

Top Maine Lawmaker Pushes for Free School Meals in Massachusetts

Katie Lannan

State House News Service

Lawmakers advocating to make school meals available to all students at no cost got a hand Tuesday from a New England neighbor, as Maine Senate President Troy Jackson urged Massachusetts to follow his state's lead in passing the bill.

Introducing himself as "a fifth-generation logger from northern Maine," Jackson spoke of his own experience accessing reduced-price meals as a child, saying some of his classmates thought he was rich because his lunch wasn't free while others looked down on him for not paying full price. He testified before the Education Committee in support of universal school meals legislation (H 714, S 314) from Democrats Rep. Andy Vargas of Haverhill and Sen. Sal DiDomenico of Everett. Under the bills, families would not be required to sign up for free meals or provide income information.

"As a lawmaker, and more importantly as a parent, I want children in Maine and all across this great nation to get a chance to focus on being kids, on playing with their friends and learning how to read, not worrying about where their next meal is going to come from and who's going to pay for it," Jackson said. "Now I imagine the folks in Massachusetts want the very same thing that I do. No child should have to ever prove that they're worthy of nutritious food, regardless of which state that they live in."

DiDomenico, the committee's Senate vice chair, said a quarter of food-insecure children in Massachusetts do not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and breakfast. "This is important

because we can't wait for next year or two years from now," he said. "Our children are hungry today." Vargas said students are more academically successful with universal free meals, making them "just as essential as universal free desks and visits to the school nurse."

New Bedford Public Schools Athletics pauses due to COVID

New Bedford Public Schools will be pausing all athletic practices and competitions through this Friday, January 7, due to an increase in positive COVID-19 cases among several different □ athletic teams, Superintendent Thomas Anderson announced today. "In consultation with the New Bedford Department of Health, we have been advised to pause participation in our athletic programming including practices and games for one week, beginning today, and continue with test and stay over the next four days," he said in a memo to School Committee members today.

"As the number of positive cases continue to rise in our community, we are also experiencing an increased number of positive cases on our athletic teams. We now have several teams proactively participating in the Test and Stay Program due to an increasing number of positive cases over the past weekend," he said.

Thomas Tarpey, NBPS Director of Physical Education, Health & Athletics stated, "out of an abundance of caution, we have put a pause on all Athletics at New Bedford Public Schools for the remainder of this week. We will re-evaluate this weekend and hope to be up and running again on Monday."

Jodi Spencer, NBPS Manager of Health Services, noted, “The safety of all our students and staff is our foremost priority and this pause in activities will help to limit spreading infections. As the situation is highly fluid, we will be assessing positivity rates on an hourly basis, which will inform our determination regarding extending this pause in Athletics and for any other district events or activities going forward.”

Healey Campaign Reports Raising \$400K in December

By Matt Murphy
State House News Service

Attorney General Maura Healey will report raising more than \$400,000 in December, the Democrat’s largest fundraising month ever, adding to the \$3.3 million she has on hand as she weighs whether to seek the governor’s office this year.

Healey’s campaign committee said Monday that she raked in \$403,351 from 1,140 donors last month, more than doubling her previous monthly record. The haul brings her campaign account’s balance to \$3,666,104.

“Maura is grateful for the tremendous support she continues to receive from every corner of this state,” said Corey Welford, a Healey committee spokesman.

Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz and Harvard professor Danielle Allen, the two Democrats already in the race, also released numbers for December, reporting \$102,606 and \$83,000 raised respectively.

Chang-Diaz's monthly total came from more than 650 contributors, 80 percent of whom live in Massachusetts, and she more than doubled her take from November. Seventy-two percent of the Jamaica Plain Democrat's donations were for \$100 or less.

"It's clear that Sonia is the people's choice for Governor," said Joshua Wolfsun, Chang-Díaz's acting campaign manager. "This campaign is being powered by working families across the state who know it's time for real, urgent change in our government. Sonia's led that fight for her whole career and beaten insiders' assumptions over and over —" and people across Massachusetts are joining her to do it again."

According to Healey's team, 91 percent of donors contributing to the attorney general's political committee were from Massachusetts. The complete report has not yet been posted online by the Office of Campaign and Political Finance.

