

Easthampton — Investigative Briefing Memorandum

PUBLIC RECORDS ANALYSIS · REAL TRUTH MA · RETRIEVED SEPTEMBER 11, 2026

Easthampton

August 2026

Subject: City of Easthampton NFG FOIA Return Analysis

FOIA Return Received: July 23, 2026 (Easthampton Health Department, Gmail export)

Adoption Status: NFG regulation adopted June 2026 (2-member Board of Health)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Easthampton FOIA return is a high-value document set that traces, in near-complete detail, the full arc of a Nicotine-Free Generation (NFG) adoption — from the moment an external academic “targeting” survey identified Easthampton as a receptive community, through eleven months of coordinated advocacy, to a final Board of Health vote that the Health Director privately described as a foregone conclusion. The return comprises roughly fifty threads of correspondence spanning May 2025 through June 2026, including the monthly advocacy newsletters of the statewide “Nicotine Free Generation” group, regional coalition emails, and the Health Director’s own exchanges with advocates, board members, and a Harvard research team.

The documents establish that the campaign in Easthampton did not originate with local demand. In May 2025, a Harvard Medical School team operating as “The Nicotine Free Generation Coalition” emailed hundreds of Massachusetts boards of health a one-minute survey designed to identify “communities seeking further information” and to “prevent unwanted communications to communities not currently interested.” Health Director Ryan Griffin answered that survey as “Highly Interested,” and within weeks was contacted directly by a Belchertown Board of Health member acting as a volunteer NFG recruiter for Hampshire County. From that point forward, an interlocking network of a state-funded regional coalition (PVTC), a youth-prevention coalition (SPIFFY), a tobacco-control community partnership, the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards, and the Public Health Advocacy Institute supplied Easthampton with model regulations, a hearing “script,” student testifiers, and an offer of free legal defense.

Most significantly, the return captures the network’s two most damaging characteristics in the officials’ own words: the state’s tobacco-control program treats NFG adoption as a funded program goal, and the outcome of the public process was known in advance. Days before the final vote, the Health Director wrote to an outside advocate that a student would present and “the board will vote. I am very confident” — while that same advocate offered to supply “articulate kids from outside Easthampton” to testify. The vote was ultimately taken by a two-member Board of Health, after the one member who had urged broader public input before considering NFG left the board and her seat was not filled.

KEY PLAYERS IDENTIFIED

Name	Position / Affiliation	Role in NFG Campaign
Ryan Griffin	Director of Public Health, City of Easthampton	Local champion; solicited and coordinated the advocacy network; set adoption of the “full package” (permit retirement, pouch ban, NFG) as his stated goal before any public process.
Ken Elstein	Elected member, Belchertown Board of Health; self-described NFG volunteer for Hampshire County	Cross-municipality recruiter; presented to Easthampton BOH; sought student testifiers, including “articulate kids from outside Easthampton.”
Dr. Jonathan Winickoff	Professor of Pediatrics, Harvard Medical School / Mass General for Children; “The Nicotine Free Generation Coalition”	Co-sponsor of the statewide survey used to identify receptive municipalities for targeted outreach.
Matthew Reynolds	Medical Student, Harvard Medical School	Sent and reminded the municipality-targeting survey to hundreds of MA boards of health, including Easthampton.
Merridith O’Leary	Health Commissioner, City of Northampton; Coordinator, Pioneer Valley Tobacco Coalition (PVTC)	Regional coordinator; offered to “lead this effort” and “help draft language” for the Board; PVTC partners with MTCP.
Maureen Buzby	Regional Tobacco Prevention Program Coordinator (Melrose; seven communities)	Submitted a support letter for the Easthampton BOH agenda; identified in prior FOIA analyses as a central statewide NFG coordinator.
Cheryl Sbarra, Esq.	Executive Director & Senior Staff Attorney, Massachusetts Association of Health Boards (MAHB)	Author of the sample NFG regulations; advised that a 2-member board could adopt; consulted for the Amherst hearing “script.”
Heather Warner, MPH	Coordinator, Hampshire Franklin Tobacco-Free Community Partnership (Collaborative for Educational Services)	Submitted testimony for the vote; proposed and recruited a prospective Board of Health member; supplied local data.
Lexi Polokoff	Coordinator, SPIFFY Coalition (Collaborative for Educational Services)	Network connector; added the Health Department to the coalition listserv; referred Griffin to the tobacco-control partnership.
Public Health Advocacy Institute (PHAI)	Mark Gottlieb, Exec. Director, Northeastern University School of Law	Provided a written offer to defend Easthampton free of charge against any legal challenge to NFG.
“Nicotine Free Generation”	nicotinefreegeneration@gmail.com (statewide volunteer advocacy group)	Bcc’d Griffin on monthly advocacy newsletters (Aug 2025–May 2026) tracking adoptions and soliciting presentations.
The 84 Movement	MA youth anti-tobacco program (MTCP-supported)	Made NFG its “Stipend Project for Fall 2025”; supplies youth testifiers at hearings.

