July 15, 2016

Dear Mr. Speaker:

In the past decade, Massachusetts has been nothing short of a national leader on expanding access to healthcare. Healthcare accessibility and affordability is critically important to the constituents we represent, many of whom face significant barriers in building relationships with primary care physicians, getting to the physician office and receiving culturally competent care.

Unfortunately, many patients of our member health centers (and in particular, the African American, Latino and other minority communities) are currently being harmed by lack of access to timely, effective eye care. Massachusetts trails every other state in terms of glaucoma care and direct treatment for other eye diseases—and even has fallen behind the federal VA system and military branches. That’s because the practice of optometry in Massachusetts sits well below the United States’ standard of care and is not allowed to provide treatment for glaucoma or prescribe certain oral medications for eye disease.

As you may know, nearly one in every 120 Massachusetts residents suffers from pain, lost vision, and reduced quality of life because of glaucoma. Unfortunately, the Commonwealth’s outdated regulations prohibit optometrists from providing direct treatment for glaucoma or prescribing a limited number of oral medications for treatment of infectious eye diseases and glaucoma (or use injections such as EpiPens for anaphylaxis.)

Glaucoma disproportionately impacts minorities, according to various research studies:

- The Baltimore Eye Study found that the most common form of glaucoma is three times to four times more prevalent among African Americans than Caucasians (source: Bright Focus Foundation)
- The Proyecto VER study in Arizona and the Los Angeles Eye Study found that the most common form of glaucoma is more prevalent among Latinos than Caucasians (sources: National Institute for Health and National Eye Institute)
- African Americans are six to eight times more likely to experience blindness and 15 times more likely to experience visual impairment due to glaucoma than Caucasians (source: Glaucoma Research Foundation)

Access to approximately 350 licensed ophthalmologists allowed to provide Glaucoma care can be limited, with few office hours in community health centers. In addition, Optometrists are designated as primary eye care providers by the Mass Health (Medicaid) insurance program and offer a cost-effective fee structure. In situations where adequate follow up care is critical (Glaucoma) or timely access to prescription medicine (other eye diseases requiring oral antibiotics), supporting the delivery of care by an optometrist is a powerful way to assure that Massachusetts residents can maintain good eye health.
We urge the leadership to move forward with An Act Relative to the Modernization of the Practice of Optometry”, HB 1973 (Rep. Haddad) / SB 151 (Sen. Flanagan) /HB 1983 (Rep. Jones), which will allow glaucoma patients and others to receive direct care and oral medications from optometrists.

The disparity between the standard of optometric care in Massachusetts and every other state has become a national concern. In February, the Department of Justice’s Antitrust Division and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) issued a joint statement that encouraged the Massachusetts legislature to expand the services that optometrists can provide to glaucoma patients. The DOJ and FTC letter described the potential benefits to patients of enhanced competition among glaucoma care providers, including greater access to timely and cost competitive care. The correspondence stated that providing optometrists with an expanded role in glaucoma care, with conditions to ensure patient safety, “has the potential to bring the benefits of competition to Massachusetts health care consumers.”

On behalf of our member health centers, I urge you to move this bill forward and expand access and lower costs for our patients.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

James W. Hunt, Jr.
President and CEO
MA League of Community Health Centers