

CommonWealth

POLITICS, IDEAS & CIVIC LIFE IN MASSACHUSETTS

A photograph of firefighters in full protective gear, including helmets and oxygen tanks, fighting a large fire. The firefighters are seen from behind, silhouetted against the intense orange and yellow flames. One firefighter's helmet has "MIA" on it, and another's gear has "19" visible. The fire is very large and intense, filling the background.

Creative accounting —Beacon Hill style

Lawmakers warm to private funding
for police, fire training



BIA-MA and numerous health care providers across the Commonwealth **urge the Legislature to support brain injury survivors** and enact S.502, a bill requiring commercial health insurers to cover cognitive rehabilitation services.

- **30,000 hospitalizations** occur annually in Massachusetts due to brain injury, stroke and infectious disease.
- **15,000 people are released** from hospitals without services each year.
- **None have cognitive rehabilitation coverage** in their commercial health insurance plan.

“....the presence or absence of effective cognitive rehabilitation, can **make the difference between a favorable outcome, including a return to independence, and a fulfilling and productive life or an unfavorable outcome, languishing and even regressing at home or in a nursing home.**”

- **Douglas I. Katz, M.D.**

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Going all-digital

THIS WILL BE our last print issue of *CommonWealth*. After surveying readers, consulting with board members of MassINC, and holding many discussions with my colleagues here at the magazine, I've decided we should stop printing the quarterly print magazine and focus all of our attention and resources on the *CommonWealth* website.

The decision wasn't easy. MassINC has been publishing the magazine for more than 20 years, but the growing success of our 9-year-old website and its various digital products has forced a re-evaluation of our priorities. The website has become our prime vehicle for reaching readers and an important part of the way public policy is explored in Massachusetts.

In the end, I concluded the print magazine took too much time and too many resources to produce. My belief is that these resources should be redeployed to the website, its various digital products, and our podcast, which we call The Codcast.

We explored a number of compromise positions, including publishing a thinner magazine (you'll notice this issue is a bit narrower), a smaller-sized magazine, and even reducing the number of issues we publish. We evaluated each option closely, but in the end they all felt as if they were merely delaying the inevitable.

The whole process, while difficult, was important in several ways. I asked for your feedback in my editor's note in the last issue, and you provided it. An online survey of more than 1,000 *CommonWealth* readers, conducted with the help of the MassINC Polling Group, told us much more about who is reading our content and what they are interested in.

The survey also suggested most of our readers are migrating online, even for the content contained in the print magazine. The polling data indicate 10 percent of our print readers only read the print version of the magazine,

while half of those with access to the print edition at home or work choose to read the stories mostly or exclusively online. Sixty-three percent of our print subscribers said they would continue to read the magazine online if the print edition disappeared.

Our conversations with readers also highlighted our role in the local news food chain. We aren't the place readers generally go for breaking news or leaks from political insiders. But we are the go-to place for insightful analysis, coverage of events and people beyond Boston, and for policy debates.

I know many of you like the convenience of the print magazine, the ability to slip it in a bag and take it wherever you go, even to the beach. But the world is changing. Even I, old geezer that I am, have stopped reading print versions of most publications. In the long run, it's just easier and more environmentally sound to go online.

Let me assure you on a few key points. We have no intention of discontinuing our focus on long-form journalism, perhaps the most distinctive feature of the print magazine. In this issue, for example, we have a story on a novel, off-the-books way of funding government programs; a profile of one of the state's most controversial education advocates; a report on efforts to turn Gateway Cities food deserts into oases; and a summary of what county sheriffs are doing to turn their jails into human service agencies. We also have a Q&A with Gregory Jenkins, the executive director of the Somerville Arts Council.

On the plus side, we plan to redesign our website to make it more attractive and easier to use. We also have high hopes of expanding our staff and our coverage. It's sad that the print magazine is coming to an end, but *CommonWealth* isn't going anywhere and what's coming online is exciting.



BRUCE MOHL

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And as we do every year, we wish to thank our employees for helping lead the way with their achievements. For us, this recognition is always about more than a ranking. It's about providing the highest quality care, innovating for the future, and ensuring our community continues to thrive.

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Is Warren becoming more bipartisan?

New research says yes, based on the bills she files, cosponsors

BY SHAWN ZELLER

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM HAS it that the Massachusetts delegation to Congress is very liberal and very partisan, with few substantive differences separating the state's nine representatives and two senators.

Traditional methods of evaluating members of Congress—by looking at their votes—confirm this view. But in an era of party government, in which the gulf between Republicans and Democrats is as wide as ever, proponents of bipartisanship are looking for new measures to categorize narrow differences.

The Lugar Center, led by former Indiana GOP Sen. Richard Lugar, and the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University, have devised a methodology that is digging deeper. They've found that even as they vote in lockstep, there are important differences amongst Massachusetts' liberals in Congress that give a better sense of their collegiality, their willingness to reach across the aisle, and their focus on policy issues.

Who would have thought, for example, that with the Republican takeover of both the Congress and the White House in 2017, Sen. Elizabeth Warren would prove more willing to work with the GOP? She wasn't the only one: Reps. Niki Tsongas of Lowell and Jim McGovern of Worcester worked more with Republican colleagues last year than they had in the preceding Congress, when Republicans held both the House and Senate but Barack Obama was president.

Others, by contrast, were less willing to work with Republicans: Reps. Michael Capuano of Somerville, Bill Keating of Bourne and Richard Neal of Springfield. The remaining representatives and the state's other senator, Ed Markey, have proceeded with about the same level of par-

tisanship since Donald Trump became president as they had before—though in the case of Rep. Seth Moulton, that means maintaining his outlier standing among the delegation near the top of the bipartisan ranking among all House members.

"A lot of this just has to do with effort," says Dan Diller, who was Lugar's legislative director in Congress and is now policy director at the Lugar Center. "Is a member making an effort to go to the other party and try to convince them that they have a good idea?"

The Lugar Center and Georgetown evaluate congressmen by looking at the bills they've introduced. Lawmakers score points if their bills attract co-sponsors from the other party. They can also move up the bipartisan index if they co-sponsor bills from members of the other party.

On the plus side, the data is evaluated objectively. Lugar and Georgetown simply tally the sponsors. (The researchers don't count ceremonial bills, such as those naming post offices, and they don't score members who introduce and co-sponsor very few bills.)

The results add to public understanding of Congress, says Peter Ubertaccio, a political science professor at Stonehill College: "What's happening in committees, who's cosponsoring what—these are the sorts of things where you see gradations."

Still, if the study has a weakness, it's that less active legislators can look either more partisan, or more bipartisan, based on a small sample size. In 2017, Richard Neal was the least active Massachusetts lawmaker in terms of his bill sponsorships. He sponsored 11 bills and co-sponsored 95. By contrast, McGovern sponsored eight and co-sponsored 542.

Though Warren, Tsongas, and McGovern were more open to working with Republicans on bills in 2017, they weren't high scorers in the

Lugar/Georgetown study. Warren ranked as the 64th most bipartisan senator in 2017, compared to the 88th in 2015 and 2016. The study doesn't include the Senate majority or minority leaders because they introduce and co-sponsor few bills, so the ranking is out of 98 senators instead of 100.

Both Tsongas and McGovern jumped into the top half of representatives, in terms of their willingness to work with Republicans on bills in 2017. McGovern moved up from the 281st out of 434 (the House Speaker is excluded from the ranking), to 196th; Tsongas leaped from 360th to 188th.

On the other side, Keating became the most partisan Massachusetts representative in 2017. He was the 364th

government workers to use Uber or Lyft on official business, to allow people suffering from Lou Gehrig's disease easier access to government disability benefits, and to improve technology education, among others—and all had Republican co-sponsors.

The Lugar/Georgetown approach differentiates lawmakers in a way that their voting records do less and less. Congressional Quarterly, the Washington trade journal, has rated representatives and senators since 1953 on how often they side with their party on floor votes that split a majority of Republicans from Democrats.

Over the past quarter century, as southern Democrats have grown scarce and northern Republicans have become endangered, the parties have become far more unified. As a result, votes are no longer as useful in determining which members are most willing to work with those on the other side.

In the last three years, for example, the average level of party unity voting for a member of the House ranged from 94 percent for Republicans in 2015 to 96 percent for Republicans and Democrats in 2016. That's not much of a spread.

The Massachusetts lawmaker most willing to buck his party during that time was Bill Keating, who voted with Republicans in 2015 on 6 percent of the votes that split the parties. That's hardly a bipartisan record. Still, it passes for one when one considers that Markey and Warren sided with fellow Democrats 100 percent of the time in 2015 and 2016, and 99 percent so far in 2017.

"Votes are often tactical and often come at the end of a long, torturous process, dictated by circumstance, whipping, the mood of the day," says Jay



most bipartisan representative last year, down from 222th in 2015 and 2016. Capuano dropped to 301st from 249th.

Both fell in the middle of the pack in terms of their legislative involvement. Keating introduced eight bills in 2017 and co-sponsored 229. Capuano introduced 21 and co-sponsored 267.

In the Senate, Markey ranked 92nd for bipartisanship in 2017 and in 2015 and 2016, having introduced 37 bills and co-sponsored another 269. Warren was slightly more active, introducing 31 bills and co-sponsoring 324.

Based on the Lugar/Georgetown data, only one Massachusetts lawmaker can claim real bipartisan bona fides. That's Rep. Seth Moulton of Salem, who ranked 35th in 2017 and 34th in 2015 and 2016.

Moulton eschews introducing legislation purely to make political points. Democrats being the minority party, bills introduced by Democrats, without Republican co-sponsors, stand little chance of enactment.

Moulton only introduced five bills in 2017—to allow

Warren went from 88th to 64th in bipartisan ranking.

Branegan, a senior fellow at the Lugar Center. "Looking at bill sponsorship is more granular and considered."

At the same time, lawmakers are regularly judged on their votes at election time, whereas bill sponsorships mostly fly under the radar. Lawmakers know that very few of the bills they put their names to will ever see the light of day. Only 97 laws were enacted in 2017, one of the lowest tallies for the first year of a Congress in modern times.

And lawmakers may have different motivations for co-sponsoring legislation. They may strongly believe in the policy and want to go on record saying so, but they also may just want to butter up a colleague or trade their sponsorship on one bill for a fellow member's on one of

theirs. Whatever the case, it does indicate a willingness to work across the aisle.

Co-sponsorships are also something lawmakers can point to at election time to demonstrate their open-mindedness, something that remains popular with many voters even as the country's ideological divide has widened. Warren, for example, has been touting her work with Colorado Republican Cory Gardner on legislation that would require the federal government to respect state laws legalizing marijuana use. "Despite the polarization, Americans are still pretty skeptical of partisanship," says Ubertaccio. "Candidates who can talk about their bipartisan bona fides impress voters."

The Lugar/Georgetown data also underscore how, despite partisan differences on major legislation, much of Congress's work is relatively uncontroversial. Warren, for example, scored points because she's sponsored legislation with two Republicans, Charles Grassley of Iowa and Johnny Isakson of Georgia, aimed at making hearing aids more affordable and making some models available without a prescription.

She also joined forces with GOP Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida on legislation aimed at combating money laundering by human traffickers, and she's working with

Maine Republican Susan Collins on a bill to help hospitals better care for victims of terrorism.

She's also signed on to legislation introduced by Republicans, such as a bill by Grassley that aims to expand the availability of health care in rural areas by authorizing Medicare reimbursement to pharmacists for services normally rendered by doctors. And she co-sponsored a bill by Rubio that would require the State Department to track anti-Semitic acts in Europe.

Her name on a bill hasn't meant, for the most part, that it has a better chance of enactment. As of this spring, none of her own bills had become law, and only six of those she'd co-sponsored had, none particularly notable or controversial. The Senate passed all six, from a measure by Ohio Republican Rob Portman to bolster hearing tests for newborns and young children to one by Democrat Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin that orders the State Department to measure how well countries are doing at compensating victims of the Nazis, without opposition.

What does it all add up to? Warren seems to be looking for more opportunities to play nice on fairly uncontroversial issues. When it comes to battles over big issues that tend to divide the two parties, look for her to revert to pugilistic form. **CW**

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Creative accounting— Beacon Hill style

Lawmakers warm to
private funding for police, fire training

BY BRUCE MOHL

BRIAN KYES, THE police chief in Chelsea, sounds like a mountain climber with the summit finally in sight. He and his fellow chiefs have been scaling Beacon Hill for almost a decade looking for a way to fund police training programs that wouldn't require them to go hat in hand to the Legislature each and every session. What they are looking for is every public agency's dream—a dedicated, non-

tax source of funding immune from the ups and downs of state government finances.

The chiefs investigated a lot of different options over the years. They looked at a special assessment on homeowners insurance policies and a surcharge on auto insurance premiums, but neither one passed muster with lawmakers. Now Kyes thinks he's found the ideal solution—a \$2 fee that



Firefighters-in-training
battle a blaze.



The recruit officer course at the Municipal Police Training Committee's Randolph Regional Police Academy.



Police recruits train in Randolph.

would be added to the cost of each rental car transaction in Massachusetts, raising an estimated \$7 million to \$8 million a year for police training. Both branches overwhelmingly approved the new fee in different pieces of legislation, though at press time it was unclear whether the assessment will make it into law.

