

Tuesday, March 26, 2024

Chair Michlewitz, Chair Rodrigues, and Members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means:

My name is Jonathan Cohn, and I am the Policy Director at Progressive Massachusetts, a statewide grassroots advocacy group fighting for a more equitable, just, sustainable, and democratic commonwealth. Thank you for your work on the FY 2025 budget.

In the following, we outline several key priority areas for the budget to ensure that it builds on recent progress in investing in our commonwealth.

### **Strengthening Our Commitment to Public Higher Education**

Our public colleges and universities are essential vehicles for economic mobility of our commonwealth's residents and economic vitality of the commonwealth itself. Studies have shown that college graduates are more likely to be healthier, earn significantly more on average, and are less likely to face job loss during an economic recession, and graduates of our *public* colleges and universities are more likely to stay in Massachusetts to live and work, contributing to our commonwealth and common wealth.

However, our state has been disinvesting from public higher education for the last two decades, with funding for public higher education still below its (inflation-adjusted) value in 2001. When the state reduces funding to public colleges and universities, the result is higher tuition and fees, and a growing debt burden faced by students and families.

The published in-state tuition and fees increase at public 4-year institutions in MA increased 135 percent from 2001 to 2021 after adjusting for inflation, and for two-year institutions, 81 percent, but real Median Household Income in Massachusetts only increased by 8 percent. Just between 2009 and 2021, the average student debt rose 52% for four-year graduates and 62% for community college graduates. When we close off opportunities like that for our students, we are all worse off.

As you craft the FY 2025 budget, we urge you to **incorporate key provisions of the Cherish Act and the Debt-Free Future Act**, such as

- Instituting fair and adequate minimum funding levels for public higher education
- Ensuring that students are able to graduate from our public colleges and universities debt-free
- Ensuring that adjunct faculty and part-time staff are eligible for state health care and retirement benefits
- Reducing wage disparities on campuses



- Increasing funding for student supports
- Investing in green and healthy buildings on campus

### **Fully Funding Our Public Schools**

The passage of the Student Opportunity Act in 2019 was a major win for education justice in the commonwealth. We are very appreciative of recent comments that the Legislature will **fully fund the Student Opportunity Act's fourth year of implementation**, keeping the law on track to be fully funded by the 2026-2027 school year. Importantly, maintaining that commitment includes fixing the Chapter 70 inflation calculation glitch that, if left unsolved, could permanently reduce school aid and prevent the Commonwealth from meeting the real-dollar targets in the Student Opportunity Act.

### **Full Funding for School Meals for All**

We also urge you to support **full funding in support of School Meals for All (Line Items 1596-2422 and 7053-1925)**.

The research on universal school meals is clear: participation in school meals improves academic achievement, attendance, and student behavior at school; decreases childhood food insecurity; leads to children eating more fruits, vegetables, and milk; and reduces visits to the school nurse.

With the implementation of School Meals for All, more than an additional 100,000 students participated in school lunch in October 2023 compared to October 2019 in schools not previously serving universal free meals. This program has been a success all around, and we must ensure it continues to be so.

### **Advancing the Common Start Vision**

As a member of the Common Start coalition, we would also like to amplify the common Start coalition's asks:

- \$510 million to continue operational grants to child care providers (line item 3000-1045)
- Increased funding that makes substantial progress towards the Economic Review Commission's recommendation of raising early education and care financial assistance reimbursement rates (line items 3000-1041 & 3000-1042)
- \$75 million to increase access to child care financial assistance (line item 3000-4060)
- \$20 million for the Head Start Supplemental Grant (line item 3000-5000)

The Governor, Senate Leadership, and House Leadership have all expressed a commitment to strengthening our child care and early education system, and these investments would help to do that.

### **Access to Counsel**

Without legal representation, many tenants risk becoming homeless. Indeed, most tenants are unrepresented and face eviction alone. It doesn't have to be that way, and an Access to Counsel program is a proven solution.

We urge the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means to include in your respective FY25 budgets **\$3.5 Million (Line-item 0321-1800) to start a Access to Counsel program** in tandem with the full Access to Council bill language in S.864/H.4360, which provides the framework for a statewide program.

### **Increasing Assistance to Families in Deep Poverty**

We also urge you to include **a 20% increase in cash assistance grant levels (line items 4403-2000 and 4408-1000).**

The maximum grant for a family of 3 with no income is only \$783 a month, far below even half the federal poverty level – known as Deep Poverty – which is currently \$1,076 for a family of 3. The maximum grant for an elder or person with a disability is only \$401 a month. In January, Governor Healey cut the 10% grant increase that the Legislature had scheduled to go into effect in April.

Deep poverty hurts kids. It causes health and emotional damage, toxic stress, impaired school performance, and homeless and housing instability. We must do right by our neediest families.

A budget is a moral document, and we urge you to include such investments to advance a vision of a commonwealth that works for all residents.

Sincerely,  
Jonathan Cohn  
Policy Director  
Progressive Massachusetts