resident in Massachusetts can expect the same public health protections, whether they live in Brockton or Swampscott. In addition, the SAPHE 2.0 Act is the blueprint to operationalize the \$200 million in ARPA funding allocated to transform local public health services. It is essential that the legislature put the bill back on the governor’s desk, and that the governor sign it when it gets to him.”

The SAPHE 2.0 Act builds on a body of work undertaken by the Baker administration, the legislature, municipal leaders, public health officials, fiscal policy experts, and other key stakeholders. The SAPHE 2.0 Act is supported by municipal officials in all regions of the state. The legislation was filed by a bipartisan group of legislators and was passed unanimously in the House and Senate.

“Without SAPHE 2.0 we will have missed an enormous opportunity to improve public health in every city and town in Massachusetts,” said **Paul Brodeur, Mayor of Melrose and Vice-Chair of the Metropolitan Mayors Coalition**. “We are disappointed and will work with the legislature to ensure that we do not wait another year before the provisions of SAPHE 2.0 that matter most become law.”

“It is very disappointing that the Governor did not take this opportunity to support the creation of minimum standards for local public health services in every community in Massachusetts,” said **Phoebe Walker, Director of Community Services for the Franklin Regional Council of Governments**. “Without such standards, we know that many of those in under-resourced communities will continue to experience the kind of health inequities that have been brought into public view through the COVID pandemic. The next public health challenge is at our doorstep. I urge the legislature to act again to ensure that every municipality is prepared to meet the challenges ahead.”

"I am disheartened by the Governor's action returning SAPHE 2.0 to the legislature unsigned," said **Kevin Sweet, Town Administrator for the Town of Wrentham and Executive Director of the Metacomet Public Health Alliance**. "Over the years, I have been involved in a number of public health regionalization efforts that have failed due to a lack of sustainable funding commitment. We have an opportunity with SAPHE 2.0 to provide this commitment and expand upon our local public health capabilities."

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. ###