It's hard to understand why someone from Chicago who is renting a car in Boston should be paying for police training in Massachusetts, but in a way that's the genius of the proposal. A good share of rental car customers are from out of town, so hitting them with an extra fee doesn't create a lot of pushback locally. On top of that, the rental car money will replace police training funds currently provided by cities and towns and the state, allowing the municipalities and the state to direct those taxpayer funds for other purposes.

"That money could certainly be put to good use," Kyes says. "It's a win-win for everybody."

No one disputes the need for police training; the question is how best to fund it. These off-the-books funding mechanisms raise alarm bells among government watchdogs because they hide the true cost of government initiatives in a series of fees and assessments on private industry. No need to raise taxes when the state can just tap the private sector for more money. And it's not as if the private sector just eats the cost. The assessments eventually are passed along to customers in the form of higher bills—a tax by another name.

The rental car fee to support police training is patterned after a long-established assessment on insurance

companies to support fire training. The Department of Fire Services each year seeks funding on Beacon Hill, but its job is made easier by the fact that the tab for its services is paid for not by taxpayers but by an assessment on property and casualty insurance companies. The assessment, initiated in the early 1970s in response to two horrific fires, has grown steadily over the years, tripling in size to \$28 million over the last 14 years.

Many rental cars are rented by visitors, so hitting them with an extra fee doesn't get a lot of pushback.

Even more alarming is the way lawmakers have come to view the budget line item for the Department of Fire Services as a cash spigot for the municipalities they represent. More and more earmarks are popping up in the line item for just about anything that has a connection to fire. In recent years, Millis pocketed \$100,000 for police and fire communications equipment, Needham secured \$104,000 for fire safety equipment, and Weymouth received \$100,000 for the purchase and upgrade of fire equipment. The list goes on and on. Gov. Charlie Baker, like his predecessors,



has often vetoed a lot of the pork-barrel spending, only to see his vetoes overridden. But now Baker appears to be awakening to the line item's possibilities. He wants to shift the cost of the State Police arson and bomb squad into the Department of Fire Services line item, sticking the insurance industry with the \$3 million price tag.

What's most surprising about the entire process is how everyone has come to accept it. Even the Massachusetts Insurance Federation, which represents property and casualty insurance companies, the firms on the hook for the Department of Fire Services line item, mounts only token opposition. Every year, the federation writes a letter to the governor urging him to veto millions of dollars from the line item. The letter's wording hasn't changed the last few years, except the dollar amounts keep going up. The letter's bottom line hasn't changed: "While denominated an assessment, in reality this is a tax imposed on insurance companies to defray the cost of basic governmental services," the letter says.

DON'T CONFUSE BUDGET AND REVENUE

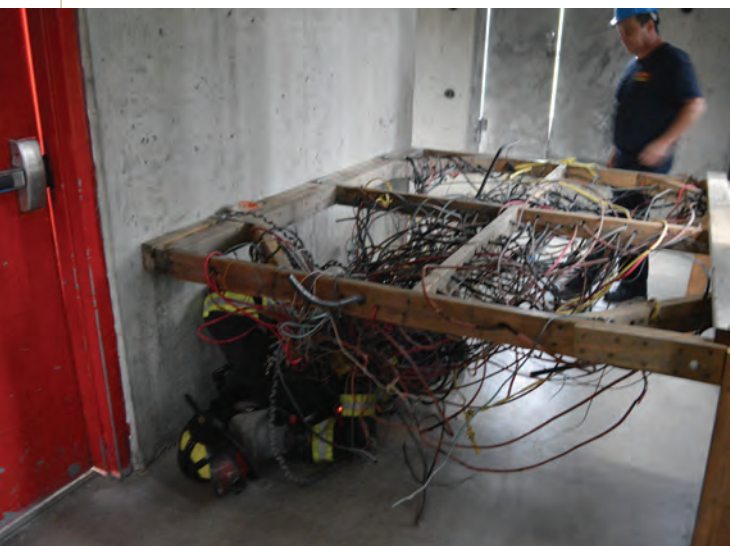
In putting together the budget for the Department of Fire Services, state Fire Marshal Peter Ostroskey calculates what it will cost to run the firefighting academies in Stow and Springfield, which are used to train municipal firefighters at no cost to cities and towns. He also totals the expenses for his department's hazardous materials, or HazMat, response program, its fire safety division, and its special operations unit. Then he presents that infor-

mation to the Executive Office for Administration and Finance, which comes up with a number for the governor's budget proposal

"We go through the same process that any other state agency goes through," says Ostroskey, who has been fire marshal since 2016 and prior to that deputy fire marshal for four years. "Don't confuse the budget process with the revenue stream."

The revenue stream for the fire services agency is what sets it apart from most other agencies in state government. Most of the agency's revenue comes from an assessment on property and casualty insurance companies doing business in Massachusetts. The agency's HazMat work is funded through a separate assessment on commercial automobile insurance policies.

The assessment on property and casualty insurance companies based on their market share was first put in place by the Legislature in 1973, in the wake of the Hotel Vendome fire of 1972 (generally considered the worst firefighting tragedy in Boston's history, with nine firefighters killed) and the massive fire that swept Chelsea in 1973 (which destroyed 300 homes and displaced 1,000 people). The initial \$100,000 funding cap was raised to \$750,000 in the 1980s and then to as high as \$5 million in the 1990s. By 2003, the line item was nearly \$9 million. In 2008, the law was amended to allow assessments on the insurers for capital expenditures, paving the way for a \$40 million expansion of the Department of Fire Services headquarters and the construction of a \$13 million training facility. By 2011, funding hit nearly \$21 million and



by 2018 it exceeded \$28 million.

Insurance industry officials say the assessment on their industry increased 117 percent between fiscal 2004 and 2016, a period when the state budget grew by 68 percent.

According to records from the Division of Insurance, three property and casualty insurers—Commerce, Citation, and Arbella—are paying annual assessments greater than \$1 million. Citation and Commerce are affiliates of the same company, MAPFRE.

The industry says assessments on companies domiciled in Massachusetts carry a heavier burden because those companies are subject to retaliatory assessments in other states where they operate. “Each increase in the fire services assessment punishes our own Massachusetts-based companies by subjecting them to higher taxes in other states,” says John Murphy, executive director of the Mass Insurance Federation, in his annual letter to the governor requesting spending vetoes.

The industry’s dire warnings haven’t deterred Massachusetts lawmakers, who regularly file budget amendments seeking funding for projects in their districts. These earmarks are probably outside the scope of the Department of Fire Services, but no one balks because taxpayers aren’t being hit with the bill.

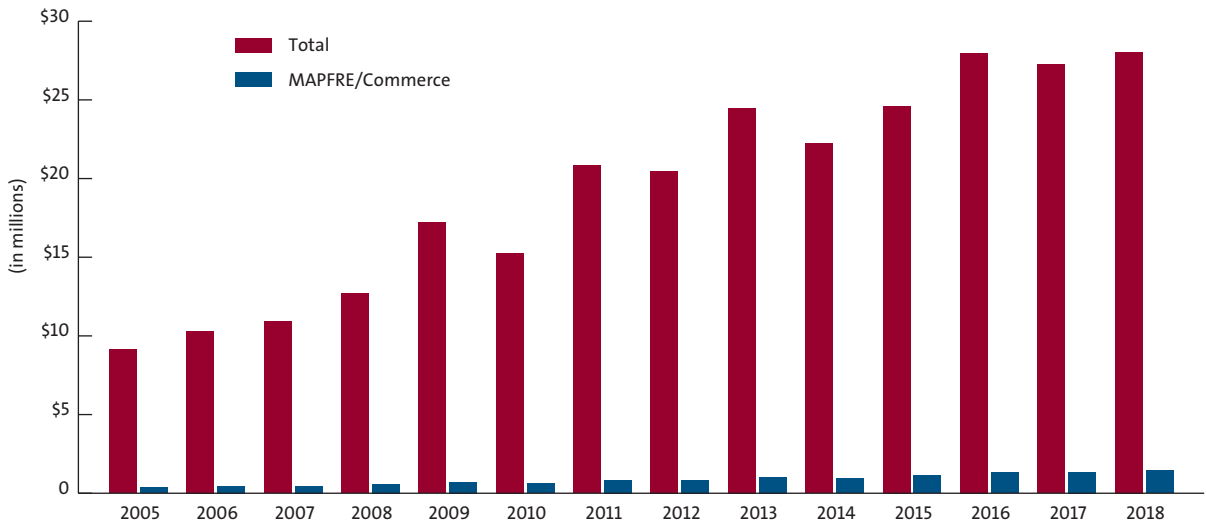
The funding dance on Beacon Hill is almost always the same. In both fiscal 2017 and 2018, the governor’s budget sought one level of funding and the Legislature increased that amount by about \$3 million, with all of the extra money added on the floors of the House and Senate through amendments. The governor vetoed most of the added money—\$2.8 million in fiscal 2018 and \$2.4 million in fiscal 2017—and then the Legislature overrode his vetoes.

Most of the budget amendments have some connection to firefighting. Over the last two years, the town of Millis received \$100,000 to improve communications at the police and fire departments and \$35,000 for a self-contained breathing apparatus. Many towns received money for safety equipment, including Needham (\$104,000), Franklin (\$65,000), Plainville (\$25,000), and Chelsea (\$4,600). Stoneham (\$15,000) and Lynn (\$40,000) received money for uniform sanitizing equipment. And the Holyoke Fire Department received \$10,000 for the purchase of naloxone.

The Tewksbury Fire Department received \$90,000 both years to cover the cost of municipal improvements needed to respond to calls at Tewksbury Hospital. The Fire Chiefs’ Association of Plymouth County received \$100,000 both years to upgrade the county’s emergency radio communication systems. And House Majority Leader Ron Mariano both years secured \$50,000 for the HazMat unit in his hometown of Quincy.

INSURANCE INDUSTRY FUNDING FOR DEPARTMENT OF FIRE SERVICES

Assessments on property and casualty insurance firms doing business in Massachusetts. MAPFRE/Commerce is the largest, so its share is the largest.



SOURCE: Massachusetts Division of Insurance

For fiscal 2019, the House and Senate have both approved budgets and are now trying to resolve differences between them. The line item for the Department of Fire Services included many of the same appropriations from past years, but the two branches also have added a number of unique requests. The House budget includes \$100,000 for Worcester fire safety equipment, \$22,000 for fire department upgrades in Medway, \$50,000 for a Jaws of Life for Saugus, and \$500,000 for the HazMat

don't know where they come from," he says.

In fiscal 2018 and again in the budget for fiscal 2019, Gov. Charlie Baker sought to move an estimated \$3 million in funding for the State Police arson investigation unit out of the State Police line item and into the line item for the Department of Fire Services. The move would shift the funding from taxpayers to insurers. The measure failed to pass in 2018, but it has a chance in the fiscal 2019 budget. The Senate included the measure in its fiscal 2019

spending plan while the House did not; the two branches were attempting to resolve their differences as *CommonWealth* went to press.

Ostroskey says the idea of funding the State Police unit out of his agency's line item originated with the governor's office and not with him. Baker administration officials say the funding shift makes sense. Unlike the legislative earmarks, which are not in keeping with the mission of the Department of Fire Services, the officials say the State Police unit operates out of the Department of Fire Services facility

in Stow, and there is a nexus between the unit's arson investigation work and benefits to the insurance industry.

"The residents of the Commonwealth and assessed insurance companies receive great benefit in having a highly trained, specialized State Police unit in residence at the Department of Fire Services to investigate arson incidents across the state, which can reduce the financial impact if an investigation reveals fraud or other culpability," says Felix Browne, a spokesman for the Executive

The governor vetoed most of the added money in FY2017 and FY2018 — and then the Legislature overrode his vetoes.

teams in Everett, Cambridge, and Boston. The Senate budget includes \$100,000 for fire station improvements in Maynard, \$65,000 for the Winthrop Fire Department, \$75,000 for fire equipment in Stoneham, and \$100,000 to help Scituate fix up a fire station.

Ostroskey says his office makes sure that the earmarked money goes for the intended purposes, but otherwise he takes a hands-off attitude toward the practice. "We don't weigh in, frankly, on the merits of these proposals. We

Office of Public Safety and Security.

A BIT OF A HIDDEN TAX

The esoteric question of whether it's appropriate to fund government services through an assessment on private industry generally gets little attention on Beacon Hill. When the House approved the \$2 rental car fee to fund police training in May, the measure passed quickly by a margin of 145-4, with four Republicans voting no.

One of the four, Rep. James Lyons of Andover, called the fee an "absolute joke" at a time when the state budget is topping \$40 billion. "If we cannot make police training one of our priorities without raising a fee, where are we spending this \$40 billion?" he asked.

Sen. Julian Cyr of Truro, who sponsored the \$2 rental car fee in the Senate, says the funding approach makes perfect sense. As a society, he says, we are asking police officers to wear more and more hats—social workers, first responders, and law enforcers—and they need high-quality training to perform all of these functions.

He says the state has provided funding for police training, but over the years it has been erratic and subject to the whims of the moment. The rental car fee will provide

a steady flow of money to provide the necessary training. "We do a lot of this in state government," he says. "This is a mechanism to have a steady appropriation that's tied to the activity. For consumers, it's about a small, unnoticeable cost."

Baker administration officials say it's not unusual in state government to use industry assessments to fund operations. They note industry assessments provide the bulk of funding for the Division of Insurance, the Department of Public Utilities, and the Division of Banks.

