TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF H.2519/S.1552
AN ACT TO CREATE ALTERNATIVES FOR COMMUNITY EMERGENCY SERVICES (ACES)
BEFORE THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY & HOMELAND SECURITY
JULY 14, 2021

The Massachusetts Medical Society (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. As physicians, we are concerned about the many determinants of health of the people of Massachusetts. Throughout our nation’s history, systemic and institutional power structures have created inequities and perpetuated and exacerbated negative health outcomes for people of color. Policing is one such power structure. People of color, who have been historically marginalized, are affected most by violent police interactions, with their health and safety at greater risk from controversial police practices. For the following reasons, the MMS wishes to be recorded in support of House bill 2519 and Senate bill 1552, An Act to Create Alternatives for Community Emergency Services (ACES).

As the legislature considers additional reforms in furtherance of the goal to promote public safety and racial equity, we urge support of the ACES Act. This bill aims to improve public health, broaden access to mental health and social services, and reduce potential police violence by connecting those in crisis to community and health supports. Existing research highlights the public health effects of violence between law enforcement officers and individuals from historically marginalized communities. Data shows that Black, Latino, and Indigenous individuals are disproportionately subjected to excessive police force and racial profiling, and additional data shows the correlation between violent policing and adverse health outcomes.

Most emergency calls relating to mental health, substance use disorder crises, health and safety checks, and the like do not require a law enforcement response. Armed police intervention under these circumstances can needlessly escalate the situation and result in the unnecessary use of force, causing undue harm. Based on the training and function of law enforcement, most of these encounters result in arrest or criminal charges, which puts further obstacles in the way of those in need of social supports and resources. Indeed, unnecessary interaction with law enforcement often deters our communities made most vulnerable, especially immigrants with undocumented legal status, from seeking help.

The ACES Act would increase the availability of non-law-enforcement, unarmed community-based emergency response options for calls to 911 to help individuals in need and to avoid
escalation of a crisis situation. We have seen similar programs succeed in other states, and it is time for Massachusetts to invest and empower communities to follow suit. Inequitable law enforcement practices directly and indirectly impact the health our patients, particularly communities of color. Extrinsic crisis response and support from law enforcement will not only improve the health and health outcomes, but it will ultimately save lives.