

Policy Updates on Key State Issues Impacting Community Health

Andrea Freeman, Public Health Institute of Western MA <afreeman@publichealthwm.org> Fri, Mar 27, 2026 at 12:15 PM
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Hello Elizabeth,

As spring slowly comes to the natural world, many things are also emerging in Massachusetts policy advocacy circles.

- Many important bills before the MA Legislature need action if they are to pass this session. See updates below and **PHIWM's policy priorities**.
- House Ways & Means has one more FY27 **budget hearing** before releasing their draft budget and the Legislature also considers a supplemental budget for FY26.
- Organizations and agencies are releasing insightful reports and hosting engaging events and advocacy days on issues to help advance health equity and racial justice.

There's a lot happening across all levels of government—more than any one person can track or act on alone. We hope these selected updates help cut through some noise and provide you with helpful context and some hope.

Keep the faith,
Andrea Freeman, Policy Director

There's No 'I' in Team - Thank you!



A persistent team of legislators, aides, partners, and PHIWM board members recently turned out with smiles for **413Cares.org**. We're especially grateful to Representative Michael Finn and Senator Adam Gomez for their leadership in securing \$100,000 to keep **413Cares connecting more and more people** to free and low-cost resources.

Legislation to Reduce Problem Gambling Advances

Since Massachusetts legalized online sports betting in 2023, problem gambling rates have been increasing, and growing numbers of youth are easily bypassing the age requirement. Studies show that gambling at a young age increases the likelihood of problem gambling and addiction as an adult.

Referrals to treatment from Mass. gambling helpline

There has been a surge of treatment referrals from the Massachusetts Problem Gambling Helpline since online sports betting was legalized in 2023. The data presented below was collected in fiscal years spanning July 1 through June 30.

Age Group	2021	2022	2023	2024
20-29	44	102	142	185
30-39	62	52	192	192
40-49	43	90	146	113
50-59	46	87	102	94
60-69	18	46	68	62
70+	10	25	30	31

From WBUR's 12/5/25 story, **Young Adults in MA are Hooked on Online Sports Betting**. The data includes people who call, text, or web chat with counselors on the hotline. The hotline did not offer texting in 2021 and 2022. Table: Patrick Madden/WBUR | Source: MA Department of Public Health.

We were heartened to learn last week that the Legislature's committee on Economic Development & Emerging Technologies gave a favorable report to S.302—Senator John Keenan's **"Bettor Health"** bill, which would add common-sense regulations to online sports gambling. Now in Senate Ways & Means, we encourage the Senate to pass this bi-partisan bill quickly and send it to the House. **Please help advance the Bettor Health bill by contacting Senate Leadership; here's a template message for your convenience.**

TAKE ACTION NOW

More context:

- **Online Sports Betting is a Public Policy Issue and a Public Health Issue (JAMA Network)**
- **PHIWM's report** to the MA Gaming Commission and **testimony** to the Legislature's Economic Development Committee.

NOTE: We're also pleased to learn that bills to legalize online casino gambling (aka igambling or igaming) (S.235 and H.4431) have been "sent to study" by the Committee, meaning the bills are essentially dead this session.

Good news! Federal Judge Sides with Science

This month, a federal judge blocked US HHS Secretary Kennedy's efforts to upend vaccination science. Many, many thanks to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Infectious Diseases Society of America, the Massachusetts Public Health Alliance, the American Public Health Association, the American College of Physicians, and the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine for their leadership. See their **press release** and **news coverage**.



Be a Complete Streets CHAMPION



As a proud member of T4MA, we encourage you to apply for their **Champion's Institute**, which is being offered for a second time, in partnership with Smart Growth America. It's a statewide program to foster closer partnership and collaboration between committed community advocates and dedicated local public officials to identify and implement strategies for **safer and more complete streets** in their communities. The **first cohort** included four Western MA leaders, including PHIWM Board Member Rachel Gordon.

More info | Apply now

**Applications are due end-of-day
Tuesday, March 31, 2026**

Come When you Can, Leave When you Must

Whether it's for 10 minutes or two hours, we hope you'll stop by one of our open-house **Air Quality and Transportation Showcases** for some inspiration, information, and to help advocate for more public transportation options. We'll have snacks, door prizes, and it's family-friendly.



Healthy Air Network invites you to our **Air Quality & Transportation Showcases**

WHAT YOU'LL EXPERIENCE:

- ✓ Sneak preview of the **NEW Healthy Air Network App**
Get a sneak peek at how you can track air quality and stay informed.
- ✓ Understand the link between **air quality & transportation**
Learn how traffic, transit, and daily choices affect the air we breathe.
- ✓ Turn awareness into **action**
Explore real opportunities to advocate for policies that protect our health and our community.

