June 30, 2015

Representative Brian Dempsey
Chairman
House Ways & Means Committee
House of Representatives
State House
Boston, MA  02133

Re: State Budget

1. Earned Income Tax Credit
2. Reducing Youth Consumption of Flavored Cigars

Dear Chairman Dempsey,

I write on behalf of the Massachusetts Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics (“MCAAP”) which represents over 1,800 pediatricians practicing in the Commonwealth to urge the conference committee to support the Senate provisions increasing the Earned Income Tax Credit and increasing the tax on flavored cigars.

Earned Income Tax Credit

In response to the growing number of children living in poverty and the increasing number of low-income households in the United States, the American Academy of Pediatrics has focused its advocacy on poverty and child health. The Massachusetts Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics supports efforts to ease poverty for low and moderate income working families in the Commonwealth and supports the Senate’s budget provision to increase the state’s Earned Income Tax Credit for low and moderate wage workers.

Poverty and low socioeconomic status are significant determinants of child health. Children living near, at, or below the poverty line have worse health and are at greater risk for developmental delay, asthma, ear infections, obesity, behavioral health problems, and child abuse and neglect. Infant mortality is higher amongst the poor and near poor. Child Poverty also adversely impacts health access across the life span and into adulthood.

As pediatricians, we see the impact of poverty on our patients and their families. This is not limited to urban or rural practices. It is an issue seen throughout the state, including suburban communities. Think about the struggle of low-income working families to make ends meet, to provide safe housing, food and other necessities for their children. Such stress affects the physical and mental health of both parents and children and impedes children’s abilities to learn while in school and sometimes, even stay in school at all.

Research by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has found a strong association between EITC participation and mother’s receiving prenatal care. This improves both maternal health and infant health (fewer children born premature or at low weights). Also, children in families receiving EITC support have shown higher test scores, especially in elementary and middle schools, and higher high school graduation rates.
As a society, we must help low-income working families make ends meet and provide for their children. There is much more to do, but increasing the state’s earned income tax credit (EITC) is an important step. The MCAAP therefore strongly urges the conference committee and legislature to do so.

Reducing Youth Consumption of Flavored Cigars

The Senate has included a provision (amendment #836), to increase the excise tax on flavored cigars, which is intended to reduce the use of these products by minors.

Flavored cigars are appealing to children. Their candy-like tastes conceal the well-documented hazards of tobacco while their low cost encourages repeated use and eventual addiction. As parents, pediatricians, legislators, and all responsible adults work determinedly to protect children from life-long tobacco related diseases, the presence and aggressive marketing of small flavored cigars undermines those efforts. Increased excise taxes, minimum pack sizes, and prohibitions on flavoring have helped to reduce cigarette use by children and teenagers. Similar policies should apply to all tobacco products including cigars and e-cigarettes. It is critically important for you to take the first step in stemming the use of these tobacco products by supporting the Senate provision increasing the tax on flavored cigars.

The pediatricians of Massachusetts implore the conference committee to support increased funding for smoking cessation programs by dedicating revenues from an increased tax on flavored cigars.

Respectfully,

Michael McManus, M.D., MPH, FAAP
President, the Massachusetts Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics