



The Massachusetts  
Health Policy Forum

January 20, 2022  
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## Media Advisory

### **Forum to Present Recommendations for Improving State's Local Public Health Systems**

In 1799, the first public health department in the United States was formed in Boston, with Paul Revere as its first health officer. Today, 351 independent municipal public health departments across Massachusetts are funded almost entirely by local property taxes, resulting in a decentralized system that has allowed smaller and poorer communities to fall behind, a disparity that has only intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Funding based on community resources is regressive and exacerbates racial and ethnic disparities in accessing essential public health services. These problems were first addressed in 2016 with the creation of the Special Commission on Local and Regional Public Health and its report three years later, *Blueprint for Public Health Excellence*, which concluded that many communities with fewer resources were unable to meet the most basic statutory requirements and national health standards. Based on the report's disturbing conclusion and the urgency brought on by the pandemic, the MA Legislature approved the State Action for Public Health Excellence (SAPHE) in April of 2020. The acute public health needs highlighted throughout the ongoing pandemic resulted in the next legislative steps to improvement known as SAPHE 2.0, which remains in draft form.

On **Wednesday, Jan. 26 from 8:30 – 10:15 am**, the Massachusetts Health Policy Forum in association with the University of Massachusetts Amherst School of Public Health and Health Sciences, will host a virtual presentation, **Massachusetts Local Public Health Infrastructure: Protecting public health and preparing for the next pandemic**, which will examine the latest legislative recommendations and propose action steps to support a statewide local public health system that can adequately respond to the public health needs of all communities throughout the Commonwealth.

The forum will feature an introduction by **State Senator Jo Comerford, Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Public Health**; with research presentation by **Anna Maria Siega-Riz, PhD, Dean and Professor, Departments of Nutrition and Biostatistics & Epidemiology, School of Public Health and Health Sciences, University of Massachusetts Amherst**, with researchers **Laura Attanasio Ph.D, Saraf Goff, MD Ph.D, Juliana Sopko and Parker Sweet, School of Public Health and Health Science, University of Massachusetts, Amherst**.

A panel discussion will focus on the wide variation in local health departments' capacity to meet increased public health needs, the lack of infrastructure to support them and the efficacy of solutions proposed by legislators and policy experts.

Dr. Siega-Riz will serve as moderator with panel members **State Rep. Denise Garlick, Chair, House Committee on Bills in the Third Reading, Dr. Craig Andrade, DrPH, MPH, Associate Dean of the Practice, BU School of Public Health, Damon Chaplin, MBA, Public Health Director, City of New Bedford, and Phoebe Walker, MPP, Director of Community Services, Franklin Regional Council of Governments.**

This event is co-sponsored by [the University of Massachusetts Amherst School of Public Health and Health Sciences](#), with generous funding from [Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts](#) and [Baystate Health](#).

A detailed agenda and registration information is available at: <https://heller.brandeis.edu/mass-health-policy-forum/categories/public-health/protecting-public-health.html>

**WHAT:** *Virtual Massachusetts Health Policy Forum on Massachusetts Local Public Health Infrastructure: Protecting public health and preparing for the next pandemic*

**WHEN:** Wednesday, Jan. 26, 8:30 – 10:15 a.m.

**WHY:** The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly illuminated the need for strong local public health departments and the difficulties the current public health system has in consistently meeting the most basic public standards. The future health and well being of Massachusetts' residents depends on an investment in the tools provided through legislation and the implementation of four action steps which will be presented at today's event.

**WHO:** **State Senator Jo Comerford, Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Public Health; Anna Maria Siega-Riz, PhD, Dean and Professor, Departments of Nutrition and Biostatistics & Epidemiology, School of Public Health and Health Sciences, University of Massachusetts Amherst; Laura Attanasio Ph.D, Sarah Goff, MD Ph.D, Juliana Sopko and Parker Sweet, School of Public Health and Health Science, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.**

**State Rep. Denise Garlick, Chair, House Committee on Bills in the Third Reading, Dr. Craig Andrade, DrPH, MPH, Associate Dean of the Practice, BU School of Public Health, Damon Chaplin, MBA, Public Health Director, City of New Bedford, and Phoebe Walker, MPP, Director of Community Services, Franklin Regional Council on Governments**