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**Massachusetts at a Crossroads: The Opportunity to Focus on Equity**

***Forum Looks at the Way Forward to Equity and Opportunity in Essex County***

**Danvers, MA – September 19, 2022** – Financial assistance during the pandemic such as expanded unemployment benefits, expansion and extension of the child tax credit, and additional SNAP benefits all contributed to direct reductions in poverty and racial disparities. The targeted benefits in federal COVID relief legislation have also shown a way towards cutting child poverty in half, according to our updated report on poverty and opportunity, "[At A Crossroads Created by COVID-19: Families Moving Along the Road to Opportunity in Massachusetts.](#)" The report outlines years of historic disinvestment, the current state of poverty in Massachusetts, and strategic recommendations for moving forward. The report was commissioned by MASSCAP and written by Nancy Wagman, Research & Kids Count Director, [Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center \(MassBudget\)](#)

The report notes over the past several decades, even though the economy continues to grow, wages, and benefits no longer keep up. Low wages mean that many workers need to work more than one job just to stay afloat. In addition, just as wages have stagnated, incomes have also flattened for all but people with the highest incomes. We see huge disparities in wealth in Massachusetts due to continued patterns of unequal access to education, jobs, and housing. There is observable income inequality across Massachusetts with family incomes overall varying by race as well as by geographic location. It is clear that median wages for Black and Latinx workers are lower than white workers, and that therefore, communities of color are more likely to have lower incomes than white communities. The pandemic only exacerbated these long-standing inequities.

As we emerge from the pandemic and are assessing its health, social, and economic effects, we note that the challenges our vulnerable friends and neighbors face every day have been exacerbated in an unprecedented way," said Joe Diamond, Executive Director, MASSCAP. "As the report pointed out, the pandemic also set in sharp relief the urgent need to address structural issues that cause poverty such as racism and the wage gap. We must take the opportunity we have in front of us to dig deep and address these longstanding issues."

“The five Community Action Agencies in Essex County work closely together in the region as well as with the Essex County Community Foundation. We thought it was critical for us to come together to talk how we continue to collaborate and create opportunity in our region and what specific actions and policies will move us forward centering on equity,” Laura Meisenhelter, Executive Director, North Shore Community Action Programs and President, MASSCAP, explained.

The report was discussed at a forum in Danvers hosted by MASSCAP along with the five Community Action Agencies serving Essex County: Action Inc., Community Action Inc., Greater Lawrence Community Action Council, LEO Inc, and North Shore Community Action Programs. A presentation of the report by Nancy Wagman ([MassBudget](#)) set the context for the day.

Keynote speaker Beth Francis, President & CEO, [Essex County Community Foundation](#), said, “The report commissioned by MASSCAP brings light to our challenges, but it also offers understanding of where opportunities exist to make a real difference for our most vulnerable families. More than 300,000 people in Essex County live below the MA living wage. What all of our residents need is access. We need equitable access to affordable places to live. And we need access to affordable education and career pathways that lead to good-paying job opportunities and health care. This report includes a ‘roadmap forward.’ It reminds us that if we strive to eliminate poverty, we have to work together. Local, state, and federal funding can be deployed differently, but there is also a role for philanthropy in these efforts. As funders, we’re ready to take on the big challenges and work together in support of common community goals.”

In addition to highlighting the findings in the report, panel participants focused on the critical issues of affordable housing, economic development to meet the housing needs, workforce development, food insecurity and social determinants of health, and how we can ensure equitable policies and solutions. Panelists included: Angela Brown, Chief of Economic Development, Metropolitan Area Planning Council; Amanda Dooling, Director of Student Engagement, North Shore Community College; Evelyn Friedman, Executive Director, Greater Lawrence Community Action Council; and Kiame Mahaniah, MD, MBA, Chief Executive Officer, Lynn Community Health Center as well as panel moderator Maureen O’Neill, Ph.D., Board member (and Past President), North Shore Community Action Programs and Former Dean of Liberal Studies, North Shore Community College

“The pandemic put Massachusetts right at a crossroads. What choices will we make now? Will we grab this opportunity and move forward with policies that center equity?” asks Nancy Wagman, Kids Count Director of the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center ([MassBudget](#)).

MASSCAP and the network of 23 Community Action Agencies in the state support and advocate for equitable policies that bridge the wage gap, create a foundation for economic opportunity, strengthen families through affordable and accessible early education and care, and strengthen the human services infrastructure. For example, this year we will be advocating to strengthen and expand the Earned Income Tax Credit and support access to it through free tax preparation, to add state resources to the fuel assistance program, to support the Head Start and the early



education and care system including early educator salaries as well as the fair share amendment that takes increased tax revenue from high wage earners and puts it to use in resourcing our communities and supporting child care.

**About MASSCAP**

The Massachusetts Association for Community Action (MASSCAP) is a statewide association of the 23 Community Action Agencies (CAAs) operating in Massachusetts. Through the combined skills and vision of its members, MASSCAP works to enhance the ability of each agency to better serve its clients. We work with the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development and other state agencies to open doors to economic mobility for low-income Massachusetts residents.

**About Community Action Agencies (CAAs)**

Community Action Agencies work to help our most vulnerable populations, especially the poor. Rooted in the communities we serve, we ensure that the basic needs of the poor and vulnerable are met. Our agencies provide basic social safety net services, including administration of services that help mothers and children afford nutritious food, assistance that prevents seniors from going cold in the winter, and centers that provide quality early child care to families. CAAs help approximately 600,000 people in need annually.

We are also at the forefront of providing vulnerable populations with innovative services that help move individuals and families to economic independence. By employing thousands throughout the state, and by administering services whose funds create an important multiplier effect throughout communities, Community Action Agencies are important economic engines, especially in the Gateway cities of Massachusetts.

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