TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF H.2418/S.1579
AN ACT TO PROTECT THE CIVIL RIGHTS AND SAFETY OF ALL MASSACHUSETTS RESIDENTS
BEFORE THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY
DECEMBER 1, 2021

The Massachusetts Medical Society (MMS) wishes to be recorded in support of House bill 2418 and Senate bill 1579, An Act to protect the civil rights and safety of all Massachusetts residents, also known as the Safe Communities Act (SCA).

The MMS is a professional association of over 25,000 physicians, residents, and medical students across all clinical disciplines, organizations, and practice settings. The Medical Society is committed to advocating on behalf of patients, for a better health care system, and on behalf of physicians, to help them provide the best care possible. The MMS has long-advocated for the best possible health care for every patient in the Commonwealth, which demands safe access to health care for immigrants and refugees in the Commonwealth, regardless of immigration status. Moreover, the MMS supports policies that protect the civil rights, safety, and well-being of all patients by drawing a clear line between immigration enforcement and health care. As such, the MMS supports the SCA, which is a critical step toward ensuring that immigrant patients can safely seek the health care services they need, particularly at a time when public health is threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 has forced Massachusetts to contend with an unprecedented public health crisis. Immigrant communities—which disproportionately include low-income residents working essential jobs and living in overcrowded, multigenerational households—continue to be amongst the hardest hit. The ongoing collaboration of some local police departments with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) leads many immigrants to hesitate over calling 911 during medical emergencies, or otherwise seeking needed health care, fearing repercussions for the legal status of themselves or their loved ones. Cultivating trust in medical providers and public health is key – that trust is foundational to facilitating unfettered access to health care for these patients, which is critical not only to protecting overall public health, but to promoting equity in our pursuit of ending this pandemic. Distrust of government agencies also hinders the Department of Public
Health’s (DPH) contact tracing efforts. DPH releases the addresses of COVID-19 positive patients to local first responders in many municipalities, compounding undocumented immigrants’ hesitation to participate in testing and contact tracing. This is particularly important now, as vaccination has plateaued, and we face the threat of new variant; testing and contract tracing continues to be a critical aspect of the overall strategy to combat COVID-19.

The implications of ongoing police collaboration with ICE extend beyond the current COVID-19 crisis. Multiple studies have demonstrated the detrimental effects of aggressive immigration enforcement and anti-immigrant policy environments on the health of immigrants and their US citizen family members. Community advocates report that immigrant victims of domestic violence and other crimes have long hesitated to seek help from authorities, placing their physical and mental health at grave risk. Immigrants are justified in fearing the consequences of entanglement with the authorities for their families; at a time when the health risks of racism and police brutality have come into sharp focus, distrust of police among marginalized communities poses a public health issue that demands swift action.

The COVID-19 epidemic has clearly illustrated that the health of our society depends upon the health of its most vulnerable and marginalized members. One in six residents of Massachusetts is foreign-born, and one in three children in the Commonwealth has at least one immigrant parent. Most are members of racial and ethnic minority groups. The SCA is a logical and necessary step toward enabling immigrant patients to safely seek needed health care services.