Healey has been openly weighing whether to run for governor in 2022, but the focus on her decision has intensified in recent weeks since Gov. Charlie Baker and Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito both said last month they would not be candidates for the office this year.

Over the summer, Healey said she hoped to make a decision by the fall, but as the seasons have changed the window for her to announce a decision before Democrats caucus in February to elect delegates to the statewide nominating convention later this year has narrowed.

Last week, former state Sen. Benjamin Downing announced that he was withdrawing from the race, citing a lack of funds to continue. Downing's exit left Chang-Diaz and Harvard professor Danielle Allen as the two major declared candidates in the race, with U.S. Labor Secretary Marty Walsh also weighing a run.

Allen had a total of \$386,270 in cash on hand at the end of

November, while Chang-Diaz's campaign said she now has \$248,000. Interest in support Healey surged after Baker's decision last month, with supporters holding a number of events for the attorney general in December.

December is typically a big month for elected officials to fundraise around the holidays in an effort to max out donors before the new year when contribution limits reset and supporters are free to give again. Individual donors are allowed to give up to \$1,000 a year to any one candidate's committee.

Massachusetts Gas Prices Not Falling as Fast as Elsewhere

Chris Lisinski

State House News Service

Gasoline prices in Massachusetts have been ticking downward over the last month, but the pace of change has been slower than the national average and Bay Staters continue to pay more at the pump than drivers in many other states.

The average price for a gallon of gasoline in Massachusetts is now \$3.38, AAA Massachusetts reported Monday. That's down 1 cent from the average price a week ago and 4 cents from the average price one month ago. Compared to last year, gas prices are still elevated, landing \$1.19 higher than the \$2.19 per gallon average price on Dec. 27, 2020, AAA Massachusetts said.

"Gasoline prices fluctuated over the past few days as fears of an omicron-driven economic slowdown were countered by news of a severe fire at a major oil refinery in Texas," said AAA

Massachusetts Director of Public and Government Affairs Mary Maguire.

The state's average price is 10 cents higher than the national average of \$3.28 per gallon Monday, which itself is down 2 cents from last week and 11 cents from a month ago but still \$1.03 more than this time last year.

Vaxed And Boosted Face “Extremely Low” Risk, Baker Says

By Chris Lisinski and Colin A. Young
State House News Service

People who have been both vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19 face an “extremely low” risk from the fast-spreading omicron variant, Gov. Charlie Baker said Wednesday as he defended his resistance to mandating mask-wearing or reimposing other mitigation measures.

Top-ranking Democrats in the Legislature are unhappy with Baker's approach to the ongoing COVID-19 surge fueled by the omicron variant, calling for him to pursue more stringent options such as requiring schools to opt out of pooled testing programs rather than opt in.

Senate President Karen Spilka on Tuesday urged Baker to replace his newly revived mask advisory with a full mandate requiring, rather than just recommending, individuals to cover their faces in indoor public spaces.

Her suggestion did not gain any traction with the Republican

governor, who replied Wednesday that he believes “the policies we’ve put in place and the protocols we’re pursuing at this point in time are the right ones.”

Legislative leaders, who plan to meet in lightly attended informal sessions until early January, so far have communicated no interest in forcing additional action through votes. Two key Democratic senators said Wednesday that it is “the Governor’s responsibility” to use his executive powers to impose temporary public health measures.

Baker noted in a GBH News radio interview that mask mandates are still in place in several settings, including nursing homes and schools that have not secured vaccination-based waivers relieving them from the requirement.

“In some respects, what we’ve tried to do with our strategies generally now that we have 5 million people in Massachusetts who are vaccinated and almost 2 million people who are boosted – and we have rapid tests – is to recognize and understand that our strategy at this point is sort of layered and multi-dimensional,” Baker said.

“There are going to be a lot more cases because omicron is very contagious, but people need to understand that the vaccines and the number of people in Massachusetts that have gone out and gotten vaccinated and gotten boosted – their risk is extremely low,” he later added. “It’s important for everybody to understand that vaccines and boosters are in fact doing exactly what they were supposed to do, and they are our best defense.”

