



## Senator Nick Collins

### 2024 Legislative Update

#### **Senate Passes Legislation Legalizing Fentanyl Test Strips**

The Massachusetts Senate debated and unanimously passed *An Act relative to fentanyl test strips*—S.2543—legislation to help prevent overdoses and save lives by making legal the sale, possession, and distribution of fentanyl test strips, and other testing equipment used to identify fentanyl, in the Commonwealth.

If passed into law, the bill would add a potent tool to support drug users in knowing whether they are consuming fentanyl. Fentanyl test strips are a proven harm reduction strategy that have been shown to help drug users engage in less risky behavior, including by discarding drugs, reducing doses, using drugs more slowly, using drugs with someone else around, or keeping naloxone nearby.

#### **“Blue Envelope” Bill Supporting People With Autism Passes Senate**

The Massachusetts Senate unanimously passed *An Act facilitating better interactions between police officers and persons with autism spectrum disorder*—also known as the “Blue Envelope” bill—to improve communication during traffic stops involving a person with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The bill would create a voluntary program that would make available blue envelopes that people with autism could carry with them while driving and hand over to a police officer in the

event that they are pulled over. A driver could place their license, registration, and insurance cards inside the envelope, and the outside of the envelope would note that the driver has Autism Spectrum Disorder and provide guidance on best practices on how to interact with the individual.

The envelope's guidance—which would be created by a coalition of advocates, Chiefs of Police, and the RMV—would help law enforcement officers to better understand the actions of individuals with autism, who are more likely to have increased sensitivities and communication challenges in stressful situations.

### **Wheelchair Warranty Reform Passed by Massachusetts T**

The Massachusetts Senate voted unanimously to strengthen consumer protections for wheelchair users.

*An Act expanding wheelchair warranty protections for consumers with disabilities—S.2541—* requires all wheelchairs to come with warranties, extends the minimum warranty period to two years, sets standards for wheelchair repairs and replacements, and eliminates the cumbersome prior authorization process for all wheelchair repairs under \$1,000.

### **Senate Overwhelming Passes Legislation to Increase the Commonwealth's Competitive Advantage**

The Massachusetts Senate passed S.2548, *An Act to provide for competitiveness and infrastructure investment in Massachusetts*, an economic development bill that takes advantage of the interest accrued from the Commonwealth's Stabilization Fund and leverages that interest to ensure the state receives the maximum possible share of federal funds. The Commonwealth's Stabilization fund currently has a historic balance of \$8.2 billion.

It is estimated Massachusetts currently has the opportunity to receive up to \$17.5 billion through historic, once-in-a-generation federal funding opportunities.

## **Senate Passes the *SAFER* Act: Consensus Common Sense Gun Reform from Massachusetts**

With bipartisan support, the Massachusetts Senate passed *An Act to sensibly address firearm violence through effective reform—the SAFER Act*—to increase firearm safety in the state without infringing on the rights of gun owners. Following a thorough debate amongst members on the Senate floor, the bill passed 37 to 3.

The omnibus legislation—[S.2572](#)—was introduced following extensive testimony at a November hearing of the Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security, where the public provided over four hours of testimony on more than 50 gun safety bills before the committee. Led by Majority Leader Cynthia Stone Creem, the bill’s passage follows months of discussions which included stakeholders and advocates with diverse perspectives on the issue.

The bill’s provisions would help make residents safer—and ultimately save lives—by building on the Commonwealth’s already strong record on gun safety and updating laws to prevent those who wish to do harm from being able to access and use deadly weapons. It would reform and modernize the state’s firearm laws, support the state’s public safety and public health infrastructure in mitigating gun violence, and strengthen accountability and oversight mechanisms for illegal gun activity.

## **Senate Acts to Update and Modernize Sexual Health Education**

The Massachusetts Senate on Thursday passed the *Healthy Youth Act*, which would ensure that Massachusetts public schools electing to teach sexual health education curriculum use age-appropriate, inclusive, medically accurate, and research-based information on sex, relationships, and consent.

The *Healthy Youth Act*, [S.2686](#), would enhance parental rights and codify into law the voluntary framework approved by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). It calls for sex and relationship education to be inclusive and appropriate for students regardless of gender, race, disability status, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

## **Massachusetts Senate acts to transform early education and care**

*EARLY ED Act would expand accessible, affordable, and high-quality care across the state*  
The Massachusetts Senate unanimously passed legislation to make early education and care more accessible and affordable for families across Massachusetts.

The [EARLY ED Act](#)—*An Act ensuring affordability, readiness and learning for our youth and driving economic development*—takes transformative steps to improve the affordability and sustainability of childcare programs by making the state’s Commonwealth Cares for Children

(C3) operational grant program permanent, expanding eligibility for the state's subsidy program and capping subsidy recipients' childcare costs at 7 per cent of family income, and boosting compensation for educators by creating a career ladder and providing scholarships and loan forgiveness.