Opposition figures appearing in the return (for balance): Peter Brennan (NECSEMA); Josh Pruett (National Association of Tobacco Outlets); Andrew Parker (Liberty Square Group, for “consumer choice advocates”); and Stephen Helfer and Paul Neff (Cambridge Citizens for Smokers’ Rights). Templated opposition emails also arrived via grassroots platforms (foradvocacy.com, forgrassroots.com).

KEY DOCUMENT EXCERPTS

Ordered by investigative significance. All quotations are verbatim from the FOIA return.

1. Health Director Confirms the Vote in Advance; Outside Advocate Offers Out-of-Town Students

From: Ryan Griffin <rgriffin@easthamptonma.gov>

To: Ken Elstein <kenelstein@gmail.com>

Date: Monday, June 8, 2026 at 12:14 PM

Subject: Nicotine Free Generation

“Yes, This Month’s meeting is this Wednesday the 9th. There will be a presentation from an Easthampton student on NFG, and the board members will be able to ask them questions. After that, the board will vote. I am very confident.”

Six days earlier, Elstein — a Belchertown official — had written:

From: Ken Elstein <kenelstein@gmail.com>

To: Ryan Griffin <rgriffin@easthamptonma.gov>

Date: Tuesday, June 2, 2026 at 2:48 PM

Subject: Nicotine Free Generation

“I thought that you were going to try to find students. Is The 84 group of anti-tobacco kids active in Easthampton? I also may have some very articulate kids from outside Easthampton on the Zoom meeting.”

SIGNIFICANCE: These paired emails combine two of the most damaging evidence categories. The Health Director states the vote’s outcome (“I am very confident”) before the hearing, framing a single student presentation as the final step before a decided vote. Simultaneously, an out-of-town advocate proposes producing student testifiers, including “articulate kids from outside Easthampton,” to populate the record — manufacturing the appearance of local, youth-driven demand.

2. Harvard Team’s Survey Targets “Interested” Municipalities; Griffin Responds “Highly Interested”

From: Reynolds, Matthew J. <MREYNOLDS8@mg.harvard.edu> (with Jonathan P. Winickoff, MD)

To: Hundreds of MA boards of health, incl. rgriffin@easthamptonma.gov

Date: Wednesday, May 28, 2025 at 10:30 AM (reminder June 5, 2025)

Subject: Tobacco Control in Your Community: Please Take 1 Minute Survey

“The Nicotine Free Generation Coalition is assessing local community interest in the policy... The results will help us effectively reach communities seeking further information regarding the policy and will help prevent unwanted communications to communities not currently interested in considering such a policy.”

The Belchertown recruiter later confirmed Griffin’s response:

From: Ken Elstein <kenelstein@gmail.com>

To: RGriffin@easthamptonma.gov

Date: Tuesday, June 24, 2025 at 7:57 AM

Subject: Nicotine Free Generation: Survey Follow-up

“You responded to our recent survey as ‘Highly Interested’ to the question, ‘How interested would your board be in more information about an initiative to limit the sale of nicotine products to those born after a certain date...’ ... One possible time frame would be to include NFG on your agenda over the summer, with a possible vote in the fall.”

SIGNIFICANCE: This is the campaign’s targeting mechanism, documented at both ends. An academic institution’s survey builds a list of receptive municipalities and screens out the uninterested; a volunteer advocate then converts a single “Highly Interested” response into a scheduled path to a vote — before any public notice, hearing, or community request.