Work is underway to open a booster shot clinic in January at Fenway Park, which last year served as a mass vaccination site in the initial vaccine rollout. Baker said Wednesday that the most significant challenge to booster clinics is finding available staff, which is “part of the reason why some of this might happen a little bit after the holidays as opposed to

before.”

The administration does not have any plans in place to open a similar booster clinic in western Massachusetts and will instead look to relaunch a regional collaborative that had previously been in place in Berkshire County.

Federal Support Could Reduce Staffing Pressure

During his interview on GBH, Baker was asked about the federal measures President Joe Biden announced this week to step up the coronavirus response and said he expects that Massachusetts will benefit from Biden’s orders deploying more vaccinators and vaccination/booster sites.

“I don’t think we’re going to get pop-up sites from them, but I think we’re going to get people. And at this point in time, people in some respects, given all the issues everybody has with staffing, are every bit as important as having a site,” Baker told GBH hosts Jim Braude and Margery Eagan. “And for us, that’ll translate into a whole variety of additional sites in communities where we would like to expand access.”

Baker said the president’s actions “will make it possible for us to go even bigger in places like Brockton and Everett and down on the Cape where we have some issues and in Taunton and in Roxbury and in Lynn.”

Earlier in the day, Baker touted rapid tests as a key feature in the state’s evolving pandemic response, even as many residents complain the kits are difficult to find in stores.

“The frustration people feel is real, but this is something we’ve been on for months and I’m glad to see the feds finally get there,” he said after a State House event. “We’ve done a lot of things to alleviate some of the concerns people have about access and availability. You can also order them online. I can tell you by my own experience, having ordered many rapid tests online recently from Walmart, they landed on our front porch within two to three days.”

A day after avoiding any direct response to Boston Mayor Michelle Wu's new policy to require proof of vaccination to enter many indoor spaces starting next month, the governor engaged on the topic a bit more Wednesday.

"It's not like everybody says 'it's awful,' or everybody says 'it's great.' There's mixed opinions on it and a lot of people want to know exactly how it's gonna work. I think the fact that the date is, I think, what, January 15? That does give people a little while to figure out the answers to some of those questions," he said.

Baker also said that the protests at City Hall while Wu announced the new policies were "not helpful at all in any way." Republican candidate for governor Geoff Diehl, a former state representative with whom Baker does not often see eye-to-eye, was among those arguing Monday that Wu was depriving people of their civil rights.

"It doesn't offer solutions, it's not constructive and it doesn't help people sort of get from where we are to where we need to go," Baker, who refused to say whether he might support Diehl or any other candidate for governor next year, said when asked whether Diehl has an argument.

The governor added, "If you're not going to be offering solutions or constructive advice, or providing alternatives, then you're not really helping very much because these are serious times and these are serious issues. Serious people are trying to do things to work us through it and that should be respected and understood."

While Baker is opposed to policies like Wu's that require businesses to screen customers for proof of vaccination, he said Wednesday that a digital way to present proof of COVID-19 vaccination similar to the passports used in other states is still expected to be available in Massachusetts "soon."

On GBH last month, Baker said his administration was working

with more than a dozen states “to try to create a single QR code that can be used for all sorts of things where people may choose to require a vaccine.” He said at the time that it would be ready “soon.” On Wednesday, Braude asked for a status report and Baker would only say it “should be ready soon.”

“A lot of people have asked us to create this so that they would have it and so they could download it and we get it,” Baker said. “We understand it and we’re working on it.”

Eyeing More ARPA Spending

As Massachusetts heads toward the end of the calendar year, the Baker administration is working to put \$4 billion in American Rescue Plan Act and surplus tax revenue dollars to use.

Lawmakers missed their deadline of mid-November to get the bill to Baker, but found compromise and sent it to his desk a few weeks later. The timing works out, Baker said, because officials can align the spending approved from those pots with the administration’s capital plan as well as money flowing to Massachusetts under the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure package Biden signed into law.

“There are ways to use all three of those in a concert of decision-making,” Baker said. “There’s a way to make all of those dollars go farther because of the availability of all three programs.”

