



Massachusetts Society of Optometrists

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May 3, 2015

Honorable Kate Hogan, House Chairwoman
Honorable Jason Lewis, Senate Chairman
Joint Committee on Public Health
State House, Room 130
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

Dear Chairwoman Hogan, Chairman Lewis and Members of the Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the over 700 members of the Massachusetts Society of Optometrists to strongly support House Bill 2046 / Senate Bill 1164, An Act Relative to Assessing the Commonwealth's Eye Care and Vision Health Needs. Despite the importance of eye care and vision health, no comprehensive study of the Commonwealth's status and need has been undertaken in some time. This initiative could lead to improved health outcomes in addition to a reduction of health care dollars spent addressing problems that, if identified earlier, could be managed more efficiently.

As written, HB 2046 / SB 1164 would create a special commission on the eye care and vision health needs of the Commonwealth to: (i) report on the current status of and foreseeable needs for eye care and vision health, (ii) identify existing pathways for access to eye and vision care services, (iii) identify mechanisms to address current unmet needs, with a focus on rural and underserved areas, (iv) identify strategies for addressing unmet needs in children and seniors, and finally to (v) provide recommendations for legislation, support programs and resources necessary to provide residents with need, access to appropriate services. The commission, which would be chaired by a representative from the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, would also include representation from the Executive Offices of Education and Elder Affairs, as well as the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, the Massachusetts Public Health Association, the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers, the Massachusetts Society of Optometrists, the Massachusetts Society of Eye Physicians and Surgeons, the New England College of Optometry, a Massachusetts medical school, a licensed optometrist, a licensed ophthalmologist and a representative from a consumer health care advocacy organization.

The Massachusetts legislature has taken steps that acknowledge the importance of eye care and vision health, however these initiatives are limited and do not provide for any collective evaluation. For example, Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 71, §57 created a reporting mechanism, which requires schools to obtain vision screenings (annually for children in grades five through nine) and certifications (for children entering kindergarten) that document vision screening examinations. Nothing in this law, however, requires that these certifications or test results be provided to the state for high level tracking and evaluation. There is no vision care registry in place, no ability for the Commonwealth to identify problematic trends, such as issues with access to appropriate care in certain school districts. Similarly, Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 6, §136, which requires all eye care providers to report all cases of legal blindness to the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, does not feed into a statewide registry that can provide

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for an overall evaluation of eye and vision health in the Commonwealth. Finally, absent legal blindness, there is no current law in place that collects information on vision health and eye care needs for residents of high-school age and through adulthood.

Given the simple fact that the current statutory framework does not provide a single mechanism to evaluate the eye care and vision health needs of the Commonwealth, this prevents the Commonwealth from developing thoughtful and cogent strategies to address unmet eye care and vision health needs. Put simply, there are missed opportunities that could be better addressed if a single comprehensive evaluation were undertaken. In light of current health care reform initiatives that place an emphasis on accountable care and whole health, the timing is right to identify gaps in the current marketplace which evidence a need for greater focus on eye care and vision health.

On behalf of the current members of the Massachusetts Society of Optometrists, I appreciate your consideration of this matter and ask that you release HB 2046 / SB 1164 favorably. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard Lawless", written in a cursive style.

Richard Lawless
Executive Director