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Contact: Kristina Kimani, Massachusetts Public Health Association  
781-603-6716, [kkimani@mapublichealth.org](mailto:kkimani@mapublichealth.org)

## **Coalition calls for Accelerating Improvements to Local Public Health**

### *Fractured, inefficient nature of current system cited*

Boston, MA – This morning, a coalition of public health, municipal, regional, state, and academic leaders gathered for an online rally, calling on the Legislature to take urgent action to improve the local public health system in Massachusetts. The group is calling for passage of the Statewide Accelerated Public Health for Every Community Act (SAPHE 2.0), which would create minimum public health standards for every community, ensure a qualified workforce, incentivize municipalities to share services, create a uniform data collection and reporting system, and dedicate state funding to support local boards of health and health departments.

“Public health protections must be available to every community in Massachusetts,” said **Attorney General Maura Healy**. “Local public health departments are on the frontlines of addressing health disparities, and they need funding, data, and consistent standards to get the job done. I want to thank the Massachusetts Public Health Association for their leadership and for these thoughtful proposals.”

“The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the deep inequities in our local public health system. We have a moral obligation to our residents to take meaningful action now,” said **State Senator Jo Comerford**, the Senate sponsor of the bill. “We must do the hard work today, so that we will be ready for whatever comes.”

“Massachusetts is the only state in the nation with a local public health system that is based in hundreds of different municipalities,” said **State Representative Hannah Kane**, a lead House co-sponsor of the bill. “This legislation will put our state on a path to meet key benchmarks and create an efficient and effective local public health system accessible to all residents.”

“The COVID-19 virus pandemic has illuminated the responsibility and expectations of the actions of local health departments,” said **Vice Chair of Ways & Means Representative Denise Garlick**, a lead House co-sponsor of the bill. “As a Registered Nurse and former elected member and Chair of the Needham Board of Health, I know it has also shone a light on the need to increase resources for staffing, training, and education. Our Commonwealth and communities are only as healthy as our State and local health departments are strong.”

The SAPHE 2.0 Coalition is led by municipal officials and public health experts, including New Bedford Health Director Damon Chaplin, Shrewsbury Town Manager Kevin Mizikar, Massachusetts Health Officers Association President Sigalle Reiss, and Massachusetts Association of Public Health Nurses President Ruth Mori. It is facilitated by the Massachusetts Public Health Association.

Earlier this year, coalition members successfully advocated for passage of the original SAPHE Act, which is now in statute as Chapter 72 of the Acts of 2020, An Act Relative to Strengthening the Local and Regional Public Health System. That legislation, which was drafted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, created a voluntary grant-based approach to improving the local public health system.

The new SAPHE 2.0 Act builds on the lessons learned from COVID-19 by directing the Department of Public Health to establish minimum standards for local public health departments and boards of health, setting out a clear timeline for communities to reach those standards, establishing state funding to support local public health programs, encouraging municipalities to share services, and creating a uniform data collection and reporting system to ensure that timely decisions can be made based on accurate and consistent data.

“The local public health system in Massachusetts is not adequately structured, staffed, or financed to meet large scale public health challenges,” said **Kristina Kimani, Assistant Policy Director for the Massachusetts Public Health Association**. “As a coalition, we are working to accelerate improvements in our state's local health system, so that it is better prepared to meet the challenges of the future.”

“Our decentralized structure of 351 separate local health departments leads to inequities in public health protections across municipalities, and this puts the entire state at risk,” said **Damon Chaplin, Health Director for the City of New Bedford**. “Because viruses do not respect municipal borders, the extreme variability of protections provided across municipal health departments increases the potential for harm to all communities.”

“Many local boards of health struggle with a lack of funding and a lack of staff, especially public health nurses,” said **Ruth Mori, President of the Massachusetts Association of Public Health Nurses** and a Public Health Nurse/School for the Town of Wayland. “This leads to inconsistent and incomplete data collection and reporting, inconsistent use of the Massachusetts Virtual Epidemiological Network (MAVEN), and unaddressed health inequities.”

“Over the past several months, we have seen the remarkable heroism of our local public health workforce,” said **Sigalle Reiss, President of the Massachusetts Health Officers Association**. “But we have also seen the ineffectiveness of the structure in which they are working. They deserve better.”

“Massachusetts has failed to invest in public health for years, kicking the proverbial can down the road,” said **Phoebe Walker, Director of Community Services for the Franklin Regional Council of Governments**. “Now is the time to change that.”

“With the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19, we have an unprecedented opportunity to improve the laws, policies and practices of public health,” said **Kevin Mizikar, Town Manager for Shrewsbury**. “Now is the time to enhance the partnership between the State and local public health officials to raise standards and increase funding for the benefit of all residents of the Commonwealth.”

“The structure for delivering Public Health services at the local level is inefficient,” said **Aimee Petrosky, Health Director for the Town of East Longmeadow**. “It is time to provide greater incentives for towns to cooperate by delivering shared services and, in some cases, hiring shared staff. This will help small towns, many of which currently have no public health staff at all.”



“Massachusetts is one of the only states in the nation that does not provide dedicated state funding to local health departments,” said **Kevin Sweet, Town Administrator for Wrentham**. “It’s time for the state to play a bigger partnership role in helping local boards of health meet necessary standards.”

The coalition seeks to build on the consensus findings and recommendation of the Special Commission on Local and Regional Health, as An Act Relative to Strengthening the Local and Regional Public Health, which was signed by Governor Baker on April 29, 2020.

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](http://www.mapublichealth.org). ###