

MASSACHUSETTS MONEY AND POLITICS PROJECT

A PROGRAM OF THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION PROJECT

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Asthma - Money and Politics Issue Brief

Serious Urban Health Issue Largely Ignored Does Color of Political Money Play a Role?

Asthma rates in Massachusetts are higher than the national average and are linked with health disparities affecting a disproportionate number of minority communities. Two of the top ten zip codes for asthma hospitalizations in Massachusetts, Dorchester 02124 and Dorchester 02126, are majority African American.¹

Yet, the House of Representatives nearly eliminated tobacco education and juvenile smoking prevention programs, slashed funding to the Department of Public Health (cut \$47,471,199) and the Department of Environmental Affairs (cut \$18,209,014) in the FY2004 budget – all programs that figure prominently in the fight against asthma.

Furthermore, the House has failed to approve modest environmental justice legislation (HB2112) that would in part address the high rates of asthma in urban areas around the state. (The Senate has passed a companion environmental justice bill in 2004.)

Could it be that the interest of low income and minority communities are ignored because they are not serious players in the state's pay to play privately financed campaign system? The vast majority of campaign contributions to Massachusetts state legislators between 1999 and 2002 came from predominately white, wealthy neighborhoods. In fact, out of the 2,157 total precincts in the state, the most generous 1% (22 precincts) gave nearly 14% of contributions (\$3,169,872) to state legislators. Nearly 95% of the money raised by state legislators came from predominately White non-Hispanic precincts (those with minority voting age populations less than 50%).

Total Individual donations to state legislative candidates (1999-2002)	\$23,449,706
Donations from Majority non-Hispanic White precincts	\$22,251,861
.....	94.9%
Donations from Majority Minority precincts	\$1,197,844
.....	5.1%

¹ Massachusetts Chronic Disease Improvement Network

How do these giving patterns effect public policy? The 2004 budget passed by the legislature and signed into law by Governor Mitt Romney includes drastic reductions in K-12, higher education, public health, housing, and environmental protection among other essential services - programs upon which voters of color and lower and middle income citizens depend more heavily. Specifically, the Speaker's budget cut funding for K-12 education by 6.6%, public health by 11.1%, and environmental affairs by 9.1%. These cuts come on top of significant reductions already made to these budget areas in the 2002 and 2003 fiscal years.

Publicly Financed Elections are Fair Elections

As the cost of running a competitive state legislative political campaign grows each year, fewer and fewer citizens of average means can afford to run competitive campaigns. The inflated campaign finance "market" disproportionately affects women and candidates of color who often cannot overcome the 'wealth primary.'

Publicly financed campaigns level the playing field, increase legislative competition and offer voters a real choice. In Maine and Arizona publicly funded elections have helped elect more woman and minorities.

For more information about asthma and campaign finance reform or publicly financed elections, contact Galen Nelson at 617.422.0118 or gnelson@comcoal.org.

The MA Money and Politics Project is a project of the Commonwealth Education Project. MA Money and Politics conducts research and analysis of state wide and state legislative campaign finance trends. For more information, visit www.comcoal.org or contact Galen Nelson at 617.422.0118 or gnelson@comcoal.org.