With \$2.3 billion in ARPA dollars unspent, Baker said he plans to file a proposal “some time after the first of the year” to use the remaining funding on housing, environmental infrastructure – particularly combined sewer overflows – and downtown revitalization.

“There is the possibility we can use some of the money in the federal infrastructure bill to deal with some of those issues, and we can do a lot with culverts in the federal infrastructure bill as well,” Baker said. “I know that’s

boring to everyone but me, but every time it rains and your downtowns flood and your communities flood, you should know it's because our environmental infrastructure is inadequate to deal with the storms we have these days."

[Chris Van Buskirk contributed reporting]

Boston To Require Vax Proof To Enter Many Businesses

By Katie Lannan

State House News Service

Patrons and staff at indoor spaces in Boston – including restaurants, bars, nightclubs, fitness facilities and entertainment venues – will need to show proof they are vaccinated against COVID-19 starting next month, under a policy Mayor Michelle Wu announced Monday that marks a major shift from current practice in the city.

Wu, who also tightened the vaccine policy for city employees, was joined for her announcement by municipal officials from Salem, Somerville and Brookline. Wu's office said those communities, along with Arlington and Cambridge, are also working to advance their own vaccine requirements.

"This region requires Boston to take major steps and for us all to work together as a community amongst communities," Brookline Select Board member Raul Fernandez said.

Wu's announcement comes five days after the Boston Public Health Commission announced the city's first confirmed cases of the omicron variant of COVID-19, in three young adults over

the age of 18 who were not vaccinated and experienced mild disease without needing to be hospitalized.

“This step will help increase our vaccination numbers, which we know is the best way to keep our community safe and thriving,” Wu said. “Although Boston’s vaccination rates have been high, we continue to see serious disparities by race and by age, allowing omicron and other new variants to spread in our communities. Vaccines are the most powerful tool in fighting this pandemic, once again, and they’re the most powerful tool to allow us to recover as a city and to truly be together.”

BPHC Executive Director Dr. Bisola Ojikutu said the number of COVID-19 cases in Boston has increased almost 90 percent compared to two weeks ago, with the city now averaging 369 new cases a day. She said hospital resources are “stretched thin” and that an estimated two-thirds of those hospitalized with COVID-19 in the city are unvaccinated.

Ojikutu, who issued the order establishing the proof-of-vaccine policy projected that the city’s case numbers will “rise significantly” in January based on the omicron variant’s transmissibility.

Under Boston’s policy for indoor dining, fitness and entertainment establishments, dubbed the B Together initiative, workers and patrons age 12 and up will be required to show proof of at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine starting Jan. 15.

Proof of full vaccination – acceptable forms include the CDC vaccination card, a photo of the card, “any official immunization record or digital image from a pharmacy or health care provider, or on any COVID-19 vaccine verification app” – will be required for those 12 and up as of Feb. 15.

For children age 5-11, the youngest age group for which COVID-19 shots are currently authorized, proof of a first dose

will be required as of March 1, with full vaccination required starting the first day of May.

In August, Acting Mayor Kim Janey imposed a rule requiring the city's 18,000 workers to get vaccinated or submit to weekly testing for COVID-19. Wu said Monday that the city will drop the testing option "along the same timeline" as the new proof-of-vaccination requirement, with a first dose by Jan. 15 and second shot a month later.

Boston officials said the city plans to create its own proof-of-vaccination app, modeled after the Key to NYC app in New York City. Wu said she has been in touch with New York officials, where a similar vaccine requirement has been in place for months.

"Indoor vaccine mandates and mandates in general increase vaccination rates," Ojikutu said. "After New York City implemented its indoor vaccination mandate, known as the Key to New York City program, citywide vaccinations increased by 9 percent in just one month, and the number of doses administered has risen steadily since the implementation."

Ojikutu had to raise her voice during her remarks to be heard over protesters who arrived at City Hall while she was speaking. The group chanted, used whistles and at one point sang the "The Star-Spangled Banner" as officials described the new policy and their reasoning behind implementing it.

"Welcome to the people's building," Wu told the crowd of shouting demonstrators. "I just want to emphasize, there is nothing more American than coming together to ensure that we are taking care of each other, that each and every one of our community members is safe, is healthy and has access to the future and opportunities they deserve."

A group called Boston First Responders United, which opposes vaccine mandates, criticized Wu's policy ahead of her announcement, issuing what it described as "a call to action

to our brothers and sisters in all law enforcement unions.”

“We especially remind our fellow members of law enforcement that civil rights and worker’s rights cannot be suspended, abridged, or revoked in America,” the group said in a statement, which also said any ongoing contract negotiations should be suspended.

Wu said Boston officials are “in conversations with all of our city unions to proceed along all the processes that are required.” She said more than 90 percent of the city’s workforce is fully vaccinated and that she is “confident that that number will continue to grow as we host on-site clinics in partnership with each of our departments.”

Sen. Will Brownsberger, a Belmont Democrat whose district includes parts of Boston, was on hand for Wu’s press conference, as was City Councilor Lydia Edwards, a candidate for an open state Senate seat. On Twitter, House Ways and Means Chairman Aaron Michlewitz, a North End Democrat, called the vaccine-proof requirement “a bold and necessary step for many of us to feel safe when going out and dining out in Boston.”

Republican gubernatorial candidate Geoff Diehl, meanwhile, called the policies “clear violations of the civil rights of anyone who lives in, works in, or travels to the city” and said they “will make it even more difficult for Boston’s economy to recover from the pandemic.”

Diehl’s campaign also distributed a photo of him inside Boston City Hall, saying it was “taken this morning during the Boston First Responders’ Rally.”

The Boston Public Health Commission order – which says it will remain in effect until the executive director rescinds it – calls for “all reasonable efforts” to be made “to secure voluntary compliance,” including outreach, education and written warnings. It also allows for fines of \$300 per

violation “and orders of the BPHC to cease and desist.”

Christopher Carlozzi, state director for the National Federation of Independent Businesses, called it unfortunate that “private businesses are being placed in the unenviable position of having to enforce another government health directive.”

“City officials should take every step imaginable to ensure consumers know this is a city policy, and are aware business owners and their workers are simply being forced to abide by these latest rules,” he said.

Boston’s planned outreach and support efforts for businesses include a series of webinars and what Wu’s office described as “a weeks-long campaign to educate residents and businesses about the new policy, utilizing city outreach workers and inspectional services.”

Temple Gill of the Huntington Theatre Company, an organization that requires vaccines for its staff and artists and has been checking its patrons for proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test, said the new city policy “means that arts organizations don’t have to shoulder the responsibility of these decisions alone.”

According to the mayor’s office, 68 percent of Boston residents were fully vaccinated as of Dec. 14, and 79 percent had received at least one dose.

Maura Healey Padding Campaign

Account Ahead Of Massachusetts Governor's Race Decision

By Matt Murphy

State House News Service

Attorney General Maura Healey has picked up her fundraising pace this month with at least one event last week and two more planned this week as her fall timeline for a decision on whether to run for governor in 2022 rapidly comes to a close.

Healey, a two-term Democrat who political strategists view as a potential early front-runner for the governor's office now that Gov. Charlie Baker has opted against seeking a third term, said recently that she would make a decision on her political future "soon."

Though any money she raises could also be used for a campaign for reelection, the attorney general is already sitting on a hefty campaign account and faces no known opposition to date should she decide to seek a third term instead of running for governor. By tapping into her donor networks at the end of the year, Healey could strengthen her position in the developing Democratic field.

The fundraisers planned this week on her behalf include events hosted by two prominent Boston lobbying firms – ML Strategies and Smith, Costello and Crawford. Both events are on the calendar for Thursday, with ML Strategies hosting the attorney general in the morning at their downtown offices, followed by a noon event at Smith, Costello and Crawford's office on State Street.

"We've been supporters of hers for a long time, and we're happy to help her in whatever future endeavors she might

pursue. This is not a new venture for us but it could be a new venture for her and we want to be supportive,” said Michael Costello, a former state legislator and partner in his Beacon Hill lobbying firm.

Costello said the firm typically holds an end-of-year fundraiser for Healey, and would have this year even if she wasn’t a prospective candidate for governor.

Another virtual event took place last Thursday night hosted by a group of attorneys who billed themselves as “Lawyers for Maura.” The invite to the event featured Healey’s attorney general campaign logo, and the hosts included former Supreme Judicial Court Justice Margot Botsford, former Attorney General Scott Harshbarger, labor lawyer and prospective attorney general candidate Shannon Liss-Riordan, and former Ambassador to Norway Barry White, who before his overseas posting under President Barack Obama was the chairman and managing partner of Foley Hoag.

It’s not unusual for elected officials to hold fundraisers around the holidays in an effort to max out donors before the new year when contribution limits reset and supporters are free to give again. Individual donors are allowed to give up to \$1,000 a year to any one candidate’s committee.

Advisors close to Healey say that many of the fundraising events on her calendar this month had been booked before Baker’s announcement, but interest in attending the events has “jumped significantly” as the focus has shifted to the Democrat and whether she will seek the governor’s office.

“Maura is taking all the steps that one would need to take to prepare for a run, including closing the year with a strong fundraising month,” said one senior advisor.

Healey reported having \$3.3 million in the bank at the end of the November, which could be used for a run for governor or a third campaign for attorney general.

It's easily the most of any candidate currently running for governor, though it is less than the \$5.1 million that U.S. Labor Secretary Marty Walsh is sitting on, and could tap if he were to return to Boston to seek the governor's office.

Since reporting no money raised in August, Healey has collected \$35,406 in September, \$42,636 in October and \$59,513 in November.

Of the three declared Democrats in the race, Harvard political science professor Danielle Allen is sitting on the most cash with \$386,270 in her account, followed by Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz who reported \$198,311 on hand at the end of November. Former Sen. Ben Downing finished last month with \$32,742 in his account.

Solar Mandate Framed As Weapon In Emissions Fight

By Matt Murphy

State House News Service

Newly constructed single-family homes, apartments and many commercial buildings would be required to be outfitted with rooftop solar systems under legislation pushed Tuesday by two progressive Democrats who say the expansion of solar power will be necessary to meet the state's climate goals.

Gov. Charlie Baker signed a law earlier this year committing Massachusetts to a clean energy future with net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. To meet this goal, advocates and legislators say solar must become a larger piece of the energy puzzle in the coming years.

The Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities and Energy held a virtual hearing Tuesday on bills related to solar power, which is part of the state's multi-pronged strategy to reduce carbon emissions that includes technologies like offshore wind, hydropower and carbon sequestration.

The testimony focused on ways the state could remove barriers to solar development and encourage greater installation of residential and commercial solar arrays on already developed properties.

Sen. Jamie Eldridge has filed a bill (S 2165) that would update state building codes to require new construction to be able to accommodate rooftop solar installations.

The bill would also require new single-family homes to have rooftop solar systems capable of generating 100 percent of the dwelling's electricity needs, and new multi-family homes and larger commercial buildings would need solar systems capable of producing sufficient energy to meet standards set by the state.

The Acton Democrat has also filed separate legislation (S 2169) to remove net-metering caps, which limit the amount of solar electricity that can be sold at market rates by consumers back to the grid. He said he no longer saw a "policy rationale" for keeping existing caps in the place.

"The more ways we can incentivize solar, the more likely we are to reach our net zero energy goals," Eldridge said.

Rep. Mike Connolly, a Cambridge Democrat, said requiring rooftop solar panels on new construction had the potential to add 2,300 megawatts of capacity to the electric system by 2045, nearly doubling the solar capacity installed to date.

"All across the commonwealth there exists vast untapped resources that can be deployed in the struggle against climate change," Connolly said.

Heidi Ricci, director of policy and advocacy for the Massachusetts Audubon Society, said her organization also supports rooftop solar mandates.

“We’d like to see as much as possible go on the more than 1 million acres of land that’s already developed,” Ricci said.

Sen. Michael Barrett, the Senate co-chair of the committee, asked Connolly how he would justify a rooftop solar mandate so soon after the Legislature voted in support of developing a new building code that would encourage net-zero construction, but be optional for municipalities.

“I don’t necessarily see any conflict in terms of the net-zero stretch energy code. As I understand that, it applies more broadly in different areas in all aspects of energy,” Connolly replied.

As of mid-2020, there were more than 105,000 solar projects totaling about 2,700 megawatts of installed solar power around Massachusetts.

Rep. Carolyn Dykema, of Holliston, filed a comprehensive bill (H 4044) that would establish new, escalating solar installation targets starting with 550 megawatts in 2023 and reaching no less than 3,250 megawatts by 2027.

The legislation also would move the state toward a rooftop solar mandate for new residential and commercial construction, and simplify the rate-setting process for solar metering credits by putting the Department of Public Utilities solely in charge.

Paul Dale, from the Sierra Club, said Dykema’s bill also would address delays caused by siting and permitting challenges by creating solar opportunity zones where solar development would be encouraged, rather than using laws to set up limitations on how solar can be deployed.

“This bill kind of turns the cart around and causes us to define preferred location for solar that we need,” Dale said.

Nick d’Arbeloff, with the Solar Energy Business Association of New England, said developers support lifting the remaining net-metering caps on solar, which are there in part to protect utilities who must still maintain the grid infrastructure that delivers power to homes and businesses.

D’Arbeloff said SEBANE also supports reforms to the rule that limits the number of credit-eligible solar arrays to one per parcel, proposing to allow multiple solar arrays on municipally-owned land, low- and moderate-income housing or in developments where each solar system is on a distinct rooftop.

He said this would help developers avoid going through the costly and time-consuming process of seeking an exemption.

Other who testified urged the Legislature to immediately address the exemption from the net-metering cap for solar projects of 10-kilowatts or less.

Claire Chang, a partner at Greenfield Solar, said many farms and small businesses in western Massachusetts are “ready to step up their generation of 100 percent clean energy,” but fall into a trap with the existing net metering caps that prevent them from getting full market-rate credits for all the energy they need and are willing to produce on site.

Others said the 10-kilowatt exemption is no longer sufficient as policymakers ask homeowners to transition away from oil and gas furnaces and gas stove and switch to electric appliances, heat pumps and electric cars that all require more capacity.

Rachael S. Rollins Confirmed as United States Attorney for the District of Massachusetts

The United States Senate has confirmed Rachael S. Rollins as the United States Attorney for the District of Massachusetts. Ms. Rollins is the first Black woman to ever be confirmed as U.S. Attorney in the District. She was nominated by President Joseph R. Biden on July 26, 2021. The District of Massachusetts is one of the oldest United States Attorney's Offices in the country.

"I am truly humbled by today's confirmation and deeply honored to have the support and confidence of President Biden, Vice President Harris, Senate Majority Leader Schumer, Senate Judiciary Chair Durbin, and my Senators Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey. I have dedicated much of my career to public service and as I prepare to assume the role of Massachusetts's chief federal law enforcement officer, I look forward to continuing to serve this great nation. Leading the U.S. Attorney's Office is a profound honor, and I pledge to serve with continued zeal and passion for justice," said Ms. Rollins in response to her confirmation.

"Being the DA has been the highlight of my professional career. I am profoundly grateful to the people of Suffolk County. They put their faith in me and I have worked hard every day to improve the relationship between law enforcement and the communities most impacted by violence and harm. I am proud that Boston remains one of the only major cities in the United States where violent crime, including homicides, is down. As United States Attorney, I will continue to work with my law enforcement and community partners to ensure this trend continues and expands across all of Massachusetts."

A Massachusetts native and an attorney for more than two decades, Ms. Rollins has served as Suffolk County District Attorney (DA) since 2019. She was the first woman to ever be elected DA in Suffolk County and the first woman of color to ever hold the position of DA in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Prior to serving as Suffolk County DA, Ms. Rollins was the General Counsel for the Massachusetts Department of Transportation and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority. She also served as Chief Legal Counsel to the Massachusetts Port Authority. From 2007 to 2011, Ms. Rollins was an Assistant U.S. Attorney for the District of Massachusetts serving in both the Civil and Criminal Divisions. Earlier in her career, Ms. Rollins was an attorney at Bingham McCutchen LLP, focusing on matters involving complex civil litigation and criminal defense, and from 1999 to 2002 she was a field attorney for the National Labor Relations Board where she investigated unfair labor practices and upheld workers' rights. Ms. Rollins began her legal career as a clerk for Associate Judge Frederick L. Brown of the Massachusetts Appeals Court.