### **Senate passes supplemental budget, creates roadmap for emergency shelter system**

The Massachusetts Senate passed [S.2708](#), a supplemental budget which would make additional appropriations to the emergency shelter system while taking proactive and fiscally responsible steps to ensure its long term effectiveness. It also supports workforce training programs for families who have recently migrated to Massachusetts.

The bill requires each family in shelter to receive an individualized rehousing plan; eligibility for shelter after nine months would be contingent upon compliance with the rehousing plan, with certain categorical exemptions. The bill comes on the heels of Congress torpedoing bipartisan, commonsense federal immigration reforms which would have brought assistance to the Commonwealth.

Separately, the legislation permanently codifies outdoor dining flexibility made popular during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Senate Acts to Prevent Abuse and Exploitation Online**

The Massachusetts Senate unanimously passed *An Act to prevent abuse and exploitation*, bipartisan legislation that would criminalize the sharing of sexually explicit images or videos without an individual's consent and implement a comprehensive educational diversion program designed for adolescents on the consequences of posting indecent visual depictions online.

The bill, [S.2073](#), increases the allowable fine for unlawful distribution of indecent images, and rein in coercive control of abusers.

### **Senate Acts to Protect Consumers, Make Debt Collections Fairer**

The Massachusetts Senate unanimously passed legislation to protect consumers and help keep people from being pushed into financial ruin if they are sued for financial debt. The new law would make debt collection practices fairer, protect wages, and make clear that no person can go to prison for their debt.

[The Debt Collection Fairness Act](#)— S.2713—would protect thousands of families across the state, including many in communities of color, by reducing the interest rate from 12% to 3% on judgments on consumer debt, which is often old debt that has been bought by debt collection companies for pennies on the dollar.

It would also protect at least \$975 in wages per week from a person subject to wage garnishment because of a debt and ensure that no one in the Commonwealth is imprisoned for failure to pay a consumer debt. Currently only \$750 per week in wages is protected from garnishment. The bill would also reduce, from 6 years to 5 years, the time in which a company can bring suit to collect a consumer debt.

### **Senate Acts to Protect Firefighters, Increase “Hot Work” Safety**

The Senate unanimously passed legislation to boost safety for people conducting “hot work”—welding, plasma cutting, and spark-producing construction—by requiring the state to create a public database of violations of the fire prevention statute, and a public notification system to alert workers of violations.

The passage of [S.1485](#)—*An Act relative to violation of regulation regarding hot work processes*—comes in the days following the ten year anniversary of the tragic nine alarm fire in the Back Bay, started by welders working on a nearby iron railing, that resulted in the deaths of [two Boston firefighters](#).

The Senate bill would work to prevent such tragedies by promoting transparency and prioritizing safety for Massachusetts firefighters.

“This legislation represents historic regulatory reforms that the Walsh-Kennedy Commission helped institute across the hot works and welding industry in Massachusetts. Passing this legislation will ensure that the critical reforms, training, oversight, and accountability needed to prevent tragedies like the Back Bay fire, will be the law of the land. We do this in honor law of Boston Fire Lieutenant Edward Walsh and Firefighter Michael Kennedy so that their sacrifices are not in vain,” **said Senator Nick Collins (D-Boston), primary sponsor of the bill.**

### **Senate Authorizes \$375 Million for Local Transportation Infrastructure**

The Massachusetts Senate unanimously approved \$375 million in bond authorizations for statewide transportation projects, including the state’s Chapter 90 program, which would create a reliable funding source for local infrastructure investments like roads, bridges, regional transit equipment and infrastructure, bicycle infrastructure, and electric vehicle infrastructure, among other things.

Projects funded by the annual legislation often improve quality of life for residents in every region of the state, and many play a role in environmental mitigation.

Every city and town in the Commonwealth would receive a share of \$200 million in funding to be used on maintenance and construction of roads and bridges. \$150 million would be allocated equally to six programs targeting specific transportation infrastructure, and \$25 million would be allocated to cities and towns through the rural roads program.

Of the \$375 million in total authorizations, the legislation would allocate \$25 million to each of the following programs that target specific infrastructure areas:

- **[Municipal Pavement Program](#)**, which focuses on the improvement of municipally owned state numbered routes.
- **[Municipal Small Bridge Program](#)**, which provides financial support to cities and towns for small bridge replacement, preservation, and rehabilitation projects.
- **[Complete Streets Funding Program](#)**, which provides funding to municipalities for streets that provide safe and accessible options for all travel modes such as walking, biking, transit, and vehicles.
- **Municipal Bus Enhancement Program**, which provides grant funding to build out infrastructure related to mass transit by bus.
- **Mass Transit Access Grant Program**, which provides grants for design and construction improvements to access commuter rail stations or other mass transit stations, such as parking lots, drop-off and pick-up zones, bike storage infrastructure, and electric vehicle charging infrastructure.
- **Municipal/RTA EV Grant Program**, which provides grants to Regional Transit Authorities and municipalities for the purchase of electric vehicles and related charging equipment.