Eileen McAnneny, president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, says industry assessments are not an ideal way of funding government services because the approach reduces spending accountability and hides the true cost of government. Doug Howgate, director of policy and research at the foundation, said user fees make sense but only if there is a direct link between the entity providing the funds and what is being funded. "To me there's no connection between rental car contracts and police training," he says.

Frank O'Brien, vice president of the Property Casualty Insurers Association of America, views the issue more broadly. He says assessments on insurers to fund the state Division of Insurance make sense because the cost of regulation could be perceived as part of the cost of the

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insurance product being sold. He says there is a less direct link between insuring homes and businesses and funding the training of firefighters whose work could prevent or limit the losses arising from fires.

“Don’t get me wrong. There’s is a demonstrated need for this, for training,” he says. “Everybody loves firefighters. I

‘Government is going in this direction because of a shortage of money. This is almost like free money.’

come from a firefighter family. The policy issue is whether it’s appropriate to put the entire cost on one industry. We’re calling on certain industries to pay for a public safety function that benefits the community as a whole.”

O’Brien suggests the real reason state government is looking to businesses to supply the funding for services

is because—even with a \$40 billion budget—officials are struggling to find the money to do everything they want to do. “Government is going in this direction because of a shortage of money,” he says. “This is almost like free money.”

The trend line also worries him. “What began as a mechanism to fund the state fire academy has morphed over two decades to not only include training but to also include specific earmarks for specific cities and towns,” he says. “At the end of the day, it’s not a bad thing. That’s what a local rep or senator is supposed to do. But over time we’ve had mission creep. This has morphed into something much bigger. It has grown exponentially.”

What few people realize, he says, is that the insurers end up passing the cost along to their customers. “This is a pass-through business and, like any business, when setting your prices you look at your costs. This is a cost,” he says. He doesn’t know how much the cost is, and acknowledges it’s \$28 million spread out over hundreds of thousands of policyholders, so it’s not a big price tag on an individual basis.

“It gets hidden, if you will,” he says. “What’s new every year is the amount. It’s a bit of a hidden tax.” **CW**



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Keri Rodrigues, founder and
“Mom-in-Chief” of Massachusetts
Parents United.

Parent provocateur

Keri Rodrigues wants to help low-income families find their voice. Will her penchant for stirring the pot muffle their message?

BY MICHAEL JONAS | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL MANNING

IT'S A THURSDAY evening in late May and about 20 immigrant parents and grandparents are gathered in a meeting room of the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association in Lowell. It's the monthly meeting of the local chapter of Massachusetts Parents United, a statewide organization launched two years ago to give low-income families a voice in everything from housing and public safety matters to education issues in local schools.

The group is the brainchild of Keri Rodrigues, a 39-year-old single mother from Somerville with a long background in advocacy and political organizing. The focus for the Lowell meeting is the "achievement gap" that leaves many students in

urban school districts lagging behind their peers in wealthier suburban communities. As the group brainstorms ideas for improving schools, Heng Chhun Lay, a grandfather of several Lowell public schools students, tells of a high-performing school in Cambodia that was regularly visited by other school leaders looking to learn from its success.

"I love this idea!" Rodrigues says excitedly, as the group makes plans to invite Lowell school committee members to its next meeting to ask them about sharing best practices within the district.

Everything from its earnest-seeming school improvement agenda to the "Mom-in-Chief" moniker Rodrigues has adopted as her title makes

the organization seem about as controversial as a PTA bake sale. But Rodrigues is no shrinking violet, and with her history in the rough and tumble of Massachusetts politics, not everyone regards the group so innocently.

Rodrigues is a study in often jarring contrasts. She's a church-going Catholic who bristles at authority and convention, wielding a salty tongue and a large tattoo across her back. She pokes fun at her own parenting foibles, yet is driven by ferocious devotion to her three sons. But it's the unusual crosscurrents of her political profile that have turned Rodrigues into a sometimes-polarizing—and difficult to pigeonhole—figure.

She is a lifelong Democrat who once described herself as a “pit bull liberal” and spent nearly a decade with the Service Employees International Union, which has made its mark by organizing hospital workers, home health aides, janitors, and other low-wage sectors often dominated by women and immigrants. But she has become best known in Massachusetts political circles for helping lead the charge in an effort bitterly opposed by organized labor.

Rodrigues was the Massachusetts state director for Families for Excellent Schools, the New York-based education nonprofit that was the main source of funding for the multimillion-dollar 2016 ballot question campaign to raise the cap on charter schools in the state. As both a mother and member of the Democratic State Committee, Rodrigues says she became passionate about the issue in thinking about her own young Latino sons and the challenge for many low-income and minority families across the state who have limited options when it comes to school choices for their children.

Rodrigues saw the charter battle as part of the broader fight for social justice and values that the Democratic Party should embrace. “I worked for SEIU for years. I support labor,” Rodrigues says. “But how can we in good conscience, as Democrats, sit by when we know that children of color in Massachusetts are getting the short end of the stick?”

But the tide turned sharply against charters during the ballot question campaign, and gained a strong partisan slant the issue did not have before, with Democrats breaking heavily against the question. Critics pounded at the idea that charter schools siphon money from already strapped district schools. Meanwhile, millions of dollars in out-of-state money poured into the pro-charter side, lending credence to the cry that wealthy moguls were trying to upend public schools in the state.

The ballot question effort was defeated soundly, by a nearly 2-to-1 margin, despite strong backing from Gov. Charlie Baker. By the time it was over, says Rodrigues, she had become branded “the high priestess of charter schools.”

“I am Cruella de Vil,” she says of the Disney villain

caricature that took hold. Rodrigues would describe herself in far more everyday terms. “I’m a mom and I want my kids to get a decent education,” she says. “I’m not a bad person. What do you think I’m doing at night? I’m vacuuming and picking socks and underwear off the floor just like you do. I’m not like some evil villain sitting up in my tower plotting the demise of public education.”

Rodrigues says she was disappointed not just with the ballot question outcome, but also with the costly airwaves war the campaign relied on, which barraged voters with millions of dollars in TV ads, a far cry from the type of grassroots organizing she came to believe in through her work with SEIU.

Her response to the top-down ballot campaign, which was directed by Baker’s top political advisers, was to found an organization that she says flips that model on its head. Taking inspiration from her organizing work with SEIU, Rodrigues says Massachusetts Parents United takes direction from its members, who are parents in some of the state’s neediest communities. They are being coached to advocate for themselves on everything from school issues to public safety to affordable housing concerns. The organization held its first meeting in January of last year, and claims 8,000 members.

Its chapters have taken on everything from gun violence to pushing for expansion of school breakfast programs. But with backing from some of the same deep-pocketed funders that helped bankroll the charter school campaign, Massachusetts Parents United will have to prove to some doubters that it’s more than a stalking horse for pro-charter forces.

“I have to keep fighting because the inequities still

Rodrigues is a study in contrasts, a church-going Catholic with a salty tongue and a large tattoo across her back.

exists. Voters made their decision. I accept it,” Rodrigues says of the charter question. But she says there are all sorts of other ways to work to improve schools and advocate on other issues facing parents. “My children are not going to have access to the same education as rich white kids are going to get,” Rodrigues says of the current status quo.

Helen Corrigan, the former chairwoman of the Somerville Democratic City Committee, says she has long puzzled over Rodrigues’s disparate dimensions. “Her language



Rodrigues with two of her three sons, David, the youngest (left), and Matthew, the oldest. "I'm a mom and I want my kids to get a decent education," she says.

is pretty rough. On the other hand, she's a Eucharistic minister," says Corrigan. "She's a complicated person." Some things about her, Corrigan says, are clear. "There's nothing shy about Keri," she says, "and she seems to be willing to take on anyone."

TOUGHING IT OUT

If her personality and political profile defy simple categorizing, so do Rodrigues's early years growing up in Somerville.

She's the daughter of a "townie Irish" mother from Charlestown and a father with a mix of Portuguese and Venezuelan heritage. Rodrigues' childhood gave her a grounding in politics and civic activism, but it was also marked by horrific trauma that she says helps fuel her passion to improve the lot of children—and that may also explain some of the edge with which she approaches that work.

Her grandmother was a co-founder of the Massachusetts Alliance of Portuguese Speakers and a player in local Democratic Party politics. Her father, however, had problems with "extreme anger" and her mother struggled with alcoholism. After Rodrigues showed up at school when

she was 13 covered in bruises, she was removed from her home by the state and spent several years living in foster care and group homes.

As with so many things about her, Rodrigues did not fit any simple preconception of a foster kid from a troubled home. "I had a big brain, but also had this kind of growing-up-hard-in-Somerville situation. I was a tough kid, but I was a band geek," she says, an all-state percussionist with a streetwise edge.

From an early age, she had a thing for talk radio, and became a regular caller by age 12 to the late David Brudnoy's show on WBZ. Rodrigues was expelled from Somerville High School in 11th grade (she was caught with a knife in her purse that, unbeknownst to her, she says, her boyfriend had stashed there). She got her GED and managed to land a slot at Temple University in Philadelphia, where she got a degree in broadcast journalism and political science.

She credits Brudnoy, whom she got to know off the air, with encouraging her to broaden her horizons and get away from Boston for college. He pointed her to Temple because of its good communications program. "He really sent me on my trajectory," she says. Her left-leaning impulses clashed with Brudnoy's libertarian-conservative



Rodrigues addresses a monthly meeting of the Lowell chapter of Massachusetts Parents United.

outlook, and he also taught her to welcome a good give-and-take and to be ready to defend your views.

Her ability to do that helped her land a string of radio jobs following college, including gigs in Springfield, Worcester, and Providence. In Fall River, she hosted a talk show for nearly four years, calling out local politicians and serving as an AM rabble-rouser, rallying support for a grassroots campaign against a proposed LNG terminal on the city's riverfront. "I really started organizing the community on the air. It was like a town meeting every single day," she says.

She went from radio to SEIU, where she spent nearly a decade in the communications operation of the activist union, known not just for its advocacy on behalf of health care workers and janitors but its support for broader causes like an increase in the minimum wage.

"I was good at coming up with all kinds of crazy ideas and tactics," she says. "We're going to do a flash mob at the Ohio state capitol," she says recalling one organizing drive. Or teaching people "how to do a 'die-in' and lay down and get in the newspaper every day and make John Kasich look bad," she says of the state's Republican governor.

Andy Stern served for 14 years as national president of SEIU and was a leading figure in the US labor movement, overseeing enormous growth of the union and turning it into a progressive powerhouse that aggressively organized previously non-union sectors. "She's a force of nature," he says of Rodrigues, for whom he has become a mentor. "She doesn't accept the status quo when it hurts people."

Rodrigues serves as a lector and volunteer at St. Anthony's Shrine, the Franciscan Catholic center in downtown Boston known for its commitment to social justice issues. The Rev. Thomas Conway, the shrine's executive director, says there's nothing inconsistent about being a battle-ready Franciscan.

"I think the stereotype of the person who is interested in spirituality is one of docility," he says. Rodrigues is more apt to say, "put up your dukes," says Conway, but that's an "archetypal Boston Catholic" approach. "I've got a whole church full of people like that. They're ready to take on the world."

BALLOT QUESTION BATTLE

Although she honed her political chops on the radio and at SEIU, Rodrigues's involvement in education issues is fairly new, and it came about, ironically, as a result of her effort to steer clear

of the issue. In 2014, while doing consulting for local Democratic candidates, Rodrigues insisted that they not fill out issue questionnaires sent by Democrats for Education Reform, a pro-reform group that supports charter schools. She didn't think the candidates, some of whom were involved in competitive primary races, had anything to gain by completing the surveys and wading into contentious education policy issues.

The frustrated director of the state chapter of the Democratic education organization, Liam Kerr, reached out to ask if she'd sit down with him. When she did, says Rodrigues, she began to see the education issues the group was advocating as part of a social justice platform that Democrats should support.

"I started doing my own kind of internal analysis" on school issues, she says. Until then, she says, "I just thought that as a Democrat, whatever the teachers' union said was the line that we follow." She decided education issues were more complicated than that, especially as she started to face challenges with her own children's education. One of her sons was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and clinical depression and was suspended dozens of times during his kindergarten year in his Somerville elementary school.

"It opened my eyes," she says of the experience, and convinced her that parents needed more of a voice in their children's education and more options in choosing the right school for them.

She ended up doing some consulting work with Demo-

crats for Education Reform and then getting hired as state director for Families for Excellent Schools during the 2016 ballot question campaign to expand charter schools. She was relentless in arguing the pro-charter side, taking part, by her count, in 116 debates with Question 2 opponents. “We spend so much time worrying about the feelings of adults and the turf wars,” she says of education battles. “Our prime focus is supposed to be our children.”

“Teachers should absolutely have a seat at the table,” she says. “They should not have *every* seat at the table. I should have an equal say in what happens to my children.”

The charter school issue has long divided Democrats, often pitting two key party constituencies, lower-income minority families and teachers unions, against each other. But Democrats broke strongly against the ballot question, with the state party even taking an official stand against Question 2.

Not, however, before Rodrigues and state AFL-CIO president Steve Tolman mixed it up at a Democratic State Committee meeting. Rodrigues says Tolman wound up in a rage yelling at her. He says she’s exaggerating.

“We had a confrontation, I remember that,” says Tolman. “She tried to make more of it than it was.”

Deb Kozikowski, the vice chair of the state party, didn’t share Rodrigues’ view on the charter school ballot question, but she admired her determination and principled stand, and thinks Tolman overreacted. “She’s willing to stand up for her vision and her truth of what the Democratic Party means to her,” says Kozikowski, who regards Rodrigues as her “political daughter.”

The charter ballot campaign was a debacle in all sorts of ways, says Rodrigues.

‘She’s force of nature,’ says former SEIU president Andy Stern. “She doesn’t accept the status quo when it hurts people.’

Families for Excellent Schools poured more than \$15 million into the failed effort. Last September, the group paid the largest fine in state campaign finance history—\$426,000—for illegally hiding the identity of its donors. In February, the organization announced it was disbanding, shortly after its founder and CEO, Jeremiah Kittredge, was terminated following sexual harassment allegations.

“It’s terrible, and it hurts our work,” Rodrigues says of

the impact of the financing shenanigans and fine on the charter school movement.

Though she was often the face of the campaign, Rodrigues says she had no say in the high-level strategizing of the ballot question effort. “I was completely boxed out,” she says. “I was like a prop. I think I was used as a parent.” The effort was run entirely by Baker’s consultants and Kittredge, “who thought they were the smartest boys in the room,” she says. “They didn’t need to hear from me. I was banging my head against the wall a lot.”

PARENT VOICE

At the May meeting of Mass. Parents United in Lowell, before the discussion on the achievement gap, Chhorvy Sumsethi, a leader of the chapter, introduces Rodrigues in Khmer, and she gets up to offer a brief welcome to start the meeting.

Before Rodrigues speaks, one of the parents remarks on the new, short hairstyle she’s adopted since she last spoke to the group.

“I don’t have to spend any time dolling myself up anymore. It gives me a whole other hour to cause trouble,” Rodrigues says with a sly grin. “I can cause a lot of trouble in that time.”

No one doubts that. But as Rodrigues is quick to emphasize, the goal of the group is not so much for her to cause trouble as for parents to do so themselves.

Rodrigues met with Stern, the former national SEIU president, when developing plans for the new organization. “What you used to do organizing workers is exactly the same thing you need to do in organizing mothers around schools,” Stern says he told her.

Mass. Parents United has hired 12 part-time parent organizers like Sumsethi who work 10 to 20 hours a week. In addition to Rodrigues, the group has five other full-time staff members, including an administrator, a full-time organizer in Springfield, and a coach who conducts training sessions with parent organizers.

Along with the Lowell group, there are now Massachusetts Parents United chapters in East Boston, Lynn, Lawrence, Lowell, and Springfield, and a new one getting started in Salem.

The group’s mission includes ensuring that “every child has the high quality education they deserve, whether it’s through a district, charter, or private school.” Rodrigues says parents don’t care about labels and turf battles that pit district schools against charter schools. They just want schools that work well for their child. But MPU claims a broader agenda than schools, with public safety, affordable housing, and immigration issues also chief concerns.

In fact, Rodrigues says, “the parents I work with are first dealing with poverty issues,” whether it’s safety on the streets or rodent problems in poorly maintained apartments they rent.

“The conversation always goes to education in the end because that’s the pathway out of this mess so that the next generation doesn’t have to deal with the same burdens that we as parents are dealing with,” she says. “But you have to first understand where education falls in context so that you can engage parents. Otherwise they turn off to you and they say, listen, you don’t get where I’m coming from at all.”

Diana Cifuentes, a native of Colombia who has lived in East Boston for 12 years, was one of the early members of the neighborhood’s MPU chapter. “It’s excellent because we get to expose what our needs and problems are as a community,” she says after a chapter meeting in late March, her six-year-old son and four-year-old daughter in tow. “We are the voice of our kids and the voice of the community.”

The organization has secured funding from several foundations, including the Walton Family Foundation, the Longfield Family Foundation and the Barr Foundation, all in Boston, and the Springfield-based Davis Foundation. The group’s biggest backer, the Walton Family Foundation,

is run by heirs to the Walmart fortune, a fact that has raised lots of eyebrows among those who tangled with Rodrigues over Question 2.

The foundation has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into charter schools nationally in recent years, and two members of the billionaire family, Alice and Jim Walton, between them donated nearly \$2 million to the Massachusetts charter ballot campaign in 2016. Amos Hostetter, the benefactor of the Barr Foundation, donated just over \$2 million to the charter ballot effort, and Boston area entrepreneur Chuck Longfield, benefactor of the Longfield Family Foundation, also made a sizable contribution to the ballot campaign.

Rodrigues’s “Mom-in-Chief” title has a folksy feel, but it belies her group’s fast rise and impressive funding stream. The MPU annual budget is now more than \$1 million, with the Walton Family Foundation providing \$400,000 to date.

Maurice Cunningham, a University of Massachusetts Boston political scientist who blogged extensively about the undisclosed “dark money” poured into the pro-charter ballot question, sees MPU as a little more than a fresh venture of the same forces. “It’s hard to say what Massachusetts Parents United is really about,” Cunningham wrote last

			
			
			
			
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summer in a blog post about the group titled, “Old Wine in an Empty Bottle.”

“You’ve really got to focus on, not the Rodrigueses of the world, but the Walton Foundation, the Longfield Foundation,” Cunningham says in an interview, likening the situation to the agent-principal concept in economics and political science. “These people, they’re the agents,” he says of Rodrigues and MPU organizers. “The principals are the people with the money. There’s an agenda that’s coming from the top.”

‘There’s an agenda that’s coming from the top,’ UMass professor Maurice Cunningham, says of MPU’s funders.

Rodrigues says it’s nonsense to think the foundations are directing her work, or to imagine that MPU is plotting a new charter expansion campaign. She says the group shared its organizing plan with the Walton foundation, but insists MPU’s funders have no say over the issues it works on.

“The path to more high-quality schools for families who need them most looks different in every community, city, and state,” said Marc Sternberg, director of K-12 education at the Walton Family Foundation, in a statement. “What is most important is that thanks to MPU, parents have a seat at the table and can make that happen.”

“I think people are being stuck on that issue of the ballot question,” says Rodolfo Anguilar, a Guatemala native and Hyde Park resident who works as one of MPU’s part-time parent organizers. “The fact is the ballot question lost. That’s not the question [now]. The question is, what can we do to build better schools in the public system?”

Kim Rivera, the group’s full-time Springfield organizer, says MPU has been pushing for a universal waiting list that lets parents sign up for district and charter schools through one application. They helped organize a local rally as part of the nationwide March for Our Lives protests on March 24 against gun violence, and are also part of the state’s “Breakfast after the Bell” coalition, which is pushing legislation to increase access to school breakfast in Massachusetts. It’s a coalition that includes the Massachusetts Teachers Association, which led the fight against expansion of charter schools and tangled regularly with Rodrigues.

Rivera also helps promote weekly community meet-

ings the Springfield Police Department holds in the tough Forest Park neighborhood. “She helps us a lot,” says Sgt. Ariel Toledo, the Springfield officer in charge of the sessions. “Their agenda is to empower parents, particularly poor parents from low-income communities. So there are a lot of things where we have the same goals. When it goes political, we have to stay out of that. But 80 percent of the stuff [MPU does] we work together on,” he says of the organization.

MPU’s efforts to find common cause with would-be allies is sometimes running into roadblocks from those who still see Rodrigues’s past as prologue. Last year, the Springfield chapter got involved in bringing attention to complaints from parents about an unhealthy school climate under a principal at one of the city’s elementary schools. The issue also drew the attention of a Springfield school committee member, the local NAACP branch, and the city’s teachers union. But the union’s president, Maureen Colgan Posner, says she was uneasy about MPU’s involvement.

“We feel they were trying to use that situation to build up their membership. But we don’t feel they are trying to do it from a completely honest and clear position,” says Colgan Posner. Like Cunningham, the UMass professor, she thinks the group is ultimately still interested in pushing for more charter schools. “If they’re being funded by that same money that funded Yes on 2, then follow the money,” she says.

Stern, the former SEIU international president, says it’s absurd to think Rodrigues is taking direction from her funders. “If you meet Keri, you understand she’s not taking orders from anybody,” says Stern, who has also taken heat from some in progressive circles for his involvement in education reform efforts. “She’s not a patsy for anybody. She is taking orders from nobody but the mothers.”

The tattoo Rodrigues has on her back is a quote from abolitionist Frederick Douglass: “Without struggle, there is no progress.” Rodrigues, who regularly lets loose on her “EduMom” blog against teachers unions and anyone she sees blocking the path for school improvement, concedes she enjoys mixing it up.

As tough as she is, Rodrigues also admits that the battles can take a toll. “I have my days where I’m like, oh god, this is so hard, everybody hates me,” she says. “Everybody has those days.”

When that happens, Rodrigues says she looks to Stern for support. “He kicks me in the butt and reminds me what’s on my back,” she says of the Frederick Douglass quote. “He says, you know leadership is not easy. Creating progress is not easy. And you have to start with being comfortable being uncomfortable and challenging.” **CW**





Turning food deserts into oases

Gateway Cities are discovering the transformative effect of fresh vegetables and koshari

BY TED SIEFER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEN RICHARDSON

FOOD HAS ALWAYS loomed large in the life of Dimple Rana. While growing up in Revere, she helped her parents, immigrants from India, work in Indian grocery stores in Somerville. Later, she helped manage convenience stores owned by her family.

But working retail wasn't her ambition. She promptly left Revere after high school; she felt like an outsider in a city not exactly known for its embrace of diversity. She went to college in New York; worked in the Boston area with at-risk youth; and went to Cambodia to set up a pro-

Dimple Rana, who heads Revere's Department of Healthy Community Initiatives

gram for refugees deported from the U.S. Then a job as a part-time neighborhood organizer opened up at Revere City Hall, and Rana vowed to make her mark.

“Growing up there, I’ve always had a love-hate relationship,” she says. “This time around I saw still nothing has changed, so I need to do something about it.”

Rana now heads the city’s Department of Healthy Community Initiatives, where she’s embarked on a path for which she may be uniquely suited—using food to improve the wellbeing of the city, whether through promoting the city’s vast array of immigrant cuisines or making fresh, local produce more readily available (a challenge she witnessed from the trenches working in her family’s convenience stores). It’s also about getting the city’s disparate populations to interact with each other a little more.

“We don’t necessarily have any community spaces in the city, where people can gather and learn from each other and share,” Rana says. “There have been issues of discrimination and prejudice, so through these different activities we’re planning we’re aiming to bring people together through food.”

Rana is part of a movement of sorts in the state’s Gateway Cities that seeks to create a more local food economy, an effort that encompasses everything from community gardens and farmers markets, to kitchen incubators and food trucks, to promoting immigrant cuisines. The demand for locally-sourced food, for exotic culinary options, and for small-batch artisanship over mass production is well known among the upscale and hipster sets in the Boston area. But these trends are creating unique opportunities in Gateway Cities—and one could argue the stakes are considerably higher in communities where fresh lettuce, to say nothing of an organic farm-to-table meal, can be hard to come by.

TRANSFORMING A PARK

At the root of the local food economy are places such as the Cook Street Community Garden in Lynn, where on a recent blustery day volunteers sunk shovels into loamy garden beds. The sight is a far cry from a few years back, when this was an unkempt and forbidding park in one of the city’s roughest and most diverse neighborhoods, says David Gass, who heads the nonprofit that led the garden project.

“It was taken over by the gangs. That element takes over the common areas,” Gass says. “People’s response is you buy a dog, you buy a gun, you buy a lock, you buy all three. But you don’t talk to your neighbors.”

Yet Gass talked to the neighbors. A family from Nigeria that lives in a tidy house on one edge of the garden became the group’s unofficial watchmen. On the opposite side of the garden, a longtime city resident let Gass run a hose from his house. In an abutting triple-decker, the owner, from El Salvador, allowed Gass to set up a rainwater collection system on his roof. Today,

longtime neighborhood residents tend plots alongside immigrants from Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa, several of whom are growing crops from their homelands.

As idyllic as the Cook Street garden appears, it’s an oasis in a food desert. This is the term for low-income areas where there is scant access to fresh fruits and vegetables—and these deserts tend to be concentrated in Gateway Cities such as Lynn. In a 2017 study, the Massachusetts Public Health Association found that the “grocery gap” affects 2.8 million people in the Commonwealth, with the shortage most prevalent in Gateway Cities.

While a number of community gardens have sprouted in Gateway Cities in recent years, their impact is modest—produce from small plots that might total an acre across a given city only goes so far. This is where urban agriculture nonprofits such as Lowell’s Mill City Grows come in. In addition to 11 community gardens, Mill City Grows has three urban farms in the city, totaling more than five acres, where the organization grows produce that it sells at farmers markets and at mobile carts it brings to lower-income sections of the city.

“Most residents of Lowell do not have access to fresh food within walking distance of home,” says Francey Slater,

Food deserts, where access to fresh fruits, vegetables is limited, tend to be located in Gateway Cities.

Mill City Grow’s co-director. “That’s especially significant in low-income communities. Most people do most of their food shopping by foot. That means in those communities, they’re doing their shopping at convenience stores, bodegas, and gas stations.”

Locally grown, organic produce generally doesn’t come cheap, which can deter purchases. While farmers markets have for some time been able to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (a.k.a. food stamps), these limited funds could go further at a supermarket or bodega, where cheap, unhealthy processed foods abound.

Last year, the state rolled out the Healthy Incentive Program, known as HIP, which reimburses SNAP recipients for the amount they spend at farmers markets, from \$40 to \$80 a month depending on family size. Attendance at farmers markets surged in response to the funding, which also

Dina Fahim (left) and her mother Sahar Ahmed slice eggplant to accompany a batch of koshari they're preparing at UTEC's Community Kitchen.



provided a major boon to growers. Over a 12-month period, more than \$4 million in incentives was paid out—several times the budgeted amount. As a result of the funding crunch, the program was suspended in April.

