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November 25, 2020

*Submitted electronically via email.*

Representative Aaron Michlewitz, Chair  
House Committee on Ways & Means

Michael J. Rodrigues, Chair  
Senate Committee on Ways & Means

Representative Denise Garlick, Vice-Chair  
House Committee on Ways & Means

Senator Cindy Friedman, Vice-Chair  
Senate Committee on Ways & Means

Representative Todd Smola, Ranking  
Member  
House Committee on Ways & Means

Senator Patrick O'Connor, Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Ways & Means

**RE: FY2021 Budget Conference Negotiations**

Dear Chair Michlewitz, Chair Rodrigues, Vice-Chair Garlick, Ranking Member Smola, Vice-Chair Friedman, and Ranking Member O'Connor:

The Conference of Boston Teaching Hospitals, on behalf of our 12 member hospitals, writes to thank you for your work toward completing the FY2021 state budget. As you enter conference negotiations on the House and Senate-passed budgets, we wanted to share the priorities of Greater Boston's academic medical centers and teaching hospitals, who are on the frontlines of battling the COVID-19 pandemic, while simultaneously caring for the health and wellbeing of all of our patients.

2020 has brought unprecedented challenges for health care, for the economy, and for the State's fiscal outlook. COBTH's member hospitals have stepped up to each challenge COVID-19 has brought, working tirelessly to provide the health care services our patients need. We deeply appreciate the work the legislature has undertaken to support our hospitals and the Commonwealth's health care system during the pandemic. As we know, COVID-19 will be with us for the foreseeable future, and so we respectfully request your attention to the priorities of our hospitals articulated below.

**Funding to Support COVID-19 Response**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals have expended considerable resources to ensure their ability to treat all patients in need while keeping patients and staff safe. While federal and state relief funds have been enormously helpful, they have not covered the significant losses incurred by our members. We recognize the limits on the state budget, but encourage you to keep this reality in mind.



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### *MassHealth*

We appreciate the increases in MassHealth funding included in both the House and Senate-passed budgets. As many Massachusetts residents have lost employment and health insurance coverage during the pandemic, ensuring access to MassHealth for those eligible is critical to promoting access to care and controlling the spread of the virus. We appreciate your continued support for the Commonwealth's most vulnerable patients.

### *Behavioral Health*

We also strongly support your continued efforts to support access to behavioral health services, especially in light of the increase in behavioral health issues resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, we are strongly supportive of the Senate's \$10 million appropriation to create additional inpatient psychiatric beds. While emergency department boarding of behavioral health patients has long been a challenge in Massachusetts, COVID-19 has made this problem considerably worse. This funding would help support our hospitals' efforts to get our patients to the right level of care more efficiently.

## **Insurance Issues**

### *Universal Provider Credentialing*

COBTH strongly supports the Senate's language on Universal Provider Credentialing, which would allow health care providers to submit a single standard application for credentialing to all insurers, including MassHealth. This would help reduce administrative burden on health care providers and we strongly support its inclusion in the final budget.

### *Same-Day Billing*

COBTH also supports the language in both the House and Senate-passed budgets that would prohibit the denial of insurance coverage for behavioral health or primary care services solely on the basis that the services were delivered at a facility on the same day. Current law restricts the ability of health care providers to coordinate care and effectively integrate behavioral health and primary care interventions.

## **Social Determinants of Health**

COBTH's members are committed to supporting our patients and communities, which includes both delivering health care services as well as participating in efforts to address the social determinants of health, or the conditions where people live, learn, work, and play. These have a significant effect on health status and outcomes and are integral to both addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and supporting the overall health of the Commonwealth.

### *Housing*

In the first ever joint community health needs assessment (CHNA) and community health improvement plan (CHIP) recently undertaken by our teaching hospitals, housing affordability and stability was the number one area of concern of residents due to its impact on their overall health and well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the



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Commonwealth's housing crisis, and housing resources are critical to our joint response. As health care providers, we see the direct effect that a lack of housing stability can have on a family's ability to remain healthy. Additionally, when housing supports are not available, unsheltered residents often seek assistance in our hospital emergency departments.

To that end, we strongly support the increases to the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) program that were included in the House and Senate-passed budgets. The flexibility of RAFT subsidies are key to supporting the specific circumstances of families during this challenging time. However, we agree with housing advocates that no one program will fix our housing crisis, and it is critical to support an array of programs that advance long-term, stable, affordable housing solutions. We also support funding for the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP), the Alternative Housing Voucher Program (AHVP), and HomeBASE. Finally, we strongly support efforts to ensure that all Massachusetts residents have a right to counsel and access to legal services, as well as efforts to grant continuances for residents who are waiting for a decision on their eligibility for public assistance.

#### *Food Security*

Access to nutritious food is also critical to overall health, and the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have again worsened this problem in Massachusetts. The Commonwealth's nutrition assistance programs and food banks have stepped up to meet these needs, but challenges remain. COBTH supports the amendment adopted by the Senate to allow residents to apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) benefits while applying for MassHealth or the Medicare Savings Program. We also support the various policies and appropriations included in both bills to improve access to healthy food throughout the Commonwealth.

#### **Vaccine Distribution**

COBTH is grateful for the Senate's inclusion of language in the budget directing the Commonwealth to consider the recommendations of the health equity task force in designing, developing, implementing, and overseeing the Commonwealth's COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan. We recognize that distributing the COVID-19 vaccine using a health equity framework is critical to Massachusetts' COVID response, and agree with the need to prioritize equitable distribution of the vaccine.

#### **Hospital Reporting Requirements**

While we appreciate the Commonwealth's desire to improve understanding of overall PPE availability throughout the Commonwealth, we are strongly opposed to additional extensive reporting burdens on hospitals and providers. We would be happy to discuss our concerns with you in greater detail.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments and your continued attention to the priorities of the Massachusetts Health and Hospital Association, which we strongly endorse. Please do not



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hesitate to be in touch with any questions or if we can provide additional information on these or other matters. You can reach us at [pmcmullin@cobth.org](mailto:pmcmullin@cobth.org) or [aesten@cobth.org](mailto:aesten@cobth.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patricia McMullin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name and last name clearly legible.

Patricia McMullin  
Executive Director  
Conference of Boston Teaching Hospitals

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Anna Esten". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name and last name clearly legible.

Anna Esten  
Government & Community Affairs Specialist  
Conference of Boston Teaching Hospitals