

**Testimony of Geoffrey W. Wilkinson, Executive Director
Massachusetts Public Health Association,
In Favor of a Constitutional Amendment for Affordable Health Insurance for All
Joint Committees on Health Care, Insurance, Ways and Means, Medicaid, and Federal
Financial Assistance
Tuesday, April 6, 2004**

Good morning, and on behalf of the board and directors and membership of the Massachusetts Public Health Association, thank you very much for this opportunity to testify before you.

The Massachusetts Public Health Association is a statewide membership organization of over 1,000 public health professionals and three dozen organizations committed to improving the public's health through education, advocacy, and community-based organizing. We have offices in Boston, Lowell, Springfield, and Worcester. We are the state affiliate of the American Public Health Association and are recognized as one of the most effective state public health associations in the country.

Our board of directors has unanimously endorsed the proposed constitutional amendment for three primary reasons. First, one of the three core functions of public health is to assure that all populations have access to appropriate and cost effective care, including health education and disease prevention services. Public health has long been at the forefront of efforts to expand health access and ultimately to win universal health insurance. While the greatest advances in health status over the past two centuries have been due to population-based public health interventions, such as immunization programs and assurance of clean water and safe food, access to individual medical care is a key component of protecting and improving the public's health. We have a crisis in health care access in Massachusetts, with 600,000 individuals lacking basic coverage. We believe that this amendment offers an important tool to improve health coverage.

Secondly, the amendment specifically provides that the Commonwealth will enact and implement laws to ensure medically necessary *preventive* services. The mission of public health is to assure conditions in which all people can be healthy through disease and injury prevention, health promotion, and protection of the most vulnerable members of society. According to the national Institute of Medicine, 70 percent of deaths in the United States each year are due to chronic illnesses. Our leading causes of death—including cardio-vascular disease, pulmonary disease, diabetes, and various cancers—could be dramatically reduced or delayed through preventive services and changes in behavior and environment. These health improvements would come with significant savings in medical care expenses, as well as improved quality of life and reduction of suffering for individuals, families, and communities.

Much of the debate about health care system reform is driven by concerns over health care financing. Our medical care "system" is teetering on the edge of financial disaster. Cost shifting is the order of the day, retirees are losing health coverage that was supposedly guaranteed, and even working families with multiple jobs are unable to afford basic insurance. If we do not invest in public health prevention, there is no way to effectively limit cost

inflation in the health care system over time. Prevention must be a key element of health care system reform.

Over the past three years, the Commonwealth has cut the Department of Public Health's core prevention and health promotion budget by \$145 million, or 35 percent. Much of the so-called "savings" to the general treasury has come at tremendous human cost, and the cuts have been "penny wise and pound foolish" in the extreme. We are racking up huge and unnecessary future medical care costs as a result of the essential elimination of the state's tobacco control program and a host of other vital and effective programs.

We have reviewed two legal analyses of the proposed amendment and are encouraged about the prospects that the amendment could bolster future efforts to protect and restore basic public health programs that have been devastated by recent budget cuts. Examples of these kind of cost-effective, medically necessary preventive services include:

- Universal immunization programs
- Community health centers
- Substance abuse services
- HIV/AIDS programs
- School health services
- Hepatitis C programs
- Smoking cessation
- Family health services
- Tuberculosis testing
- Breast and prostate cancer programs
- Dental health services
- Children's Medical Security Program
- Healthy Start
- Early intervention programs
- Osteoporosis programs
- Multiple sclerosis programs
- Neurofibromatosis programs
- Colorectal cancer programs

In addition, we are encouraged that the amendment could help protect and restore basic health care programs such as MassHealth, the uncompensated care pool, Prescription Advantage, and others. Similarly, we applaud language in the amendment that refers specifically to prescription drugs and medical devices and hope that it will prove useful in long term efforts to contain prescription drug cost inflation, which is a major driver of sky rocketing health care system costs.

Finally, we believe that the amendment affords an important opportunity for the voters of Massachusetts to emphasize their need and desire for constitutional protection of access to health insurance. Our board explicitly commended the language of the amendment because it does not specify what kind of health care system we should have. It does not exceed the proper scope of a constitutional amendment and leaves to the Legislature the task of crafting details about how to ensure and implement the protections to be guaranteed. The Massachusetts Public Health Association welcomes the opportunity to participate in that process and discussion, and we urge you to vote favorably on the amendment in this Constitutional Convention. Thank you very much.