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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 Chelsea***

**Chelsea, MA – December 13, 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 that 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 income levels. 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 the state 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, learn from our responses to the pandemic, and address these longstanding issues."

The report was discussed at a forum in Chelsea focused on local opportunities and the path forward hosted by MASSCAP together with [Community Action Programs Inter-City, Inc. \(CAPIC\)](#). A presentation of the report by Nancy Wagman ([MassBudget](#)) set the context for the day.

“Even if the pandemic feels like it might be in the past to some, the impacts are still all around us. There’s no denying that Massachusetts is at a crossroads. What will our next set of choices be? How will we grab this opportunity to move forward with policies that center equity?” asks Nancy Wagman, Kids Count Director of the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center ([MassBudget](#)).

Richelle Cromwell, Executive Director, CAPIC explained, “Our community was the epicenter of the pandemic. We are still in the stabilization phase for some individuals and families who have been negatively impacted by COVID-19. The recovery phase must consist of addressing the inequities that have plagued our community for years. Housing, economic stability, food insecurity, healthcare and systematic racism must be addressed and changed on the local state and federal level. Systemic change is dire to our recovery.”

Keynote speaker Representative-Elect Judith Garcia said, “COVID-19 was a tragedy—its impacts are still very real for a very large portion of our communities. It forced the government to provide basic services that previously would have been an uphill battle to pass. We got an instant preview of what Massachusetts might look like if we attempted to address existing racial and socioeconomic disparities head-on—and what it looks like is a more equitable future. Now, as we rebuild from the devastation of the pandemic, we cannot waste this moment by simply returning to the status quo, we must take this opportunity to establish a status quo where all children are fed, all families are housed, and all people have healthcare.”

In addition to highlighting the findings in the report, panel participants focused on the critical issues of affordable housing, food insecurity and social determinants of health as well as collaboration as key to the wellbeing and future of the residents of Chelsea and to ensuring equitable policies and solutions. Panelists included: Senator Sal DiDomenico, Massachusetts Senate, Middlesex and Suffolk, Dan Cortez, Community Engagement Specialist, Chelsea Police Department, Richelle Cromwell, Executive Director, CAPIC, Jennifer Hassell, Executive Director, Chelsea Chamber of Commerce, and Jennifer Kelly, Director, MGH Healthy Chelsea Coalition. Panel was moderated by Alexander Train, Director, Department of Housing & Community Development, City of Chelsea.

“The COVID pandemic put so many of our neighbors through serious economic hardship, especially in Chelsea, and as MASSCAP’s report shows, giving people direct cash payments is the absolute best thing we can do to help,” said Senator DiDomenico, Assistant Majority Leader of the Massachusetts Senate. “People in our community are suffering and we have the solutions to help them, we simply need to act. Since the pandemic began, I have prioritized increasing cash assistance programs and expanding access to nutritious foods, but there is still so much more we need to do. I look forward to working with MASSCAP and all partners to make sure families across our state get the resources they need to fully recover from the effects of the pandemic and live happy and healthy lives.”



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 as well as other family tax credits and support access to them through free tax preparation, to add state resources to the fuel assistance program, and to support the Head Start and the early education and care system including early educator salaries.

#### **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 childhood education and 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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