3. State Program Names NFG Adoption as a Funded Goal

From: Nicotine Free Generation <nicotinefreegeneration@gmail.com>

To: (Bcc) rgriffin@easthamptonma.gov

Date: Sunday, October 19, 2025 (also September 21, 2025)

Subject: Nicotine Free Generation: October 2025 / September 2025

“MTCP, the Massachusetts Tobacco Cessation and Prevention Program now includes Nicotine Free Generation in its Board of Health Work Plan, stating it clearly as a goal for its Commonwealth-funded programs.”

SIGNIFICANCE: The advocacy network itself states that a state-funded public-health program has written NFG adoption into the work plan it funds for local boards of health. This connects Commonwealth dollars directly to a specific policy-adoption outcome and frames local NFG votes as deliverables of a state program rather than

products of independent local judgment.

4. Regional Coordinator Offers to “Lead” the Effort and Draft the Regulation

From: Merridith O’Leary <moleary@northamptonma.gov> (Northampton Health Commissioner / PVTC)

To: Ryan Griffin <rgriffin@easthamptonma.gov>

Date: Monday, November 17, 2025 at 3:37 PM

Subject: Next steps - Invitation to gather

“I think it would be valuable to update the regulation... I’m happy to collaborate with you and lead this effort with support from our TA team and help draft language for you and your Board. If you move forward, I can also attend your Board meeting to answer any questions. Tobacco policy is my jam...”

SIGNIFICANCE: A neighboring municipality’s health commissioner, coordinating a state-partnered regional coalition, offers to lead Easthampton’s regulatory effort and draft its regulation. This shows the “local” policy being authored from outside the jurisdiction, with the host official cast as facilitator rather than drafter.

5. Strategic Hearing Management to Suppress Opposition

From: Ryan Griffin <rgriffin@easthamptonma.gov>

To: Beth Rist; Steven Coughlin (BOH members), via BCC

Date: Tuesday, January 27, 2026 at 6:23 PM

Subject: No BOH meeting 1/21 Canceled

“Other municipalities strongly recommend holding hearings in person to limit organized attendance by outside tobacco-industry groups. I have already received several emails from individuals outside Easthampton, which I will forward to the Board.”

SIGNIFICANCE: The choice of an in-person-only format is described not as a matter of public convenience but as a tactic — recommended by “other municipalities” in the network — to reduce participation by opponents. This reframes the public hearing as an exercise in managing, rather than soliciting, public input.

6. Free Legal Defense Offered by the Public Health Advocacy Institute

From: Ryan Griffin <rgriffin@easthamptonma.gov>

To: Steven Coughlin <sjcoughlin@gmail.com>

Date: Monday, March 23, 2026 at 2:50 PM

Subject: Nicotine free generation (attaching “offer to defend easthampton.pdf”)

“I’ve attached a letter from the Public Health Advocacy Institute stating that they will defend any Massachusetts municipality, free of charge, against legal challenges from the adoption of Nicotine-Free Generation (NFG) regulations.”

SIGNIFICANCE: PHAI’s standing offer of pro bono defense to “any Massachusetts municipality” removes the principal deterrent to adoption — litigation risk — and is deployed to reassure board members. It evidences a centralized legal-support apparatus underwriting the statewide campaign.

7. Health Director Requests the Amherst Hearing “Script” from MAHB

From: Ryan Griffin <rgriffin@easthamptonma.gov>

To: Cheryl Sbarra <sbarra@mahb.org>

Date: Thursday, April 9, 2026 at 2:22 PM

Subject: NFG Question

“I was at the Amherst hearing back in October, and am looking for the script that Kiko had. Is that something you have access to?”

SIGNIFICANCE: The Health Director seeks the “script” used at another municipality’s NFG hearing from the attorney who authored the model regulation. This indicates a reusable playbook — standardized regulation, standardized hearing choreography — transferred from town to town rather than developed locally.

8. Two-Member Board Adopts After Dissenting Member Departs

From: Cheryl Sbarra <sbarra@mahb.org>

To: Ryan Griffin <rgriffin@easthamptonma.gov>

Date: Thursday, April 9, 2026 at 8:01 AM

Subject: NFG Question

“You do not have to provide a virtual option for a public meeting. And you can have 2 members of a 3-member board vote.”

