



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
MASSACHUSETTS SENATE

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Chair
JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
and
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JOINT COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL
RESOURCES

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April 1st, 2024

The Honorable Michael J. Rodrigues
Chair, Senate Committee on Ways & Means
State House, Room 212
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chair Rodrigues,

I am writing to you about my budget priorities for Fiscal Year 2025. I believe we all understand the fiscal pressures facing the Commonwealth, with revenues being down for the past few months, and how this will affect our budget priorities.

I want to express my support for progressive broad-based taxes being increased to support the state through this period of fiscal challenge. By ensuring the share of the tax burden is equitable to individuals' differing income levels in this state, we can avoid budget cuts and continue the hard work of many essential programs that protect the most vulnerable. I would also like to express my belief that Governor Healey's local option taxes suggested in the Municipal Empowerment Act allow municipalities to stabilize revenue in areas that best fit their needs. In my district, for example, the city of Marlborough has multiple hotels that bring in a large sum of money for the city and could benefit from the change to the state lodging tax, while Hudson has a booming downtown district with consistently packed restaurants that could benefit from the local meals tax. The flexibility for municipalities to adjust taxes to their own needs is essential. It would have a stabilizing effect on the state and allow us to focus on funding the services our constituents rely on.

One such area that is the foundation our government relies on is a well-functioning judiciary, with adequate legal services to ensure our laws are carried out well and justly. The

work CPCS, MLAC, MHLAC, and PLS do for our state and the public trust in the rule of law cannot be overstated. Our court decisions change lives profoundly, taking away people's liberty and/or property in the name of justice and upholding the values we instill into the laws. They are a crucial part of our work to maintain peace and prosperity in the state. Inadequate legal representation from a lack of funding can lead to miscarriages of justice, where good, innocent people are wrongfully convicted, or guilty individuals walk away having been served no repercussions for their actions. I urge you and the Senate Ways and Means Committee to prioritize the work of the judiciary and legal services in the FY25 state budget. It is imperative that we invest in these critical services to ensure that everyone has access to fair and just legal representation and that our judiciary can continue to uphold the rule of law and protect the rights of all citizens.

Housing services that support people in finding homes or shelters, loan counseling services, and matched savings programs are areas where we cannot see cuts. The topic of housing is ever-present in both the minds of constituents as well as legislators, and we all recognize that increasing our housing stock is going to take time and money so the best thing we can do in the meantime is to ensure the services that give the most back to those in need of housing are not hindered. Loan counseling services support individuals in making educated decisions in a fiscal landscape with rising interest rates and fluctuating costs, supporting those in the foreclosure process or near it. Services like this keep those individuals who already have homes in them. It is also important that we continue to fund organizations such as the Mass Fair Housing Center, the DMH Rental Subsidy Program, and the Alternative Housing Voucher Program, all of which offer essential services to low-income, underserved, or disadvantaged communities that budget cuts would most acutely impact. Their work to keep people in homes and/or find them housing is proven year after year with countless success stories of individuals staying in their homes, and this reduces the burden on the shelter system and the cost incurred from its maintenance. I urge you and the Committee to consider the work that still can be done and is needed while we work to increase the amount of housing available in the state.

Environmental protection and conservation programs are another category that has received underfunding or cuts in past years when we faced fiscal challenges, which we cannot continue to do in FY25. The environmental and climate crises are slow-moving issues looming on the horizon. While the effect of inaction or underfunding will take time to see, the dangers we face are no less serious. For this reason, we must continue to increase the amount we give to the Department of Conservation and Recreation and the Department of Environmental Protection. Both Departments have shown years of successful work and have systems to manage fiscal responsibility, which is essential to consider this year. We need to support those programs and departments with a proven track record of returning on what we invest in them, and both the department's work to ensure clean air, land, and water for all is a goal we should look to advance more in the coming year.

Finally, I would like to express my strong support for prioritizing funding for K-12 education and our public university-community college system. Our schools are struggling to

provide our children with the education they need and deserve, and our public university and community college system is facing significant challenges. New teachers with training in special education and specialties in different languages will be required to continue to provide the educational standard we are known for. We must continue to uplift vocational education to address the Commonwealth's lack of skilled trades workers as we seek to build new housing and transfer to renewable energy resources. We are responsible for investing in our future by providing the proper resources for our students to succeed and grow into the people who will fix our future challenges. For this reason, I hope the Committee will keep education high on their priorities.

While the Commonwealth of Massachusetts faces fiscal pressures, we must prioritize funding for essential programs and services that are relied on for the continued well-being of our communities. Investing in areas such as the judiciary, legal services, housing services, environmental protection, and conservation programs can ensure that everyone has access to fair and just representation, affordable housing, and a healthy environment. I sincerely believe that these priorities are of the utmost importance for you and the committee to consider while crafting the FY25 budget.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James B. Eldridge". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

James B. Eldridge

State Senator

Middlesex & Worcester District