**Door Prizes!
Air Cleaners
& More**

Greenfield - 3/31

Free!

 **Tuesday, March 31, 2026**
3:00 PM - 5:00 PM

 **Greenfield Public Library**
412 Main St, Greenfield, MA 01301

 SCAN TO REGISTER FOR
GREENFIELD

bit.ly/GreenfieldHAN

Registration is encouraged but not required!

Holyoke - 4/7

Free!

 **Tuesday, April 7, 2026**
5:00 PM - 7:30 PM

 **Enlace de Familias**
299 Main St, Holyoke, MA 01040

 SCAN TO REGISTER FOR
HOLYOKE

bit.ly/HolyokeHAN

Registration is encouraged but not required!

These open-house style events let you move at your own pace, visit different tables, and dive into the topics that matter most to YOU. Drop in at any time and stay as little or long as you want! **Information will be similar in both sessions.**

Questions? Contact Francheska:
Fbermudez@publichealthwm.org
413-795-7302

Family-Friendly!
Kids are welcome - activities will be provided.
We will serve food and refreshments.



Funding for these events is provided by Transportation 4 Massachusetts

Clean Slate is in the News!



**CLEAN
SLATE**
Massachusetts

- **Criminal justice reform advocates call for automatic record sealing laws in Mass**
-New England Public Media
- **13 States Have Adopted a Simple Criminal Justice Reform. It's**



R - L: Brother Al Hubert, Diane Jacobs, Pastor Atu White, and Andrea Freeman

Time for MA to Join Them

-Boston Globe

- The Case for Clean Slate: States are Stepping Up
- The Hill

Until Massachusetts passes a **Clean Slate law**, we need CORI-sealing clinics like **the one on May 8 in Springfield** (see below). Stop by the Clean Slate MA table or **sign up here** for CSMA information and action alerts.

[Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [LinkedIn](#)

FOURTH ANNUAL FRESH START

Job Fair & CORI
Sealing /
Expungement
Clinic

MAY 6, 2026
11:00 AM - 3:00 PM

**1000 Hall of Fame Ave,
Springfield, MA 01105**

WHAT TO EXPECT

- Get a free copy of your CORI ✓
- Speak with an attorney about sealing or expunging your record. ✓
- Connect with CORI-friendly employers ✓

**PRE-REGISTRATION IS
REQUIRED FOR CORI
SEALING ASSISTANCE**

<https://tinyurl.com/corireg>

Register for CORI-sealing Assistance

SPIFFY's Update on NFG Policies

**Need some more acronyms in your life?
We've got some good ones for you!**

- **SPIFFY** = *Strategic Planning Initiative For Families & Youth*--a Hampshire County coalition working to reduce youth substance use and build healthier communities.
- **NFG** = Nicotine-Free Generation



From SPIFFY's February 2026 newsletter:

More and more municipalities in Massachusetts, including many in Western Massachusetts, are passing Nicotine-Free Generation policies.

What is a Nicotine Free Generation policy? The Nicotine Free Generation (NFG) policy uses a birthdate to set a limit on retailers' ability to sell nicotine products. NFG prevents the creation of future demand for nicotine by preventing sales to anyone born after the designated birth date. Users who currently are legally sold nicotine are NOT affected. You can learn more about NGF by viewing [these resources](#).

Last month, NFG was enacted unanimously in the neighboring towns of **Amherst and Leverett**. They are the 20th and 21st NFG communities, raising the total population of enacting cities and towns to over 627,000 people. This growing list now includes Amherst, Belchertown, Brookline, Chelsea, Concord, Conway, Dover, Hopkinton, Leverett, Malden, Melrose, Manchester-by-the-Sea, Needham, Newton, Pelham, Reading, Somerville, South Hadley, Stoneham, Wakefield, and Winchester. More are on the way!

Is your town or city interested in potentially passing a NFG policy? Please reach out to nicotinefreegeneration@gmail.com, they will make a presentation about NFG. Even in small towns with no tobacco licensees, they welcome supporting resolutions from boards of health.

Since this newsletter, Hardwick has joined the list NFG communities, and Northampton is currently seeking public input on one. The **Public Health Advocacy Institute** also provides information about the NFG movement in Massachusetts.

ICYMI

- **MA Poll Sheds Light on Parent Perspectives on Cell Phone Bans in Schools**
(EdTrust MA/MA Polling Group)

- **New Survey Finds Trust in Banking High Among Low-Income Residents—but Barriers Still Keep Many Unbanked** (Partnership for Financial Equity)
- **Shaping Action: Findings on Use of Housing Choice Vouchers in MA** (CHAPA/Housing Policy Action Center)
- **Taking Stock of Transportation Funding: A year after the Transportation Task Force, how much progress has been made?** (Transportation for MA)

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