

October 15, 2024

Chair Marjorie Decker
Chair Sal DiDomenico
Massachusetts Poverty Commission

Dear Chair Decker, Chair DiDomenico, and honorable members of the Poverty Commission,

The Massachusetts Public Health Alliance (MPHA) is a statewide non-profit advocacy organization focused on advancing community-driven policy change that fosters the conditions for people to achieve their full health potential where they live, work, and play. We envision a Massachusetts of healthy, equitable, just, and thriving communities where racism, poverty, and zip code do not determine our health or lifespan. We know that poverty and health are closely linked, and any strategy to promote health equity must focus on reducing poverty and dismantling structural racism, which has shaped many of the policies that perpetuate poverty.

We urge the Poverty Commission to include recommendations on progressive tax policy, direct cash assistance, and housing policies that prevent homelessness and displacement.

Progressive tax policy

Massachusetts is still recovering from the economic damage of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as American Rescue Plan Act funding is spent down, new sources of progressive revenue will be essential. MPHA supports progressive tax policies that generate revenue through taxes on our state's wealthiest individuals and corporations. The Fair Share tax has shown the promise of progressive tax policy. While revenues are down in other areas, resources generated by the Fair Share tax have funded critical programs and services that help meet the basic needs of residents living in poverty, including food and regional transportation access. We encourage the Commission to explore other, similar progressive tax policies.

Tax credits and direct cash assistance

Tax credits and direct cash assistance programs play a critical role in giving individuals and families resources to meet their basic needs including access to food, housing, education, health care, and other essential services linked to good health. We encourage the Commission to recommend expanded eligibility for tax credits and benefits programs for residents, especially noncitizens who are currently ineligible for such programs despite demonstrated need:

1. Extend eligibility for the EITC to immigrant and mixed-status families who file taxes using an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN).
2. Restore SNAP and TAFDC eligibility for immigrant households.

Housing

More must be done to address Massachusetts's housing crisis. In particular, we urge the Commission to consider policies to lower housing costs and prevent people from losing the housing they have. People who face housing instability, such as eviction, foreclosure, displacement, or homelessness, experience a litany of negative physical and mental health outcomes, including chronic stress, which increases risk for diabetes, heart disease, obesity,

asthma, and other chronic diseases. Housing instability is also harmful to children's well-being, development, and educational outcomes. When housing costs are high compared to incomes, people are more likely to cut back on other necessities like food, medication, and health care. Because of the profound effects of housing instability on health, MPHA supports several policies to stabilize housing costs and prevent homelessness:

1. Lift the statewide ban on rent control and allow municipalities to enact rent stabilization policies that meet the needs of their residents.
2. Fund the Massachusetts Healthy Homes Program, which will address a multitude of health hazards in housing including, but not limited to, lead, asbestos, mold and pests.
3. Prevent evictions by expanding access to counsel in eviction proceedings and automatic eviction record sealing.

Finally, we urge the Commission to consider the infrastructure required to support the recommendations you make. In particular, local public health infrastructure is an important and sometimes overlooked piece of the puzzle in addressing poverty. Across the state, the local public health workforce provides essential direct services to residents. For instance, public health nurses have partnered with libraries, senior centers, and homeless shelters to provide vaccines and other medical care. In addition, local and regional boards of health are responsible for overseeing housing code enforcement, which is critical to ensuring that our state's housing stock is safe to live in.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. Please don't hesitate to reach out if we can be of service as the Commission considers this important topic.

Sincerely,

Oami Amarasingham
Deputy Director