The effect was evident by mid-May at the YMCA in downtown Lynn, the site of the indoor farmers market run by the Food Project, one of the oldest and largest urban agriculture organizations in the state. Piles of spinach and other vegetables sat forlornly on tables in a nearly empty room. In prior weeks, the venue had been so packed that people had to take numbers to get in.

Still, the fact that SNAP recipients had flocked to the markets in such great numbers strikingly demonstrated that they had a strong appetite for fresh fruits and vegetables—contrary, perhaps, to the stereotype that the poor prefer junk food.

“When we do the farmers market, they’re so happy,” said Manolo Moquete, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic who was manning a table at the Lynn market for Riverdale Farm, where he’s worked for nearly 25 years. “They’re so glad to get fresh stuff.”

LOCAL FOOD LOBBY

The food movement is a “lumpy tent,” wrote Michael Pollan, its foremost proponent in America, in his 2010 essay, “The Food Movement, Rising.” It’s best viewed as a set of movements, Pollan wrote, “since it is unified as yet by little more than the recognition that industrial food production is in need of reform because its social/environmental/public health/animal welfare/gastronomic costs are too high.”

Among the movement’s constituent parts are rural farmers, anti-GMO activists, environmentalists, people working in the fishing industry (who often chafe at environmental regulations), and anti-poverty and public health advocates.

What’s notable about what’s happening in Massachusetts and other states is that these various constituencies are coming together. Indeed, it was the HIP issue that brought these forces to bear, in the form of what could be called the local food lobby. The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative rallied farmers, urban agriculture activists, and others to press lawmakers to restore fund-



ing—and it worked. In May, the Legislature and Gov. Charlie Baker approved a supplemental budget that provided another \$2.15 million to the program through the end of the fiscal year. For the 2019 budget, lawmakers are expected to designate about \$4 million for the program, less than the \$6.2 million supporters had sought but still a substantial increase over its allotment in last year's budget, \$1.35 million.

"It's one of the best examples of a win-win-win for everybody," says Winton Pitcoff, the collaborative's director. "There hasn't been anything that increased farm sales by \$4 million in a year. There was the question of whether the local food movement has reached a plateau. It turns out we haven't. There's a whole other market."

Food is increasingly becoming part of the portfolio at municipal planning, public health, and economic development agencies across the state. Food policy councils—tasked with reducing food waste; improving access to fresh, healthy food; and connecting the kitchens of schools and other large institutions with local growers—have been established in Worcester, Salem, and Cambridge, while Boston has its own Mayor's Office of Food Access.

The state has also become active on the food front. The Food Venture Program makes a point of supporting projects in Gateway Cities and rural communities, and the Food Trust Program provides grants aimed at address-

ing food insecurity. MassDevelopment's Transformative Development Initiative, which targets resources in selected parts of Gateway Cities, is big on things like shared kitchens and workspaces. Private charities, such as the Eos Foundation and Merck Family Foundation, are also backing local food ventures, as are hospital networks, including Partners HealthCare and Massachusetts General Hospital, which have supported nutrition and wellness programs in Revere.

AMERICANS WELCOME

Not far from Revere Beach, just up the way from the T stop, one can find in the space of a block a Colombian bakery, a Cambodian restaurant, and a Moroccan cafe. Yet, for all the rave reviews the Moroccan restaurant, Argana Cafe, has garnered online, its owner estimates that no more than 50 percent of the people who come in the door are "American."

At Thmor Da, the Cambodian restaurant (which is beloved on Yelp), most of the clientele is Cambodian (about 60 percent) and another 30 percent is "Spanish," according to Lin Leng, who runs the place with her family. Locals by and large don't venture to this stretch of Shirley Avenue, a gritty thoroughfare in a neighborhood densely populated with immigrants from Southeast Asia,

North Africa, and Latin America.

It's this gap that Dimple Rana, the Revere official heading up the city's food initiatives, wants to bridge. And she has some allies in the effort. Last May, students in the Tufts Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning completed a study about fostering a local food economy in Revere that has served as a guidepost for the city's efforts. The report found that the culinary offerings in Revere may be even more diverse than public records would indicate. Through on-the-ground surveys, the researchers found that the cuisines of 17 different countries were available in the city.

"We saw that, due to the cultural shift in Revere from a traditional Italian-American community to one that has a bunch of different immigrants and cultures, food is really a way to have social cohesion with the community," says Laura Flagg, who was part of the Tufts team and is now interning with Revere's community initiatives office.

The office has been reaching out to would-be food entrepreneurs and offering to help them with training and permitting, and it's working on drafting a food truck ordinance. Its most ambitious project to date is a series of "night markets" planned for this summer, which will feature local food vendors, a DJ, and games at several locations around the city.

Still, in attempting to build cohesion through immigrant cuisine, Rana may face a steeper climb in Revere than she would elsewhere. In the 2016 Republican presidential primary, the city went for Donald Trump by a wider margin than anywhere in the state. In a city where the foreign-born population has grown considerably in

Food may help Revere's disparate population interact more, but it's not going to be easy.

recent years, to nearly 40 percent, there are no nonwhite members of the City Council or School Committee. Even the city farmers market can't escape these divisions. It's heavily patronized by minorities, many of them SNAP recipients, Rana says, and there's an attitude among locals that the market is for "those people."

For his part, Mayor Brian Arrigo—a relative political newcomer first elected in 2015—is supportive of the food initiatives, including expanding food trucks in the city. "Our new initiatives all aim for inclusivity within our

expanding local food economy, ultimately empowering the citizens of Revere to not only make choices about the food they eat, but also stake their claim with a business in their community," Arrigo said in a statement.

Among the vendors who will be at the night markets is Diana Cardona, who sells "Maninuts," lightly sweetened roasted nuts with sesame seeds that she makes with her twin sister and business partner, Angelica. The idea came to them during a visit back home to Manizales, Colombia (hence the name of their product), where nut-selling street vendors are an ubiquitous presence.

The sisters have opened a store just off Broadway, Revere's main drag, where they make and package their nuts and hope to eventually open a small retail area in front. It's the second shop the Cardonas have opened in the downtown area—they previously had a cafe that specialized in Colombian baked goods.

Diana recalls that around the time Trump was elected, a few locals came in to the bakery and said rude things to her. "Since you are the person who's serving them you always have to keep your calm and always have to kill the rudeness with kindness," she says. "I never thought they would talk like that. It wasn't many, but they still buy, and they love my *pan del bono*," she says, referring to a cheesy bread that was one of her specialties.

KOSHARI IS WHO WE ARE

On any given Sunday at Mill No. 5 in Lowell, you can find vendors behind tables laden with kale and other greens, fresh baked bread, jars of honey, homemade energy bars, and myriad other offerings. It's where you'll likely find Egyptian-born Sahar Ahmed and her daughter Dina Fahim selling *koshari*, a rice and lentil dish topped with fried onions and tomato sauce.

"The reason we picked *koshari* is it's part of who we are," Ahmed says of the traditional Egyptian street food. "We grew up eating *koshari*."

In another time, Ahmed's career trajectory might seem retrograde. She went from managing a nonprofit theater company to selling street food from the country her parents left to seek a better life. But Ahmed is not the only vendor at Mill No. 5 whose career took an unlikely turn. Bob Cuesta, a Lowell native, left a corporate job managing a call center to sell empanadas out of food truck, drawing on family recipes from Cuba, where his parents are from.

In some ways, the story is as old as America: the immigrant opening up a shop to sell a specialty from home—pizza and bagels had to get their start somehow. But there's been a fluorescence of new culinary ventures of late, in part because there are so many paths to market—food trucks, fairs, public markets, pop-up venues—besides the costly and risky proposition of opening a

brick-and-mortar restaurant.

David Parker, the chief executive of EforAll, which promotes entrepreneurship in Lowell and other Gateway Cities, says close to 20 percent of those who have gone through the organization's training and mentorship program have started food enterprises.

"There are amazing melting-pot cultures in the Gateway Cities. There all these recipes that are beloved by different cultures," Parker says. "It's just a skill set they have, and it is in demand. Americans are eating out way more than they used to. And people are much more adventurous in terms of trying different foods. So it's a totally natural fit for many of the folks who come here."

This was the case for Andres Jaramillo, a Revere resident who owns a food truck, Perros Paisas, that serves up hotdogs in the style of his native Medellin. In terms of volume, his dogs put the American variety to shame: they're piled with bacon, crushed potato chips, and quail eggs. While Jaramillo's English is limited, he's plastered his truck with a map highlighting some of the attractions of his homeland. "Unfortunately, the first association is very bad because we have the giant stigma, which is Pablo Escobar and the drugs," Jaramillo says, speaking in Spanish. "But what I'm trying to do is bring a different

image of Colombia, of Medellin."

Places such as Mill No. 5 and organizations such as EforAll are part of an emerging ecosystem supporting food entrepreneurship. Another key part are shared kitchens and food incubator spaces. Typically stocked with industrial scale ovens, freezers, mixers, and the like, they're where entrepreneurs can, for example, make small batches of a barbecue sauce they hope will catch on, or do their prep work before heading out in a food truck. One of the most prominent is Commonwealth Kitchen in Roxbury, which hosts some 50 food enterprises that make everything from bone broth to Mexican sopapillas. The organization also conducts training programs, one of which culminates in a food entrepreneur pitch contest in downtown Boston. (More than 70 percent of the enterprises that have come through the facility are owned by women or people of color, the group says.)

Such facilities had been hard to come by in Gateway Cities—until recently. Worcester now has the Regional Food Hub Kitchen. The Dartmouth Grange has turned its kitchen into a shared space for food ventures around the region. In Lowell, the nonprofit UTEC, which helps young people caught up in the criminal justice system

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get into job programs, recently opened its Community Kitchen as part of its new \$2.5 million Hub for Social Innovation.

UTEC's facility builds on its existing food training program, which includes a cafe, but it's also open to entrepreneurs from the wider community. In a matter of weeks, around a dozen enterprises flocked to the facility, including Koshari Mama.

During a recent tour, Chris Austin, UTEC's director of food enterprises, said the kitchen could be used for food manufacturing, which could open up new training and revenue opportunities for the organization. "We've got the equipment to do just about everything," Austin says, pointing out a hulking steel grinder.

KOSHARI FOR THANKSGIVING

What's happening in Lowell might offer hope for people like Dimple Rana in Revere who are perhaps more eager for a funkier and more inclusive food scene than the powers that be. Lowell's city government, after all, is not known for its diversity. The city is currently being sued by a civil rights group over its voting system, which the group alleges systematically disenfranchises minorities.

And yet Ahmed, the koshari maker from Egypt, says city officials have been nothing but helpful. If she ever does open a restaurant, the Winchester resident says it will likely be in Lowell. And Ahmed says the kind of interactions she's had at Mill No. 5, with patrons and fellow vendors, has transformed her business.

"You know this is how we got catering jobs," she says.

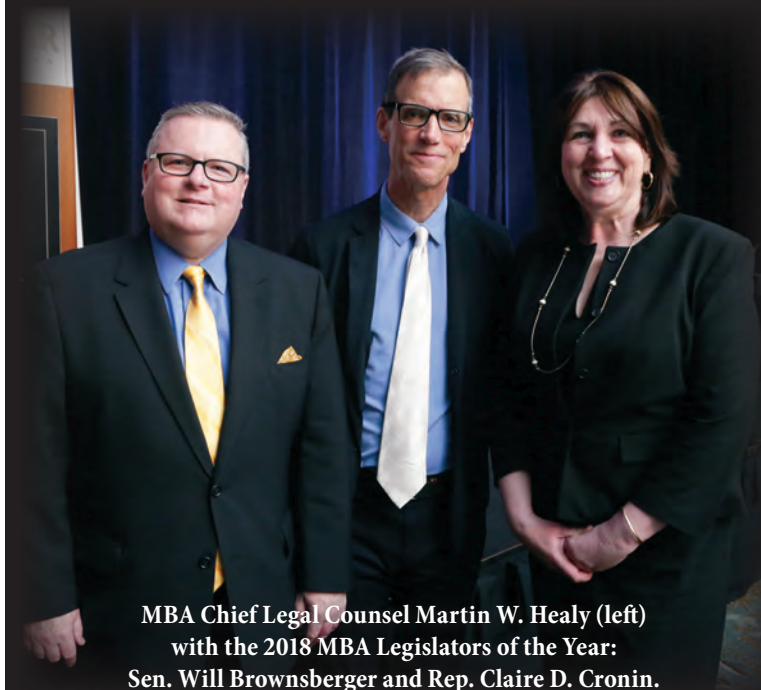
Andres Jaramillo's food truck serves up hotdogs in the style of his native Medellin, Colombia.

"People say I'm having a surprise party. I have relatives who are vegan. I even had a Thanksgiving dinner for vegan people. Can you imagine? Koshari for Thanksgiving."

Weird things can happen when people get together and eat. **CW**



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Course corrections

Dogs, drumming, and beads:
Is this really jail?

BY LINDA ENERSON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MEGHAN MOORE

THE HAMPDEN COUNTY Sheriff's Pre-release Center in Ludlow looks pretty much like what you'd expect of a minimum security jail—clean but stark. Then, Zadie and Misty, two energetic young hounds bound down the hallway to greet the visitors, ears flapping, tails wagging. As they fill the otherwise institutional space with infectious energy, you start to get the sense that this is not your father's jail anymore.

