

John Auerbach, Executive Director
The Boston Public Health Commission
Testimony in Support of H.B. 4444
Tuesday, April 5, 2004

- Good morning, my name is John Auerbach, Executive Director of the Boston Public Health Commission, the health department for the City of Boston.
- I am here today to urge your support of H. 4444 to ensure every Massachusetts resident has access to affordable health insurance.
 - Ensuring access to care is a smart investment. Investing in health care not only reduces expensive emergency care, but also ensures a robust health care system.
 - As it stands right now, the health care system in Boston and Massachusetts is under intense strain—from public health to hospitals, health centers, and H.M.O.'s-- we are all feeling the squeeze of the high cost of health care and the cost of care for those without insurance.
 - Our ability to help sign eligible people up for care is eroding. Institutions and programs like those at the Commission to enroll people in insurance and provide safety net care are threatened by funding cuts.
 - Current estimates put the number of uninsured Massachusetts residents statewide at 600,000. We estimate the number of uninsured Boston residents could be as high as 80,000, many of whom are children.
 - Reports from the state Division of Health Care Finance and Policy show the uninsured rate for children in Boston jumping 50% from 2000-2002. We expect that more recent cuts to public health insurance programs and rising costs of private insurance have caused the rate of children without insurance to jump even higher.
 - For example, caps on the Children's Medical Security Plan have left thousands of children in Boston without coverage. Statewide, 11,000 children are on the CMSP waiting list, 14% of whom live in Boston.

- The increase in uninsured residents is hitting hospitals—with FY 2004 first-quarter applications for free care up by 34% compared to last year.
- It is hitting health centers particularly hard. 43% of the state's uninsured use community health centers for needed medical services.
- But most directly, lack of public or affordable insurance is hitting the health of families and communities.
- Program observations suggest that people are coming to Boston Public Health Commission services sicker and in more crisis, with complicated challenges because they lack health insurance and preventive public health programs.
- This past year, the number of uninsured individuals seeking care through the Commission has grown significantly.
- For example, Boston EMS transports of uninsured residents increased by about 13% last year.
- Overall EMS transports increased as well. We attribute that increase in part to Medicaid and public health cuts.
- The Mayor's Health Line in Boston assists over a thousand callers a year in finding low-cost health care and coverage. More callers than ever lack insurance. In 2003, the primary assistance we gave callers was referral to Free Care sites such as hospitals and health centers. In the same year, the most common reason people called for insurance was loss of public benefits. Uninsured callers who had lost public benefits rose by 38% in 2003 after several years at a lower level.
- We are particularly concerned about the role lack of access to care plays in racial and ethnic disparities in health.
- Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey data show that Black and Latino adults are more likely than whites to be without health insurance.
- All residents of color are less likely to see a doctor when care is needed because of the cost.
- And people of color are more likely than whites to rely on Medicaid and public insurance programs.

- Without health insurance, without access to care, health disparities worsen.
- While lack of health insurance has a disproportionate burden felt by communities of color and low-income families, it hurts all of us.
- Boston is a world-class center for medical education and research, activities that have been key factors in the Commonwealth's economic growth over the past 20 years, creating new technologies, businesses, jobs and wealth.
- Yet 40% of Boston families face medical debt – debt that often puts them one accident or illness away from bankruptcy.
- Investing in the health of Bostonians is a vital way to ensure basic access to primary and preventive care that avoids expensive, emergency care and preventable illness and death.
- It's an investment in the future of Boston's children.
- It's a commitment to reducing health disparities.
- And it's an investment in the health and sustainability of institutions that strive to provide the highest quality care to all Boston residents, whether or not they are paid for that care.
- While HB 4444 is a very open-ended proposal, it is built on an important principle.
- Access to care is critical to the health of individuals, for the health of communities, and for the long-term vibrancy of the Massachusetts health care system. Thank you.