

Chairman Aaron Michlewitz  
House Committee on Ways and Means  
Massachusetts State House  
24 Beacon Street, Room 243  
Boston, MA 02133

Chairman Michael Rodrigues  
Senate Committee on Ways and Means  
Massachusetts State House  
24 Beacon Street, Room 212  
Boston, MA 02133

March 26, 2024

**RE: Fiscal Year 2025 State Budget**

Dear Chairman Michlewitz and Chairman Rodrigues:

Mass General Brigham appreciates the opportunity to provide input into the development of the FY2025 State Budget. The Mass General Brigham network includes the Harvard affiliated teaching hospitals: Massachusetts General Hospital, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Mass Eye and Ear, Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital and McLean Hospital along with multiple community health centers and hospitals, a physician network, home care and long-term care services and a health insurance plan. We are the largest private employer in Massachusetts, with approximately 80,000 employees, including physicians, nurses, scientists, and caregivers.

Through our **United Against Racism** initiative, Mass General Brigham aims to promote health equity, improve community health outcomes, and develop external advocacy programs and initiatives that support systematic changes to improve equity. Our policy priorities for external advocacy include addressing the social determinants of health, expanding access to substance use disorder services, reducing inequities in maternal/child health, and supporting violence prevention and disability service programs.

These priority areas have been informed by our clinical equity work, including our participation in MassHealth's Quality and Equity Incentive Program. Consequently, we are improving data collection and reporting on demographic and social risk factors such as race, ethnicity, language, disability status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and health-related social needs, as well as implementing evidence-based clinical interventions to improve quality and access. These efforts have reinforced the importance of state investments in these policy priority areas and we appreciate your leadership in advancing programs and policies that impact the health and wellbeing of all residents via the Commonwealth's FY2025 budget.

**Nutrition Security**

As a member of the Feed Kids Coalition, we very much appreciate your support in fully funding School Meals for All in the FY24 state budget, and respectfully request that you do so once again in FY25. Massachusetts' permanent investment in universal school meals has solidified our state as a leader in prioritizing the well-being of students and families. Providing school meals is a proven way to increase students' attendance, improve behavior and academic achievement, and reduce childhood hunger and tardiness. By continuing to remove financial constraints and stigma around students' economic status, we can ensure every student in Massachusetts is hunger-free and ready to learn. Please continue to invest in School Meals for All and prioritize full funding for **line items 1596-2422 and 7053-1925** in the FY25 budget.

As a member of the Feeding our Neighbors Coalition, we are deeply grateful to the Massachusetts Legislature for including \$6M in the FY23 supplemental budget to restore critical state SNAP benefits for

legally-present immigrants who are barred from federal SNAP benefits. We ask that you include \$18M in FY25 funding in **line item 4400-1032** to continue this program. State-funded SNAP benefits are critical to help families get on their feet and have access to nutrition benefits.

### **Affordable Housing**

Health and housing are inextricably linked, and research has demonstrated the connection between housing stability and health outcomes. Therefore, we respectfully ask that you include \$3.5M in the FY25 budget to fund an Access to Counsel program (**line item 0321-1800**), alongside the full Access to Counsel bill language contained in S.864/H.4360, which provides the framework for a statewide program. Without representation, many tenants face eviction and risk becoming homeless.

### **Substance Use Disorder and Infectious Diseases Services**

Mass General Brigham's Cooley Dickinson Hospital (CDH) is a member of Project ABLE, a statewide coalition of AIDS service providers, advocates and people with HIV/AIDS/Hepatitis C. CDH's interdisciplinary team of infectious disease specialists, primary care providers, and community health workers provide high quality care and support services for people living with HIV; harm reduction and education for people who use drugs; gender affirming health & social services navigation for transgender/nonbinary individuals; testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections; housing support & advocacy; transportation and access to healthy food.

We ask that you level-fund the Department of Public Health's HIV/AIDS/Hepatitis C Program (**line item 4512-0103**) at \$35 million and restore the \$5.6 million the Governor cut from the HIV/AIDS/Hepatitis C Line Item in her FY25 budget to:

- Continue \$1.6 million in funding for workforce development investments in public health agencies that serve vulnerable populations at high risk of HIV and other infectious diseases, such as Hepatitis C, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and COVID-19.
- Continue \$3 million in funding for HIV, Hepatitis C, and STI testing services.
- Continue \$1 million in funding for Syringe Services Programs (SSPs). A cut to these services would result in over 3,500 individuals losing access, representing 13% fewer Massachusetts residents who inject drugs receiving sterile injection equipment, overdose prevention and naloxone, and connection to medical care and substance use treatment. The impact would be increased HIV and hepatitis transmission and fatal overdose.

### **Maternal/Child Health**

Mass General Brigham is a proud supporter of An act to expand equitable perinatal mental health services or the Massachusetts Moms Matter Act (H.1984/S.1261), which would establish two grant programs to grow and diversify the state's perinatal mental health (PMH) workforce and invest in community-based organizations supporting perinatal people. We ask that 1) \$500,000 be included in the FY25 budget for grants to establish or expand the capacity of schools or programs that provide education and training to grow and diversify the perinatal mental and behavioral health care workforce and 2) \$500,000 be included for grants to community-based organizations working to address perinatal mental health conditions and perinatal substance use disorders, with a focus on medically underserved populations.

### **Violence Prevention**

Mass General Brigham's Newton-Wellesley Hospital and Brigham and Women's Hospital Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Programs are member programs of Jane Doe Inc. (JDI) which convenes 57+

domestic violence and sexual assault programs from across the Commonwealth. As a member program, we have access to national and statewide professional development opportunities as well as capacity building and technical assistance and trainings on a wide range of topics (including, but not limited to, intimate partner abuse, sexual assault, stalking, elder abuse, child abuse, commercial sexual exploitation, healthy equity, etc.).

We are therefore supportive of JDI's funding request to the Massachusetts Legislature to mitigate impending cuts to the federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) programs to maintain vital services. While the terrain of future federal funding remains uncertain in this time of great divisiveness, here in Massachusetts, we are grateful that we are united with our legislative partners in our commitment to preserve services for survivors.

To date, the Legislature has allocated \$40 million of the total request to support the VOCA Bridge. This funding will maintain services and staffing in FY25, but an additional \$20 million is necessary to stabilize essential victim service programs in every county of the state and ensure that access to high-quality, trauma-informed services remains accessible amid catastrophic reductions in federal funding.

### **Disability Services**

MassHealth's Personal care attendant (PCA) services are vital for allowing individuals in Massachusetts living with certain chronic or permanent disabilities to live independently in the community and avoid unnecessary illness, hospitalization, and/or institutionalization. Supporting the PCA workforce in Massachusetts must be a priority in order to support long-term health and minimize avoidable inpatient hospitalizations for individuals living with disabilities who have impaired self-care and activities of daily living (ADLs). A robust PCA workforce will help to optimize hospital throughput and inpatient utilization while also minimizing delays to discharge for hospitals in Massachusetts and helping individuals with disability live independently and thrive in their communities. We ask that you increase funding to the PCA program to ensure the final FY25 budget protects people with disabilities, elders, caregivers, and the families who will need this care in the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our budget priorities. We recognize that you and your colleagues have difficult decisions to make this year, given the Commonwealth's challenging fiscal situation, and are grateful for your consideration. If you should have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to:

#### **Maria Rios**

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Sincerely,



#### **Elsie Taveras, MD, MPH**

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