Zadie and Misty are part of what's called the Freedom Pups program, a partnership between the county sher-

iff's department and a local animal shelter that matches pre-adoption dogs in need of training with inmates who need the sort of connection the dogs can provide. It is one of the new programs that Sheriff Nicholas Cocchi has launched since he was elected in 2016.

The dogs bolt down the hallway when they see Raymond, one of the inmates assigned to take care of them (the sheriff's department's policy is that only first names of all inmates, or residents, as they are called in the Pre-release Center, are given to media).



Raymond, an inmate/resident at the Hampden County Sheriff's Pre-Release Center in Ludlow, trains Zadie and Misty.



"We're running a hospital here, not an asylum," says Hampshire County Sheriff Nicholas Cocchi.

Raymond strokes their heads and then, after walking them down to the common room, starts to work on their training. He gives them each a treat for sitting and staying on command. "See what he's doing," says Cocchi. "He's setting rules, and giving rewards when the dogs do what he asks. That will help him set rules with his kids when he gets out of here."

The dogs are also helping Raymond regulate the peaks and valleys of his emotions. "When I see them come running at me with their tongues hanging out, it really changes my mood," he says.

A repeat drug offender, Raymond has cycled through detox programs and the jail before, but his outlook sank to a new low after his son died less than an hour after birth. "That made me go off the edge," he says. Soon afterwards, Raymond was arrested for distribution of cocaine. Before coming to the Pre-release Center, Raymond was at the jail's Recovery and Wellness Center, where he received intensive treatment for his depression and drug problem. With his release imminent, he looks forward to moving back home with a deeper commitment to staying in recovery.

Freedom Pups is just one of many programs that jails across the Commonwealth and the nation are using to treat

the underlying causes of criminal behavior and break the pattern of recidivism that has plagued the criminal justice system. These programs are slowly transforming the state's houses of correction into comprehensive human service agencies, offering treatment for a wide range of behavioral problems from major mental illness to substance abuse.

Houses of correction have become the focal point of treatment and rehabilitation programs because their inmates generally have committed less serious crimes and their stay in prison is relatively short. The maximum sentence to a county house of correction is 2.5 years and the average stay is several months. The theory behind the treatment effort is to help people recover from substance abuse, regain their mental health, and develop life and work skills they will need to succeed on the outside and stay out of jail.

Sheriffs say the new approach has the potential to save money in the long run, but it doesn't come cheap. Cocchi says the number of inmates in county corrections facilities is falling because of diversion programs designed to get lower-level offenders into treatment and keep them out of jail. But he says that leaves the jail system with inmates with more severe mental health and substance

abuse problems. Intake assessments in Hampden County indicate 90 percent of inmates have a substance abuse problem and half of them have a co-occurring mental health issue. Traditional correctional staff are still needed to maintain order and prevent violence, Cocchi says, but additional staff or outside contractors are being hired to supply the programming needed to address the underlying drug and mental health issues facing inmates.

Questions have been raised, however, about spending patterns in the state's corrections system. Reports issued last year and earlier this year by MassINC, the public policy think tank that publishes *CommonWealth*, said corrections spending continues to rise in the state despite a steady decrease in the number of inmates. Overall spending for state and county corrections grew by 18 percent from fiscal year 2011 to 2016, while the inmate population fell by 12 percent, according to the 2017 report. The reports also found that the number of employees dedicated to prison education declined at both state and county facilities, and that spending for such programs accounts for a tiny share of their budgets – just 2 to 3 percent of total expenditures.

In Hampden County facilities, however, there is not always a clear demarcation between programmatic and correctional staff. A correctional officer in the Wellness Center also works with residents in maintaining a vegetable garden in the backyard. Another officer teaches residents cooking and serving skills at the Olde Armory Grille. Cocchi says he consolidates housing units when feasible, though operational costs such as medical expenses and salaries continue to rise. “It is important to understand that housing inmates requires a set number of staff to provide care and custody. Our overarching goal

doing this work for a long time here in Hampden County, but more and more departments across the country are moving into it. It used to be when you went to conferences, all they talked about were tasers and taser shields. But now it's reentry, reentry, reentry. We're running a hospital here, not an asylum.”

MUSIC AND CRAFTS

Nowhere is the changing face of jails more obvious than at the Western Massachusetts Recovery and Wellness Center in Springfield. A tour through the facility on a weekday afternoon finds residents gathering in groups to play music and make crafts after a morning schedule of therapy and educational programming. It's about as far as you can get from a traditional jail.

Easy talk and laughter fill a room where a dozen women sit around a table weaving yarn and beads to make their own version of Native American dream catchers. Downstairs, a group of men in a drumming circle listen as their instructor pounds out a beat so they can repeat it. Posters featuring quotes that focus on resilience, hope, and determination line the hallways. A resident chats with the director of the Wellness Center about the maintenance work he has been doing as part of his treatment plan. The doors aren't locked. Conversations between residents and staff are casual and unhurried. Nothing about the place suggests it is a jail.

“Some of the women on my unit have a hard time with the schedule. It's like, ‘you mean we really gotta get up and start programs at 7:30?’ But I like the structure,” says Patricia, one of the residents at the Wellness Center. “Addicts don't have any structure in their lives. They're up all night and sleep all day.”

Patricia has cycled in and out of detox, jails, and prisons for the past three decades. Her addiction began after she broke her neck in a car accident. She had been looking forward to going to college that fall, but the injury derailed those plans. Doctors prescribed painkillers, but eventually they stopped refilling them. “A friend said, ‘Here, I've got something that will help you,’ and that was the start of it,” she says.

Patricia says the Wellness Center has helped turnaround her image of what she is capable of achieving after so many years of addiction. “There is a lot of magic happening in these units. In all the other facilities I've been at, the staff look at you and treat you like you're a dirty addict. But here, they treat you like you have a disease, and help you get better.”

Patricia recently progressed onto the final stage of her treatment, learning job skills she needs to support herself when she is released. She is starting work at the Olde Armory Grille, a cafe run by the sheriff's department at the city's technology park. The work will bring her into direct contact with real customers ordering lunch, chatting about the weather or politics, and complaining if they don't like their food. “I'm really looking forward to it,” she says.

Cocchi emphasizes the need for skill building, as

The doors aren't locked at the Wellness Center. Nothing suggests the place is a jail.

is to return inmates to the community in better condition than when we received them,” he says, pointing with pride to an 11 percent reduction in overall recidivism over the past five years.

“The minute they walk into our facility, we are planning for reentry,” says Cocchi, who has continued the direction established by former sheriff Michael Ashe, who retired in 2016 after 42 years in office. “We've been



many people who are incarcerated have little or no marketable skills. Those without a high school diploma can also learn the basic academic skills they need to pass their equivalency tests.

TREATMENT PROGRAMS PROLIFERATING

The number of substance abuse and mental health treatment programs in sheriff departments across the state is growing. In the last few months, Worcester and Suffolk County sheriff departments announced the expansion of treatment centers within their correctional programs. Worcester broke ground on a \$20 million facility that will allow inmates to more easily access medical and mental health services. Suffolk has partnered with AdCare to provide services to pre-trial detainees in a new 60-bed facility.

Even Bristol County Sheriff Thomas Hodgson, a lightning rod for criticism because of his hardline views on criminal offenders, says he believes in giving inmates the tools they need to succeed on the outside. "If we don't add at least one tool to their toolbox, we've failed when they go out because they are going to come right back in again," he says.

Hodgson says his jail offers medication-assisted treatment for inmates with addictions as well as counseling. He says it also helps inmates develop parenting and job skills and explore mindfulness. "I'm a big believer in mindfulness," he says, after hearing from people in

recovery that retraining their minds is a critical aspect of treatment. Hodgson says the state's sheriffs often have had to be creative to fund their treatment programs, as the Legislature has failed to fund the "bare bones" budget of every sheriff across the state. In addition to state funding, Hodgson says he uses volunteers and grants to implement the programs in Bristol County.

Franklin County, a rural county in western part of the state, has received more than \$1 million in federal funding over the last five years to implement programs targeting inmates with substance abuse problems. According to Assistant Superintendent Ed Hayes, the department has moved away from self-help groups and implemented a "modern, evidence-based treatment model" that has achieved national recognition as a model for abuse treatment. He says inmates with addictions are given medications that help them wean themselves off drugs, but in addition, and just as important, they are given "trauma-informed" counseling that uses mindfulness and other techniques that are proven to be effective.

The Franklin County sheriff's department is even reaching out to people who aren't in jail but known to be struggling to stay clean. Recently, Jeremiah, who cycled through the Franklin County jail before its treatment program opened, says he was contacted by the sheriff's

outreach counselors. “They have been really helpful,” he says. “It’s really important to have that connection.”

Jeremiah grew up in Orange, a small town in Franklin County with high rates of poverty and opioid addiction. As a teenager, he had tried different drugs, but once he started using heroin, he was ensnared in a decade-long pattern of getting high, getting caught, going into detox, then jail, then back out.

After his last release, it wasn’t long before he was back on drugs. He tried taking methadone to reduce his craving for heroin, but he ended up selling the methadone and using the money to buy more heroin. He lost his job, then his housing. He lived on couches and in a tent until he became so desperate that he started stealing from friends and family. “I never thought I would steal from my mother, but I did,” he says.

In the winter of 2017 he lived in his van, the temperature dipping well below zero on many nights. “I finally came to the conclusion that I should give up my life,” he says. He was walking to a bridge to commit suicide, but when he passed the hospital, his resolution wavered. “I just couldn’t do that to my kids,” he says. After spend-

Many county jails are reaching out beyond their walls to help people.

ing several days in the emergency room, he moved from detox to several other longer-term treatment programs.

The support he’s recently received from counselors and an outreach worker has helped him realize that he needs to build a new social network and abandon ties to old friends in his hometown. “My kids live there, I want to live near them,” he says. “But every time I walk into town, I see people I used to sell drugs to.”

REACHING OUT BEYOND THE JAIL’S WALLS

Middlesex County is also reaching out beyond the jail’s walls, attempting to help people make positive social connections and gain access to treatment during, after, and even before they end up in jail.

“We’re all human beings and we need social sustenance,” says Peter Koutoujian, sheriff of Middlesex County. “One of the things that drives people into the criminal justice system is their lack of social network. People don’t choose to associate with a bad social network, they do it because that’s all they have.”

In Middlesex County, outreach counselors called navi-

gators keep in contact with former inmates long after they have left jail. “The navigators may be the only positive social contact they have in their lives,” says Koutoujian. “The first call they make when they have a baby, or get married, is to their navigator.”

Jails in Middlesex County also cater to the individual needs of inmates. The county has specialized units for veterans and young offenders that are designed to develop a positive social culture within the jail and encourage treatment. The interior design of the Housing Unit for Military Veterans (HUMV) replicates the look of a barrack. Military symbols and the insignias of the five military branches line the walls. The unit is divided into smaller squads, providing a familiar environment and encouraging the camaraderie of military life that many veterans miss when they become civilians. Koutoujian says the inmates on the veterans unit have significantly lower recidivism rates than the general inmate population of Middlesex County. Only 4 percent of the 135 people who have been on the HUMV unit since it opened a few years ago have reoffended, in comparison with 28.5 percent of the general inmate population.

The jail’s MATADOR program (for Medication Assisted Treatment and Directed Opioid Recovery) has also been successful in lowering recidivism rates for a population of hardcore drug users that tend to have recidivism rates in excess of 60 percent. By contrast, 18 percent of people who had completed the six-month MATADOR program reoffended. “What our data has shown us to date is that drug-free equals crime-free. If we can address an underlying substance-use disorder, we can decrease the likelihood that these individuals will return to our custody,” says Koutoujian.

Koutoujian is also working on supporting people in crisis so they never enter the criminal system in the first place. “The best reentry is no entry,” he says. To that end, he is spearheading two projects that will keep people out of his facility. The first is an effort dubbed the Data Driven Justice Initiative, which analyzes data from criminal justice, mental health, and health care agencies to identify the “super utilizers” of the criminal justice and health care systems. These are people who have serious mental health and substance use disorders requiring multiple police calls and emergency-room visits. The initiative provides a workaround to privacy laws so that partnering agencies can share information about super-utilizers.

“Once we identify these people, we can proactively engage them and provide services that can help them stay out of crises and rebuild their lives. Sometimes that’s as simple as helping them get housing,” Koutoujian says. There are a lot of resources in the communities within Middlesex County, he says, that the collaborative nature of the Data Driven Justice Initiative can tap into, helping people gain access to services they wouldn’t be able to

access on their own.

Middlesex County is one of three pilot sites across the nation funded by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, a private foundation focusing on criminal justice, education, and evidence-based policy. The total budget for the three sites is \$1.6 million. Data Driven Justice was initiated originally by the Obama administration. The Arnold Foundation picked it up when Trump was elected and federal funding was cut off.

Many of the promising programs for offenders are funded with federal or private foundation grants, a situation that leaves them vulnerable to being closed down if grants end or aren't renewed, something that has happened in recent years with reentry programs serving inmates in Boston and Worcester. To address that, the 2017 MassINC report on corrections spending urged adoption of a line item in the state budget for "evidence-based services."