The board’s third member had earlier urged caution:

From: Samantha Maider <slsmith319@gmail.com>

To: Ryan Griffin <rgriffin@easthamptonma.gov>

Date: Monday, December 8, 2025 at 7:21 PM

Subject: Go With Float Variance

“I think there needs to be considerable discussion and public input prior to the board considering a generational ban... It feels like mixed messaging from the BOH, and the city, to consider a NFG when there is a concurrent increase in recent years in marijuana dispensaries in town. It might also be appropriate for something like a NFG to be considered by the City Council (elected officials) in addition to volunteer board members.”

SIGNIFICANCE: The one board member to question the process — urging broader public input and possible City Council involvement — flagged that meeting as her last before her term expired. Her seat went unfilled, and NFG was adopted by the two remaining appointed members, after confirming with MAHB that a reduced board could act.

KEY FINDINGS

1. The Campaign Was Externally Initiated, Not Locally Demanded

The earliest NFG contact in the return is not a resident petition but a mass survey from a Harvard Medical School team (May 28, 2025) built to identify and screen municipalities. Griffin’s “Highly Interested” response triggered direct outreach from a Belchertown volunteer (June 24, 2025) and enrollment in the statewide “Nicotine Free Generation” newsletter, which bcc’d him monthly from at least August 2025 through May 2026. No constituent request for NFG appears anywhere in the return; the impetus is documented as arriving from outside the community.

2. A State-Partnered Regional Network Supplied Strategy, Language, and Testimony

Three overlapping, publicly funded or affiliated entities operated in concert: the Pioneer Valley Tobacco Coalition (PVTC), coordinated by Northampton Health Commissioner Merridith O’Leary, which “in partnership with” MTCP offered technical assistance and to “draft language”; the SPIFFY Coalition (Collaborative for Educational Services), which added Griffin to its listserv and referred him onward; and the Hampshire Franklin Tobacco-Free Community Partnership, whose coordinator Heather Warner submitted testimony and supplied local data. The PVTC’s own meeting agenda (Oct. 30, 2025) lists a “Review of Templates and Tools: July 2025 Model Regulation, Hearing documentation, Inspection templates” — the shared toolkit behind the “local” policy.

3. Cross-Municipality Coordination and a Reusable Playbook

Belchertown BOH member Ken Elstein functioned as a regional NFG deployment agent, telling Griffin of “pending nearby appointments in Northampton, Hadley, and Montague” (Dec. 6, 2025) and, later, that he had been “invited to meet with the Hadley Board of Health” (June 8, 2026). Griffin sought the Amherst hearing “script” from MAHB’s Cheryl Sbarra — author of the sample regulations — and modeled Easthampton’s draft on the shared “state model.” Regional coordinator Maureen Buzby, identified across prior municipal FOIA analyses as a central statewide organizer, also submitted a support letter into the Easthampton record.

4. Documented Youth Recruitment

Youth testimony was actively sourced rather than spontaneous. Elstein asked whether “The 84 group of anti-tobacco kids” was active locally and offered “articulate kids from outside Easthampton” for the Zoom hearing (June 2, 2026); Board member Steven Coughlin proposed “inviting some high school kids” (Mar. 20, 2026); and Griffin confirmed a student would present immediately before the vote (June 8, 2026). The statewide newsletter is explicit that “the high school students who testify at public hearings are our most effective advocates,” and that The 84 made NFG its “Stipend Project for Fall 2025.”

5. Predetermined Outcome and Managed Process

From his first substantive message on the topic, Griffin’s stated objective was adoption of the “full package” — retiring tobacco permits, banning nicotine pouches, and implementing “the NFG ban” (Nov. 18, 2025) — with the hearing framed as the “most transparent approach” rather than a genuine decision point. He described the in-person format as a means “to limit organized attendance by outside tobacco-industry groups,” told a resident her “in-person support... will be important at this hearing,” and, before the vote, wrote that he was “very confident.” The final vote was taken by a two-member board after the sole process-skeptic left.

