

MGB puts its muscle behind housing bank bill

Doctor testifies at State House that health, housing inextricably linked

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The effort to pass legislation enabling municipalities to levy a fee on real-estate transactions for affordable-housing initiatives received support from the Mass General Brigham hospital system this week.

The move outlines the legislation from a public-health standpoint as well as an employer standpoint. MGB is both a nationally-respected medical institution and one of the state's largest employers.

"The lack of community housing is causing real issues for all kinds of institutions and businesses," Nantucket housing director Tucker Holland said. "MGB recognizes this very much. This

measure is really a case of the legislature giving local municipalities permission to help themselves. It doesn't take a dime from the state. We're at a crisis point here and it is disappointing that it has taken this long to get to this point, for the legislature to do something."

Elsie Travers, MD, Ph.D. and chief community health equity officer at MGB, testified on Beacon Hill that health and housing are inextricably linked in such a way that there is a connection between housing stability and health outcomes.

"People who face housing instability are more likely to experience poor health outcomes," she said. "A recent review of the literature on health and housing published in the journal *Health Affairs* found

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– Tucker Holland

Nantucket Housing Director

that low-income families that have difficulty paying rent, mortgage or utility bills are less likely to have a usual source of medical care and more likely to postpone needed treatment."

She said Nantucket Cottage Hospital's community health needs assessment continuous-

ly highlights the lack of housing affordability, with a workforce housing needs assessment from 2015 finding that half of the island's year-round population struggles to pay their rent.

"Not only is affordable housing a concern with respect to the social determinants of health of our patients, but it's also a significant contributing factor to staffing challenges that our hospitals are facing. The lack of workforce housing is particularly problematic for employees in our Nantucket Cottage and Martha's Vineyard hospitals," she said.

In a joint statement, Denise Schepici, Martha's Vineyard Hospital president and CEO and Gary Shaw, president and CEO of Nantucket Cottage Hospital, said a lack of affordable housing is an important factor in being able to provide a high level of healthcare services to their island communities.

"Massachusetts will not be able to maintain its status as a leader in healthcare if people cannot afford decent, quality housing," it said. "In remote locations like Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, affordable, year-round housing is essential to recruitment and retention of qualified staff to support and sustain the health of our communities."

Laura Silber, coordinator for the Coalition to Create a Martha's Vineyard Housing Bank, put it in simple terms. "If you cannot staff your hospital, you cannot serve your community," she said.

Two joint pieces of legislation, House bill 3697 and Senate bill 868, establish an enabling act that would allow every city and town in the state to opt into the plan, which establishes a level of housing price that would trigger between a 0.5 and 2 percent

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fee that would be used to form an affordable housing bank, similar to Nantucket's Land Bank.

The legislation is still waiting to be reported out of the state legislature's joint committee on housing, where it will be sent to one last committee before a floor vote that could send it to Gov. Charlie Baker's desk.

Proponents of the bill are hoping it is signed into law before Baker steps down as governor.

Nantucket sent a similar bill, this one based on a home-rule petition rather than enabling legislation, to Beacon Hill five years ago.

Holland said over that five-year time period housing costs have risen out of control.

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price has gone up over half a million dollars," he said.

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A number of institutions across the state have said it is difficult to hire their first or even second choices for jobs because of a lack of housing options, Holland said.

There are now over 80 institutions who have signed on to support the legislation, including the Greater Boston Food Bank and the Mass Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence.

Silber said the addition of MGB shines a light on two areas of discussion: a lack of affordable housing as a public-health problem, and as a problem for employers.

"MGB does not enter into conversations like this lightly," she said. "They have a presence at the legislature, with their own governmental affairs team. This is their first foray into public-health legislation. Housing instability is a determining factor in public health. It is well known that if people are spending over 50 percent of what they earn on housing, they are often choosing between housing and healthcare."

She said healthcare institutions understand that you cannot fix those problems only through the healthcare delivery system. They need to be fixed in society in general.

"This is not about who deserves or who can afford," she said. "This is about how we keep this commonwealth running."