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The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
MASSACHUSETTS SENATE

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Dear Neighbor:

I wanted to reach out to you to share a little bit about what I and my colleagues have been working on to address the public health and economic crises caused by COVID-19. While this is a time of uncertainty for many, we are working on your behalf to protect the public and stabilize the economy. Here are some developments from the past several days:

Today, the Governor announced that all non-essential businesses must operate remotely beginning tomorrow. Grocery stores, gas stations, and restaurants (for take-out and delivery) will still be operational. For a complete list of essential businesses that will remain open, see here: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/covid-19-essential-services>

While Boston Public Schools (BPS) are closed, please remember that school meals are available for pick up at select sites: <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/Page/8098>

To deal with increased demand, the Department of Unemployment Assistance (DUA) will be holding virtual town halls for claimants to ask questions about applying and benefits. To call in see here: <https://www.mass.gov/forms/massachusetts-department-of-unemployment-assistance-dua-virtual-town-halls>

Last week my colleagues and I passed an emergency **\$15 million supplemental budget** to combat the coronavirus outbreak. Those funds will support the Commonwealth's monitoring, treatment, containment, public awareness and prevention efforts against the novel coronavirus by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH), regional and local boards of health, and other public entities. For up to date info on DPH efforts, see here: <https://www.mass.gov/resource/information-on-the-outbreak-of-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19>

Last week, the Commonwealth announced a **\$200 million emergency investment** in MassHealth for critical healthcare providers, including community health centers and acute, safety-net providers. These funds will support our front-line medical providers, and make sure less people have to go to the hospitals.

The Massachusetts DPH issued guidance on March 15 that stipulates that all commercial insurers and the Group Insurance Commission are **required to cover medically necessary telehealth services** in the same manner they cover in-person services. They also required that hospitals must restrict visitors and cancel non-essential elective procedures.

To protect seniors, DPH issued guidance that assisted living residences are to ban visitors to protect the health of residents and staff. This is in addition to the federal guidance issued on Friday that bans visitors to nursing homes and rest homes.

I have also called on the Division of Insurance (DOI) to **restrict insurance providers from canceling coverage due to nonpayment during this crisis**. No one should be without health insurance at this critical moment, and MassHealth has also opened up a **special enrollment period for all uninsured residents**. In the same spirit of continued services, the State's Department of Public Utilities (DPU), announced a **moratorium on utility shut offs, service disconnections, and other collection related activities** during this crisis to make sure that seniors, families, and all residents continue to have access to basic utilities.

The state announced a **\$10 million low-interest loan program to small businesses and nonprofits** with no payments for the first 6 months. The Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) is working closely with the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) to activate the Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program which would provide assistance to eligible businesses and non-profits impacted by COVID-19. EIDLs provide small businesses with working capital loans of up to \$2 million to help meet financial obligations and operating expenses until normal operations resume. To apply for EIDL, see here: <https://disasterloan.sba.gov/ela>

To support low-income families, I have cosponsored legislation (HD.4951) to provide immediate one-time supplemental cash assistance to Massachusetts' **30,000 low-income families with children and 19,000 elderly residents** who currently receive some state benefits. These individuals are at an increased risk from this pandemic, facing immense challenges to meet their basic needs. Similarly, **I have cosponsored legislation that would restrict evictions and foreclosures**. (HD. 4935) No one should be displaced at this critical time. This bill was drafted in consultation with Greater Boston Legal Services, Lawyers for Civil Rights, City Life/Vida Urbana, and the Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action.

We know workers and businesses are suffering losses. The Legislature passed a bill last week to **suspend the one-week waiting period for unemployment assistance**, and the state has opened up the benefits to those who are temporarily laid off, like hospitality workers. The Department of Unemployment Assistance (DUA) may now pay unemployment benefits if a worker is quarantined due to an order by a civil authority or medical professional or leaves employment due to reasonable risk of exposure or infection or to care for a family member and does not intend to or is not allowed to return to work. The worker does not need to provide medical documentation and need only be available for work when and as able. To apply for unemployment online, see here: <https://www.mass.gov/how-to/apply-for-unemployment-benefits>

I have also cosponsored legislation to allow collection of unemployment assistance for **an additional 13 weeks** beyond the 26-week limit currently in place for those who apply during this public health emergency (HD.4962). These are extenuating circumstances and people need to have support as they are trying to get back on their feet.

Recognizing the hardships many restaurants are facing, the Alcoholic Beverages Control Commission (ABCC) has extended credit terms by 30 days. I called on the ABCC to suspend fees for license holders at this time. I also cosponsored legislation (HD. 4967) to give restaurants, bars, and other on premises-licensees to sell their current unopened inventory of canned or bottled beer, wine and spirits to the general public through pickup or delivery.

As we continue to confront the many challenges that lie ahead of us, this is an opportunity to help this industry and to support our small businesses during these hard times. I have also called on the Department of Revenue (DOR) to suspend meals tax to give restaurants a boost.

I have been in constant contact with my colleagues, public health officials, and organizations across my district during this difficult time. As these conversations continue, our sole focus is the medical and economic health and wellbeing of our Commonwealth. If you have more questions, concerns, or comments, please **call the Commonwealth's hotline at 211**, where you can access all the most up to date information on the state's efforts. Please continue to practice physical distancing, washing your hands, and doing your part to flatten the curve and slow this outbreak. These coming weeks are crucial in that mission. Together, we will get through this and come out stronger than before!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Nick Collins". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Nick Collins