Koutoujian has also been working with local legislators, health providers, and police departments in the region to develop a restoration center for assessing and stabilizing people in extreme crisis. The center, which he hopes to open over the next few years, has four years of pilot funding through the Legislature, at \$250,000 per

year. Koutoujian says the center will be insurance-blind and open around the clock, serving as a cost-effective alternative to local emergency rooms.

"We will be able to treat people with extreme behavioral or substance-abuse crises more efficiently than an emergency room, and we will be more effectively able

Tracking and locating 'super utilizers' allows the jail to provide services to keep them out of crises and jail.

to get people to the treatment and services they need," the sheriff says. According to Koutoujian, the hospitals in the county welcome the new center and are integral to its planning. Emergency room staff, he says, are not equipped to deal with extreme behavioral problems of people in crisis.

A dark gray rectangular advertisement for Commonwealth magazine. The word "Commonwealth" is written in a large, light gray serif font, spanning most of the width of the box. In the center, the phrase "Independence drives democracy." is written in a smaller, white sans-serif font. At the bottom left, the text "Support Commonwealth magazine." is written in a white sans-serif font.

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The Freedom Pups program matches pre-adoption dogs in need of training with inmates who need the sort of connection dogs can provide.

With all these programs, Koutoujian says, his department is rigorously collecting data so the initiatives can be replicated or revised as necessary. “Vision without data is just a hallucination,” he says. “We test all of our programming and we look at the data, which allows us to make changes midstream, or if it’s not working, move onto a program that will be successful and efficacious.”

He is hoping that in the future, several of the programs Middlesex County is now testing will be able to be replicated in other parts of the state and country. He says Middlesex County is a good place to test these approaches because it has over a million people spread out over a fairly large geographical area.

“The unique nature of Middlesex County is one of the reasons we were chosen as a pilot site by the Arnold Foundation,” he says. “It’s big, it’s urban, and it’s densely populated in some areas, but other areas are suburban and still other areas are rural. If we can make it work here, it can work anywhere.”

There’s no doubt that jails are addressing some of society’s worst problems, often with resources that wouldn’t otherwise be available, but Koutoujian is quick to point out that the resources would best be used further upstream, helping people long before they get into crisis. “We have become too reliant on correctional facilities to correct the problems we are facing today. The issues that ail society—mental health, trauma, failures in education system, substance abuse—manifest themselves in the populations we are seeing in our jails and prisons. We need to invest our resources in the communities, so people not only don’t get into trouble, but so they are fulfilled members of society.”

Hodgson agrees, “Jails aren’t the best place to recover from substance abuse issues. We have gang members here and scheduling issues. If we looked 10 years ahead and invested in evidence-based programs in the third and fourth grade, it would make a lot more sense than detoxing people in jail.” **CW**

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Keeping Somerville cool

For Greg Jenkins, the arts encompass just about everything, even Marshmallow Fluff

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANK CURRAN

SOMERVILLE MAYOR JOSEPH CURTATONE likes to be bold. “I always tell Greg, bring me something no one else has done and that’s really off the wall,” he says.

Greg, in this case, is Gregory Jenkins, the executive director of the Somerville Arts Council. Jenkins generally does what his boss tells him to do, so over the years he has helped launch events and programs that, at first glance,





often seem off the wall. There's Porchfest, the What the Fluff festival, the Honk Festival of Activist Street Bands, Project MUM (for Meet Under the McGrath), and on and on. It's a bewildering list of occasionally odd, sometimes strange, and almost always fun events that somehow come together to boost the local economy, draw diverse city residents closer together, and make Somerville an interesting place to live.

Nibble is a good example. It began as a way to introduce people to the ethnic markets of Union Square and evolved to include food festivals, events, and cooking classes. Now the program is trying to give immigrant residents with culinary skills what they need to launch their own businesses. The Arts Council has its own culinary coordinator and is opening an incubator kitchen, where would-be restaurateurs can test dishes and concepts.

"Why food?" asks an Arts Council presentation on the program. "Food landscape in Union Square is a cultural asset. Food is art. Food brings people together."

Meri Jenkins (no relation), program manager at the Massachusetts Cultural Council, which doles out state money to arts councils across the state, says Jenkins has helped transform Somerville by tapping into the city's

He is very good
at developing
programs that meet
the community
where they are.

existing human and natural assets. "He is very good at being able to develop programs that meet the community where they are," she says. "He celebrates what is, what's particular to the community. You'd think that would be easy, but it isn't."

Curtatone credits Jenkins and the Arts Council for a lot of Somerville's resurgence. "When I first became mayor, we were still struggling to shake that word that my branding experts tell me not to repeat—what Somerville rhymes with—and we said, look, we have to craft our own image based on our own values," Curtatone says. "We have to let people know about our creativity, our originality, our diversity."

The mayor says the Arts Council got the city's message out in a way that bolstered the local economy, advanced equity among the municipality's many ethnic groups, and added "some humanity to the urban edge." He said the city's investment in the Arts Council has paid big dividends.

"Even during the deepest abyss of the recession, it was the Arts Council's work in spurring the creative economy and the events it put on that helped promote and market the city," he says. "It carried us through some of the city's most difficult times in recent memory."

Jenkins, 53, grew up in North Carolina, studied anthropology as an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro and went on to get his masters in folklore from Western Kentucky University. Over the years, he has worked at the American Folklore Center at the Library of Congress in Washington; helped track cultural traditions in the New River Gorge area of West Virginia; captured the folk traditions of a fishing, hunting, and trapping community in Delaware; and worked for Arts in Progress in Boston bringing artists into classrooms and documenting the work of Cape Verdean artists in Dorchester.

In 2001, Jenkins landed his current job with the Somerville Arts Council and he's been there for the past 17 years, three longer than Curtatone has been mayor. Jenkins is paid \$97,400 a year.

I interviewed Jenkins at Bloc, a coffee shop in Union Square. The interview has been edited for space.

— BRUCE MOHL

COMMONWEALTH: What would you say the Somerville Arts Council is all about?

GREGORY JENKINS: We're here to enliven the community through presentation of the arts and support of arts and culture. We're here to help bolster the economic development of the community, to bolster the perception of the community, to create a sense of inclusion among disparate communities. The mayor often talks about how we're here to raise and foster a family, to support residents as they live, work, and play in our community. It's a very broad mandate, so the question is how we do that. We do it through events. We do it

through expanding the infrastructure of the arts and cultural community.

CW: That sounds pretty lofty, but the council seems to do a lot of unusual stuff. Is that what makes Somerville a cool place to hang out?

JENKINS: I think it is. The mayor is always talking about how our freaks are better than your freaks, meaning we like to have things that are out of the ordinary. We like to think outside the box. We like to push things that are sort of abnormal. You need to be creative in problem solving. I think the way in which we present things, the way in which we approach issues, we nurture creativity.

CW: It seems like having fun is a big part of it.

JENKINS: Oh yeah, definitely. There is this level of playfulness. And inclusiveness, too. It's highlighting a community, documenting those cultural traditions and expressions in the community, and then putting them back out there for the larger public to see.

CW: Your background is in anthropology and folklore. How does that figure in?

JENKINS: For me, it's not necessarily been about high art. What interests me are issues of community and cultural traditions and cultural expressions. All the work I've ever done has been about how people express themselves creatively, or how they express themselves in relation to the group that they are involved with. It's always about looking at the community. That's the lens.

CW: What was the council like when you arrived in 2001?

JENKINS: Cecily Miller had been the previous director. She did something that was great—the garden awards initiative. She did a series every year, hiring writers and photographers to document these old world community, garden people. They were Portuguese and Italian men and women who were creating these amazing gardens. People asked, how is this art? But that set a precedent for the Somerville Arts Council to upend the perception of what an arts council should do. I came in with that idea already in place.

CW: Somerville doesn't have a lot of traditional galleries or artist spaces. Is that why you find art hanging in the window at the CVS in Davis Square and you hired artists to paint switch boxes?

JENKINS: It was about making use of the city's assets. You

can look at the deficits of a community forever. But you can also ask, what does the community have in terms of assets. That's what I feel I'm good at—taking those assets and refining them to make them expressive and make them true assets. That, in a nutshell, is the work that we do.

CW: In regard to developing community assets, tell me about Illuminations.

JENKINS: Cecily started that, I think, in 1997 or 1998 and we've expanded it. It's become the Illuminations Tour. It's become a fundraiser for us. It's mostly old-world Catholic families—Portuguese, Italian, and Irish. They illuminate their houses. Some of it is religious iconography. A lot of it is a whimsical cross between Disney, Santa, and snow globes. They light up their houses and their yards and we do tours. What we've done is interview these people about their traditions and then we have volunteers lead the tours and tell the story of these families that have decorated their houses.

CW: Porchfest is similar, right? You're taking advantage of and highlighting something that's already there in the community. That wasn't original to Somerville was it?

JENKINS: All good things are appropriated. That's a quote for you. Here's how it started. A woman in our community told us about an event she attended in Ithaca, [New York]. It was called Porchfest. It was 20 people in the community who played music on their porches. I thought, that's brilliant. So we held a meeting saying we were thinking of doing that in Somerville. About 40 people showed up at the meeting. It was amazing. So the first year, in 2011, we blew away Ithaca.

CW: That's pretty cool, people doing concerts on their porches.

JENKINS: The beauty of Porchfest, and this is the beauty of how we operate, is that we created a structure where it's decentralized. A lot of people say why don't you do a culminating event in the park. But no, we do enough festivals and events. We set up the structure and we spent a lot of time creating a website. Last year we had 260 porches—porches, not people—participating. It's amazing because there's everything from a Nepali rock band playing Pink Floyd covers to two kids that are playing the violin. That's what it's all about.

CW: How many people come to listen?

JENKINS: Enough that we are worried it's becoming a public drinking problem. It's large enough that it's prompted

a discussion about public safety. The mayor and the police chief have been amazing saying we need to do this.

CW: I hear other communities are copying Somerville now.

JENKINS: Yeah. Brookline, JP, Arlington. Who else? New Bedford called. It's great. Everybody should be doing it. We do get some complaints, but it's only for two hours once a year. It would be different if it was every weekend.

CW: We're sitting here in Union Square, which to some extent has become a Somerville asset, right?

There's everything
from a Nepali rock
band playing Pink
Floyd covers to two
kids playing violin.

JENKINS: Union Square was like a dive 15 years ago. But we thought it had all these amazing ethnic stores that white folks don't come to. It's got an amazing group of artists in and around the square. How do we create a cultural economic development initiative that highlights the assets of Union Square? That's what the whole Arts Union project was about.

CW: What's the Arts Union project?

JENKINS: Arts Union is a cultural economic development initiative focused on Union Square. There was a short-term play and a long-term play. The short-term play was how do we change the perspective of outsiders about Union Square. And the long-term play was how do we embed the immigrant food and artistic realm in a long-term play to develop the assets of Union Square.

CW: How did you execute the short-term play?

JENKINS: We did that by, basically, doing a lot of events. We had events like the What the Fluff Festival and Smell-O-Vision. We would support the Nepali community and hold a Nepali festival.

CW: Hold on, what's the What the Fluff Festival?

JENKINS: Marshmallow Fluff. We based a zany festival around it because it was invented in Somerville.

CW: What was Smell-O-Vision?



JENKINS: It was a Willy Wonka kind of thing, where you could smell the chocolate while watching the movie.

CW: What's the strategy behind all these events?

JENKINS: It was a co-production model. We'd put out a call to artists and ask if they had a zany idea to co-produce an event. It could be dancers, singers, even puppeteers. They would bring their arts and vision and we would back it because we know how to produce events. We know how to engage the DPW, how to shut down streets, how to market, and how to raise money. Around the same time, we helped get the farmers market up and running. We also did a crafts market in conjunction with the farmers market and it became so mobbed that we separated out the two after the first year. We produced all this stuff and got people into the square.

CW: Were you targeting primarily Somerville residents with these events?

JENKINS: Yeah, but other people from around Boston started coming by, too. We developed a brochure and a tour of the ethnic markets. If you wanted to learn more about Bengali food, we would do a tour. That was very

successful. We also hired local furniture makers and sculptors to do benches. Some were glass. Some were copper. That was many years ago. We just did a huge gay dance party. We had 2,000 people in the square. All those people come into the square, and what do they do? They eat at restaurants. We've shown that for every dollar we spend, \$4 was being generated in the square economically.

CW: What's an example of the long-term play?

JENKINS: For five years, we pushed zoning reform to create an arts overlay district. If a developer wanted to build higher, we'd give them a density bonus if they kept 5 percent of the building for artist use. The Millbrook building that just got converted two years ago into 100 units, we have five artist work units in there.

CW: Speaking of zoning, I watched you give your budget presentation to the Somerville Board of Aldermen the other day and I was struck by how worried they were about the gentrification of the city and how that will drive artists out. You mentioned your zoning push and your efforts to help artist entrepreneurs make a decent living from their work, but the tone of the meeting was pretty grim.

JENKINS: It's a huge issue, and I don't think there's a silver bullet to deal with it.

CW: I've heard about Art Farm. What's that?

JENKINS: That's another long story. About five years ago, there was a former waste transfer site, about two acres right near the McGrath [highway]. It stunk. It had its issues. The mayor said I'm going to tear this down. Can you activate this space and site? Out of a series of community meetings, we realized what people wanted down there was more community gardens, more greenery because it's so urban and so industrial. And they wanted to support the arts community. Out of that we developed this thing called Art Farm.

CW: So why is it called Art Farm?

