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House passes bill to leverage federal reimbursement for state's response to COVID-19 pandemic

BOSTON – Representative Todd M. Smola (R-Warren, Ranking Member, Committee on Ways & Means) joined his colleagues in the House of Representatives to give initial approval to a \$1.1 billion supplemental budget designed to help Massachusetts leverage federal reimbursement for costs related to the state's COVID-19 response.

Representative Smola said House Bill 4802 authorizes state spending to support a number of critical areas impacted by the global pandemic, including health care, housing, food assistance, and early education. The state anticipates being able to recoup many of these expenses through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

House Bill 4802, which is a redrafted version of a bill filed by Governor Charlie Baker on May 12, establishes two reserve accounts within the Executive Office of Administration and Finance to support COVID-19 monitoring, treatment, containment, public awareness and prevention. Engrossed by the House on June 24 on a vote of 158-0, the bill will now move to the Senate for further action.

Representative Smola said House Bill 4802 incorporates spending authorizations for costs that have already been incurred by the state, as well as additional costs the state anticipates as it continues to respond to the novel coronavirus. He said the bill will help expedite the state's ability to recover federal funding and to minimize the fiscal impact on the state's taxpayers.

The initial supplemental spending bill released by the House Ways and Means Committee authorized \$1.1 billion in spending, including \$350 million for personal protective equipment, \$111.4 million for supplemental payments to hospitals and health care providers, \$85 million for

field hospitals and shelters, \$20 million to address racial disparities in health care, and \$44 million for the state's COVID-19 community tracing efforts. It also included \$45.6 million in early education grants, \$36 million in emergency child care for essential workers, \$15 million for direct wage supplements for home care workers and elder protective services, and funding for a variety of food assistance programs, including the School Breakfast Program (\$5.25 million), the Emergency Food Assistance Program (\$9 million) and \$1.25 million for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a portion of which will help support the FoodSource Hotline run by Project Bread-The Walk for Hunger, Inc.

During floor debate, an additional \$17.5 million in spending authorizations were added to the bill, many of which will assist local community-based organizations from across the state that have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. Among the items added was a \$2 million appropriation for an adaptive surveillance testing program to routinely test nursing home staff and residents for the 2019 novel coronavirus, with nursing facilities to receive testing reimbursement on a monthly basis.

House Bill 4802 authorizes the establishment of the Massachusetts Coronavirus Relief Fund, which will be funded by revenues received by the state under the federal CARES Act. The Secretary of Administration of Finance will administer this fund, with any unexpended balances carrying forward into Fiscal Year 2021, which begins on July 1.

The bill also creates an Early Education and Care Public-Private Trust Fund, to be administered by the Commissioner of Early Education and Care, in consultation with the Secretary of Housing and Economic Development. Money from this fund will be used to support Massachusetts' childcare providers during the COVID-19 reopening and recovery process.

In addition, the bill requires the Secretary of Administration of Finance, in consultation with the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA), to estimate the amount of federal reimbursements that have been claimed, or are anticipated to be claimed but have not yet been received by August 31. The bill sets a deadline of September 15 for the Secretary to complete this estimate, and directs these monies to be credited to the appropriate funds to offset the state's COVID-19 response costs that were incurred during the current fiscal year.

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