Ms. Rollins earned a Juris Doctor from Northeastern University School of Law and a Masters in Law from Georgetown University Law Center. She graduated from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 1994.

Rollins Backs Tougher Penalties in Abuse of Power

Cases

By Chris Lisinski

State House News Service

Warning that existing law leaves a dangerous “loophole” in place, Suffolk County District Attorney Rachael Rollins pushed Tuesday for the Legislature to create a new criminal charge for adults who exploit positions of authority to engage in sexual acts with minors.

Teachers, coaches, babysitters, mentors and other adults who misuse their standing to participate in sexual activity with a child under their watch would face substantial prison time if lawmakers advance a bill (H 1801 / S 1092) that Rollins endorsed.

Under current law, Rollins said, anyone in Massachusetts above the age of consent of 16 years old can legally engage in consensual sexual touching with minors who are at least 14 years old and can have intercourse with minors 16 years old and above.

“This becomes problematic when the person over 16 is an adult and in a position of authority or trust,” Rollins told the Judiciary Committee.

Last year, the Suffolk County DA’s office convened a leadership council of adults who survived sexual abuse and assault as children. Council members heard story after story, Rollins recalled, of children who were victimized by someone “in a position of trust,” including a baseball coach, two priests, a director of a youth musical organization and others.

Several of the cases could not be prosecuted at all because the children were technically old enough to consent despite the disproportionate power structure in the relationship,

Rollins said.

Rollins's testimony came one day after her office announced that a former Boston Public Schools middle school teacher pleaded guilty to child sex abuse charges involving a former student.

David Lockwood, 54, on Monday was sentenced to four years in prison followed by two years of probation after pleading guilty to four counts of rape against a child. Starting in 1996, the DA's office said, Lockwood began abusing a 12-year-old student of his at the Timilty Middle School in Roxbury, using his position "to gain her trust and prime her for abuse."

As Rollins noted at Tuesday's hearing, prosecutors could only charge Lockwood for a portion of his crimes. He continued the abuse past the survivor's 16th birthday, Rollins's office said, but because the survivor had reached the age of consent, the DA said she no longer had the same legal protection.

"It is unbelievable that we are talking about this, but I am so grateful you are considering closing this loophole," Rollins told lawmakers on Tuesday. "There are real lives impacted."

The bill, filed by Sen. Joan Lovely, would allow for a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison for a person in a position of trust, authority or supervision who commits an assault and battery on a child between the ages of 14 and 18.

An adult who commits a similar offense on a child younger than 14 "shall be punished by imprisonment in the state prison for life or for any term of years, but not less than 10 years," under the bill. Adult caretakers who have intercourse with minors, for whom the age of consent is 16, would face "imprisonment in the state prison for life or for any terms of years."

The legislation also stresses that anyone under the age of 18 is incapable of consenting to a sexual interaction with an adult in a position of authority in such cases.

“Teachers, coaches, tutors, mentors – anyone who has any type of authority over a child should strive to protect them, not to exploit them,” Lovely, a Salem Democrat, said. “This bill would help close that loophole.”

Lovely filed half a dozen bills before the Judiciary Committee at Tuesday’s hearing, including another bill (S 1091) that would require schools to implement new standardized screening mechanisms to examine if any new hires have been previously disciplined for abuse or sexual misconduct.

“It is beyond comprehension that we do not have this in place,” Suzanne Messina, a board member at the Massachusetts Citizens for Children group, or MassKids, told the committee. “Those people most entrusted with our children should be screened. Just as parents screen a babysitter, just as parents screen a nanny, those parents have the right to expect our schools to do the same for those people to whom we entrust our children.”