6. Institutional Legal and Endorsement Backing

The Public Health Advocacy Institute’s written offer to defend “any Massachusetts municipality” free of charge was circulated to reassure board members, and the newsletters repeatedly invoked Massachusetts Medical Society and American Medical Association endorsements. Together these lowered the perceived legal and political cost of adoption to near zero for a small, part-time board.

NETWORK DATA POINTS

Person	Affiliation	Date	Action
Matthew Reynolds / Dr. J. Winickoff	Harvard Med. / MGH	May 28, 2025	Emailed municipality-targeting survey to hundreds of MA BOHs, incl. Easthampton.
"Nicotine Free Generation" group	Statewide (Gmail)	Jun 18, 2025	Began bcc'ing Griffin on monthly advocacy newsletters (through May 2026).
Ken Elstein	Belchertown BOH	Jun 24, 2025	Told Griffin he answered survey "Highly Interested"; proposed summer agenda, fall vote.
Ken Elstein	Belchertown BOH	Nov 20, 2025	Offered BOH presentation citing Griffin's MHOA-conference survey interest.
Peter Brennan	NECSEMA (opposition)	Nov 11, 2025	Submitted opposition letter to Council and BOH.
Merridith O'Leary	Northampton / PVTC	Nov 17, 2025	Offered to "lead this effort" and "draft language" for the Board.
Ryan Griffin	Easthampton HD	Nov 18, 2025	Set goal: retire permits, ban pouches, implement "NFG ban"; invited O'Leary to 12/10 BOH.
Ken Elstein	Belchertown BOH	Dec 6, 2025	Cited Amherst/Leverett votes; "pending appointments in Northampton, Hadley, and Montague."
Ken Elstein	Belchertown BOH	Dec 10, 2025	Presented on NFG at Easthampton's remote BOH meeting.
Samantha Maider	Easthampton BOH	Dec 8, 2025	Urged public input first; suggested City Council role; last meeting before term expired.
Lexi Polokoff	SPIFFY / CES	Feb 2–12, 2026	Introduced; met Griffin; added HD to listserv; referred him to Heather Warner.
Ryan Griffin	Easthampton HD	Jan 27, 2026	Advised in-person hearing to "limit organized attendance by outside tobacco-industry groups."
Koni Denham / M.A. Giza	Easthampton City Council	Feb 19, 2026	Placed Griffin on March 4 Council agenda re "Nicotine-Free Generational Tobacco Ban."
Ryan Griffin	Easthampton HD	Mar 11, 2026	Circulated draft regulation "based on the state model."
Ryan Griffin / C. Sbarra	Easthampton HD / MAHB	Apr 9, 2026	Confirmed 2-of-3 board can vote; requested Amherst hearing "script."
Christopher Vayda	Easthampton HD	Apr 21, 2026	Mailed 13 templated establishment letters + draft reg to tobacco retailers; forum notice.

Person	Affiliation	Date	Action
Heather Warner	Hampshire Franklin TFCP / CES	May 12, 2026	Submitted testimony for the vote; recruited prospective BOH member Paul McNeil.
Maureen Buzby	Regional Tobacco Prev. (Melrose)	≈ May–Jun 2026	Submitted support letter for the Easthampton BOH NFG agenda item.
Ken Elstein	Belchertown BOH	Jun 2–8, 2026	Sought student testifiers incl. “kids from outside Easthampton”; noted Hadley BOH invitation.
Ryan Griffin	Easthampton HD	Jun 8, 2026	“After that, the board will vote. I am very confident.”
Easthampton BOH	2-member board	Jun 2026	Adopted NFG / updated tobacco regulation; signatures finalized (Jun 16, 2026).

FUNDING / PROGRAM CONNECTIONS

Connections documented within Easthampton’s FOIA return:

- **MTCP (Massachusetts Tobacco Cessation and Prevention Program):** as named in the advocacy newsletters, “now includes Nicotine Free Generation in its Board of Health Work Plan, stating it clearly as a goal for its Commonwealth-funded programs.” MTCP is the funding backbone linking the regional coalitions and community partnerships below.
- **Pioneer Valley Tobacco Coalition (PVTC):** regional coalition coordinated by Northampton’s Health Commissioner; “in partnership with” MTCP; offered technical assistance, the “July 2025 Model Regulation,” hearing documentation, and to “draft language” for Easthampton’s Board.
- **SPIFFY Coalition / Collaborative for Educational Services:** a youth substance-misuse coalition housed at the Collaborative for Educational Services (CES); connected Griffin into the tobacco-control network and its listserv; runs the county’s youth (PNAS) data collection.
- **Hampshire Franklin Tobacco-Free Community Partnership:** CES-based, MTCP-aligned partnership; coordinator Heather Warner submitted testimony, supplied Easthampton census/school data, and recommended a prospective BOH member.
- **Public Health Advocacy Institute (PHAI):** directed by Mark Gottlieb (Northeastern University School of Law); provided a written offer to defend “any Massachusetts municipality” against NFG legal challenges at no cost.
- **The 84 Movement:** MA youth anti-tobacco program that made NFG its “Stipend Project for Fall 2025” and organizes the ENUFF Day / State House youth day of action — the pipeline for student testifiers.
- **Massachusetts Medical Society (MMS) & American Medical Association (AMA):** repeatedly cited in the newsletters as NFG endorsers to lower the political cost of local adoption.

INVESTIGATIVE SIGNIFICANCE

Evidence Categories Satisfied

Evidence Category	Status	Summary
PRE-HEARING COORDINATION	CONFIRMED	External contact (Harvard survey, Belchertown recruiter, regional coalition) began roughly a year before the June 2026 vote, long before any public notice.
TEMPLATE USAGE	CONFIRMED	Draft reg “based on the state model” / “July 2025 Model Regulation”; MAHB “sample” regulations; a requested Amherst hearing “script”; 13 templated establishment letters.
NETWORK ACTIVITY	CONFIRMED	PVTC, SPIFFY, Hampshire Franklin TFCP, MAHB, PHAI, “NFG” newsletter group, and Buzby all appear operating in coordination.
CROSS-MUNICIPALITY COORDINATION	CONFIRMED	Belchertown’s Elstein recruited into Easthampton (and Hadley/Northampton/Montague); Northampton’s O’Leary offered to lead and draft; Amherst “script” sought.
YOUTH RECRUITMENT	CONFIRMED	Explicit sourcing of student testifiers, including “articulate kids from outside Easthampton”; The 84 “Stipend Project”; student presentation staged before the vote.
PREDETERMINED OUTCOME	CONFIRMED	“After that, the board will vote. I am very confident”; stated “full package” goal months ahead; in-person format chosen to limit opposition; 2-member board after dissenter left.
FUNDING CONNECTION	CONFIRMED	Advocacy materials state MTCP wrote NFG into its Commonwealth-funded BOH Work Plan; PVTC operates “in partnership with” MTCP; PHAI free legal defense.

What These Documents Demonstrate

- A state-funded program (MTCP) treats NFG adoption as a written goal of the work plans it funds for local boards of health.
- An academic institution (Harvard/MGH) systematically surveys municipalities to build a targeting list of receptive communities.
- Regional coalitions and community partnerships supply the model regulation, hearing script, testimony, and technical assistance behind a nominally “local” policy.
- Advocates from other municipalities recruit into the host town and produce youth testifiers, including students from outside the community.
- A centralized legal apparatus (PHAI) offers free defense to remove litigation risk as a deterrent to adoption.
- The local official functions as a network champion coordinating outside advocates, and the public process is managed toward a predetermined result — here, a vote by a reduced two-member board.

CONCLUSION

The Easthampton FOIA return documents an NFG adoption that was externally initiated, network-supplied, and managed toward a known outcome. A Harvard survey identified the community; a Belchertown volunteer and a state-partnered regional coalition supplied the model regulation, the hearing script, the technical assistance, and the student testifiers; the Public Health Advocacy Institute supplied free legal cover; and the local Health Director coordinated the effort while describing the in-person hearing as a device to limit opposition.

The single most significant piece of evidence is the network's own written statement that the Massachusetts Tobacco Cessation and Prevention Program "now includes Nicotine Free Generation in its Board of Health Work Plan, stating it clearly as a goal for its Commonwealth-funded programs" — read alongside the Health Director's pre-vote assurance that "the board will vote. I am very confident." Together they connect state public-health funding to a specific, predetermined local policy outcome, adopted by a two-member board after the one member who asked for broader public input had left.

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