

October 10, 2019

Senator James B. Eldridge, Chair
Joint Committee on the Judiciary
24 Beacon Street, Room 320
Boston, MA 02133

Representative Claire D. Cronin, Chair
Joint Committee on the Judiciary
24 Beacon Street, Room 136
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Senator Eldridge and Representative Cronin,

The Fenway Institute at Fenway Health writes to express strong support for bill S834/H3332 to ban female genital mutilation (FGM) in Massachusetts. The Fenway Institute works to make life healthier for those who are LGBT, people living with HIV, and the larger community. We do this through research and evaluation, education and training, and policy analysis. We are the research division of Fenway Health, a federally qualified health center (FQHC) and Ryan White Part C grantee in Boston that serves 32,000 patients each year.

The bill, refiled from last session, already has significant support in both the House and the Senate. As co-Chairs of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary, we ask you to vote the bills favorably out of the committee and urge House and Senate Leadership to bring the bills to their respective chambers for a vote.

FGM is defined by the World Health Organization as removal of all or part of a girl's healthy sex organs and surrounding tissue for non-medical reasons, often resulting in serious health consequences, the risk of death in childbirth, and lifelong trauma. There are no health benefits to this practice. According to the Centers for Disease Control, half a million women and girls living in the United States have been cut or are at risk of FGM. Over fourteen thousand such women and girls reside in Massachusetts, which ranks our state as 12th in the nation for at-risk populations. Last session, the Joint Judiciary Committee heard unequivocal testimony from survivors that FGM happens in the US and that girls born in Massachusetts are at risk.

Thirty-one states have already passed laws banning FGM, and with your help Massachusetts can become number 32. We do not want our state to be a destination for FGM. Last November, a U.S. District court struck down the federal law making FGM illegal, finding that Congress exceeded its authority under the U.S. constitution, and that FGM is a violent crime that must be regulated by the states. Top Massachusetts law enforcement officials testified last session that existing state criminal laws would not cover FGM. The Department of Children and Families considers FGM a form of child abuse. Massachusetts must act to stop this practice.

This legislation will act as a preventative tool for families who want to end this practice but remain afraid of social pressures to do so. The bill will provide community wide education on

the harmfulness of FGM, education for first responders, penalties for the practice of FGM, including for trafficking girls for FGM, and a civil remedy for victims.

We respectfully urge you to support this legislation and take the necessary steps to help move it forward in your leadership capacity. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jane Powers, MSW, LICSW
Acting Chief Executive Officer
Fenway Health

Kenneth Mayer, MD, FACP
Co-chair and Medical Research Director, The Fenway Institute
Director of HIV Prevention Research, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center
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