JENKINS: There's going to be a barn there that will serve as a 5,500-square foot performance facility for the arts community. There's a need for places for artists to do their work. At the same time, there's a huge urban agricultural community, groups like Groundwork Somerville and Green City Growers, people that are doing stuff on

sustainable agriculture in an urban environment. They, too, need areas.

CW: A barn in Somerville, one of the most densely populated places around. That's an interesting idea.

JENKINS: At first, we were thinking of putting containers—old shipping containers—on the site and converting them for use. We got a grant, believe it or not, for \$450,000 to work on executing that. And then we hired some architects and they said we were crazy to be pushing shipping containers. They said that would be a waste of money. So we went with the barn. At the same time, we got some money from the Department of Agriculture—can you believe it, an arts council getting money from the Department of Agriculture—to put a greenhouse on the site.

CW: What happened next?

JENKINS: The mayor said we needed a new police station, so there was a lull of about a year where the community was, like, do we really want this to happen? So we had to have another year of reengaging. Now we're back on track. We've got our architects moving. We've got full



city support. It's going to happen. It's approximately a \$3 million project now. It's going to be an urban park with this barn. It's amazing.

CW: How long has Art Farm taken so far and when will it be done?

**You can always throw
a lot of money at
something but if people
aren't engaged by it,
it's not going to work.**

JENKINS: It's been about five years and it's going to be done in 2021. If you want something good, it takes time.

CW: What's the budget of the Somerville Arts Council?

JENKINS: We're seeking nearly \$540,000 for the coming fiscal year. We also expect to bring in about \$200,000 in outside financial support. We also get another \$100,000

or so in grants, business sponsorships, and income from books, dog tags, tours, and T-shirts.

CW: Does the state give you money?

JENKINS: There's a Massachusetts Cultural Council, which is a state agency, and they provide us with an operational support grant, which is nearly \$7,000. Plus they provide what's called a local cultural council grant, which is some money that we turn around and regrant to the community. We receive around \$35,000 a year to regrant to local arts projects, and the city kicks in about \$25,000 for that. We were established just like a lot of other cultural councils in the state to basically regrant the state money.

CW: How many employees does the cultural council have?

JENKINS: It's me and four others as staff. And then we have a board, a cultural council, that serves at the discretion of the mayor.

CW: It seems like some cultural councils do a lot more than others.

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CW



The Flufferettes at the What the Fluff festival.

JENKINS: It's vision and money. You've got to have a little bit of both. We always say you can throw a lot of money at something but if people aren't engaged by it, it's not going to work. It's being aware of what you perceive as the needs and desires of the community, and then it also takes some money. But look at Porchfest. It doesn't really cost us anything and here is this amazing initiative that's all about the energy of others.

project. It's like building a new school or a new park. Everyone gets involved. Naturally, it's going to take time. I don't say that as a negative, but it does take time. And it does ebb and flow. That's part of the complexity, the timing, the will of the people to push something through, all of that. Art Farm had to go through all of that, in a natural process that any large capital project would have to go through. **CW**

CW: How many mayors have you worked under?

JENKINS: Just two. You know Joe [Curtatone] is the longest serving mayor in the history of Somerville.

CW: How important is political backing in your job?

JENKINS: You've to have it and I've got it. But there are times when things get politically complicated. Art Farm is a complex capital

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What's driving up health care spending?

An inefficiency gap is boosting costs — and profits

BY EDWARD M. MURPHY

THE HEALTH CARE debates that occurred in Washington over the past year were largely irrelevant to what's happening in the health care marketplace. Republicans couldn't repeal the Affordable Care Act but they made some changes that weakened it. Those changes will increase insurance premiums in the individual market but they do nothing to address the most significant trends that are evolving across the system. To understand the important trends, one must look elsewhere.

In March, three researchers from the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health published a study in *JAMA* analyzing the well-known reality that the United States spends dramatically more on health care than other wealthy countries. They compared the US, where health care consumes 17.8 per cent of gross domestic product, to 10 comparable nations where the mean expenditure is 11.5 percent. Despite spending much less, the other countries provide health insurance to their entire populations and have outcomes equal to or better than ours. The researchers found that this inefficiency gap is primarily driven by two characteristics of the US system: the high cost of pharmaceuticals and inordinate administrative expenses.



For example, annual per capita pharmaceutical expenditure in the US is \$1,443 as compared to an average of \$749 in the 10 other countries. Our administrative costs consume 8 percent of total spending as compared to a range of 1 to 3 percent elsewhere. No one else is close on either of these measures.

The high administrative spending derives in

large part from the fact that 55 percent of the people in the US are covered by private health insurers who embed their own billing requirements, expenses, and profit into the system. The next highest country in this regard is Germany, where 10.8 percent of the population is covered by private insurers. In many countries, there are no such middlemen.

Coincidentally, when the *JAMA* study was published, the large publicly traded health care companies that dominate the US market had just finished disclosing their 2017 financial results. Examining those results provides additional insight into the economic forces that make our system so expensive and inefficient. The scale of the money involved

TABLE 1
S&P HEALTH CARE COMPANIES WITH MOST 2017 REVENUE

COMPANY NAME	SUB-INDUSTRY	REVENUE (BILLIONS)
UnitedHealth Group Inc.	Managed Health Care	201.16
McKesson Corp	Health Care Distributors	198.53
CVS Health Corp	Retail Pharmacy and Healthcare	184.77
AmerisourceBergen	Health Care Distributors	153.14
Cardinal Health Group	Health Care Distributors	129.98
Express Scripts	Health Care Services	100.06
Anthem Inc	Managed Health Care	90.04
Johnson & Johnson	Pharmaceuticals	76.45
Aetna Inc	Managed Health Care	60.54
Humana Inc	Managed Health Care	53.77
Pfizer Inc	Pharmaceuticals	52.55
Centene Corp	Managed Health Care	48.38
HCA Healthcare	Health Care Facilities	43.61
Cigna Corp	Managed Health Care	41.38
Merck & Co	Pharmaceuticals	40.12

is sometimes hard to grasp. The largest health care corporations, those included in the S&P 500, had almost \$2 trillion in revenue last year. (Table 1)

Most of these enormous companies are engaged in one of two businesses: they're either selling drugs or they're selling health insurance. The excess costs reported by the Harvard researchers serve mainly to support the revenue of the companies in those fields.

The 2017 reporting of corporate profits was complicated by the passage of the new tax bill. But most companies also reported "adjusted net income," which shows their normalized profits after accounting for the one-time impact of the tax law. The chart below (Table 2) uses the adjusted numbers to show the largest annual profits among S&P health care companies.

Health insurers such as United Health and retailers such as CVS have enormous revenue and impressive profits but, when profit is measured as a percentage of revenue, they can't compete with biotech and pharma. The highest relative profitability, using the same reported adjusted results, is in the chart below. (Table 3)

These profit margins show that there are many situations where between a third and a half of every dollar spent on a prescription drug falls to the bottom line of the company that made it. This profit derives in large part from the enormous difference in drug prices in the US versus other countries where such prices are more effectively controlled.

The high administrative cost of the US system stems from the large portion of the market dominated by insurance companies looking to maximize their profits.



Notwithstanding many news stories about turmoil in the insurance markets, 2017 was a banner year for the largest health insurers. The big players all had significant increases in annual profitability in 2017.

Note that Humana did not report "adjusted" numbers even though its profit was swollen by unusual events. A major distortion was a huge break-up fee the company received from a failed merger. That accounted for approximately \$630 million in after-tax profit. Even discounting that, it was a very good year.

The revenue and profitability of these corporations support the proposition that high pharmaceutical prices and insurance-related administrative costs account for much of the extraordinary expense of our system. US health policy, or the absence thereof, has enabled these businesses annually to drive costs up for the benefit of their bottom line. That effect will continue. Not surprisingly, the big health care companies are developing new strategies to enhance their

TABLE 2
LARGEST 2017 PROFITS AMONG S&P 500 HEALTH CARE COMPANIES

COMPANY NAME	SUB-INDUSTRY	ADJUSTED NET INCOME (BILLIONS)
Johnson & Johnson	Pharmaceuticals	20.04
Gilead Sciences	Biotechnology	16.09
Pfizer Inc	Pharmaceuticals	11.65
Merck & Co	Pharmaceuticals	10.96
United Health Group	Managed Health Care	9.92
Amgen Inc	Biotechnology	9.25
Abbvie Inc	Biotechnology	9.01
Medtronic PLC	Health Care Equipment	6.40
CVS Health Corp	Drug Retail	6.04
Celgene Corp	Biotechnology	6.02

TABLE 3
HIGHEST 2017 PROFIT MARGINS AMONG S&P 500 HEALTH CARE COMPANIES

COMPANY NAME	SUB-INDUSTRY	PROFIT MARGIN (ADJUSTED)
Celgene Corp	Biotechnology	46.27%
Gilead Sciences Inc	Biotechnology	44.64%
Amgen Inc	Biotechnology	40.47%
Biogen Inc	Biotechnology	37.85%
Alexion Pharmaceuticals Inc	Biotechnology	37.66%
Allergan Plc	Pharmaceuticals	36.45%
Intuitive Surgical Inc	Health Care Equipment	33.43%
Regeneron Pharm	Biotechnology	32.37%
Abbvie Inc	Biotechnology	31.94%
Pfizer Inc	Pharmaceuticals	30.61%

businesses and drive their profits going forward.

The term now heard often among health care giants is “vertical integration,” which means combining upstream suppliers with downstream buyers to control the flow of business. If this strategy persists, health care delivery will evolve significantly although it is unlikely to become less expensive. The most prominent current example of vertical integration is the planned \$68 billion acquisition of Aetna by CVS.

How would these companies work together? A Wall Street analyst recently described the vision as a way to “identify high risk patients and preemptively get them into a Minute Clinic.” Thus, your health insurer could send you to a local store for diagnosis, treatment, drugs, and anything else you might need from the shelves. This will keep

‘Vertical integration’ will drive up, not lower, costs

even more of the health care dollar under their control.

Similarly, Cigna is in the process of acquiring Express Scripts, a huge pharmacy benefits manager, for \$54 billion, another attempt to bring more services under one roof. The combined company would have annual revenue of \$142 billion and, presumably, enough leverage with drug companies to improve profits although not necessarily to lower costs to patients. United Health, a leader of vertical integration, previously bought a pharmacy benefit manager but co-pays and deductibles for its patients have continued to climb. United has aggressively acquired physician practices in recent years and is now in the process of buying DaVita Medical Group, which operates nearly 300 clinics and outpatient surgical centers.

More striking are reports of a potential but unsigned merger of Walmart and Humana, a combined company that would have revenue of \$550 billion. Walmart is a large operator of retail pharmacies inside its stores and the logic is similar to the Aetna-CVS deal. Humana, a huge insurer, is separately in the process of acquiring a large home health business from Kindred so this could represent yet another level of vertical integration.

If this course continues, the health care system will evolve quickly, giving fewer and larger companies even more market leverage. Integration of this kind benefits the large corporations that initiate it but there is no evidence it will lead to lower costs, improved access, or enhanced quality. These changes are driven by highly focused corporate financial interests and are occurring without reference to public policy. That’s because there is no coherent public policy to guide these changes.

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noun. com-mon-wealth. \ˈkā-men-welth \

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such as

a : one founded on law and united
by compact or tacit agreement of
the people for the common good

b : one in which supreme authority
is vested in the people

c : republic

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PERSPECTIVES

TABLE 4
2017 CHANGE IN MAJOR HEALTH INSURER
PROFITABILITY

COMPANY NAME	2016 ADJUSTED NET INCOME (MILLIONS)	PROFIT MARGIN (ADJUSTED)	2017 ADJUSTED NET INCOME (MILLIONS) % IMPROVEMENT
Aetna Inc.	2,917	3,309	13.44%
Anthem Inc	2,948.5	3,224.2	9.35%
Centene Corp	727	889	22.2%
Cigna Corp	2,104	2,668	26.8%
Humana Inc. *	614	2,448	298%
United Health Group	7,795	9,923	27.3%

* Using GAAP Net Income

On May 11, President Trump made a long-awaited speech to reveal what he described as “the most sweeping action in history to lower the price of prescription drugs for the American people.” His typically firebrand language struck at “drug makers, insurance companies, distributors, pharmacy benefit managers, and many others” who contributed to “this incredible abuse.” His attack seemed to target the large public companies that have benefited from the abuse. Unsurprisingly, his speech did not include specifics. His staff then released tepid policy details, which immediately generated a significant upward spike in the biotech stock index as well as the stock prices of other large health care companies. For all the presidential bombast, investors saw Trump’s policy for what it is: indifference to the current path and no threat to high prices.

It is not in the interest of huge profit-making corporations to restrain the overall cost of the US health care system. In fact, their interest is served by driving health care expenditures higher. When combined with the spending analysis provided by researchers, the financial data disclosed by public corporations point to a path that the country must follow to make our system more coherent and less costly. Any progress will require driving down pharmaceutical pricing and reducing administrative costs imposed by middlemen. We are not doing that yet but, ultimately, we must. **CW**

Edward M. Murphy worked in state government from 1979-1995, serving as the commissioner of the Department of Youth Services, commissioner of the Department of Mental Health, and executive director of the Health and Educational Facilities Authority. He recently retired as CEO and chairman of one of the country’s largest providers of services to people with disabilities. The author is grateful for the assistance of Zachary Curtis in gathering financial information for this article. Curtis graduated in May from the business school at Bridgewater State University where Murphy is a trustee.

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