

VIEWPOINT

The Business Journal welcomes letters to the editor

EDITORIAL

New leader, new hope for struggling T

BBJ Facing a possible recession on the horizon, many employers are trying to entice their workers back to the office in hopes of generating creative ideas to shore up revenue.

But they're facing one big problem: A transit system that's more sluggish than ever.

Some of us thought we must be mistaken over the past two weeks in thinking that, after the March 19 news that the MBTA is lifting the last of its universal "slow zone" speed restrictions, the trains didn't seem to get any faster. In fact, it felt like many had gotten slower.

It turns out that according to data from TransitMatters, an independent nonprofit that examines the T, that's exactly what happened.

That's on top of cuts to service last year that forced commuters to wait even longer for a train. According to a March 22 tweet from Chris Friend, the finance

director of TransitMatters, the MBTA logged its highest post-Covid subway ridership day on June 16, 2022, "the last Thursday before they cut service by over 20%." He points out that since the middle of June 2022, while New York City's subway system has seen a 12% increase in ridership, Boston's has seen a 10% decline.

With the hiring of Phillip Eng as the new general manager of the MBTA system this week, we think Job One ought to be to provide some kind of realistic timeline for when trains might speed up again, as well as when the service cuts could be reversed. The fact that the MBTA has so far declined to do so is simply adding to the public sentiment that the T will remain inefficient for a long time to come.

Another top priority ought to be raising wages for some T workers in order to speed up hiring for an admittedly tough and often thankless

job. The state has collected a record-breaking amount of money over the past couple of years, and just passed the so-called "millionaires tax," the proceeds of which are intended to go toward education and transportation. Spending some of that money to get MBTA staffing levels back up where they should be would be an obvious use.

We are thankful for groups like TransitMatters and A Better City, a nonprofit business group focused on the MBTA which just named Kate Dineen to take the place of longtime CEO Rick Dimino. Both groups provide the studies need to show the MBTA what it needs to fix.

In the past few years, that list has only grown longer. But Boston simply can't function without a transit system that meets the needs of riders. We sincerely hope that Eng succeeds where so many others in recent years have failed.

MATT SELIG AND AMIE SHEI

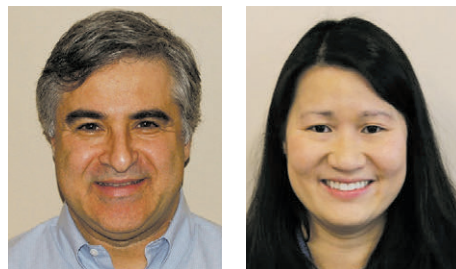
The stakes are high with MassHealth change

April 1 often represents a day of good humor, but April Fools' Day this year is no laughing matter. On this day, Massachusetts faces a new challenge for maintaining a point of pride for our commonwealth – our No. 1 ranking in the nation for the rate of health insurance coverage.

The challenge is in making sure that all residents who are among the 2.4 million in the state who now receive health insurance through MassHealth maintain that coverage if they remain eligible, as the state requires all MassHealth members to re-enroll in the program over the next year.

Currently, more than one in four Massachusetts residents is enrolled in MassHealth. We are among those working in the community to help eligible MassHealth members maintain their coverage, and we call on others to mobilize for an all-hands-on-deck response.

This upcoming year-long MassHealth eligibility redetermination process demands our attention because, due to complexities in the process resulting from special MassHealth rules put in place during the pandemic, there is a risk that a substantial number of MassHealth members will lose coverage even though they remain eligible – unless communities activate. Those most at risk of unwarranted coverage loss include



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people of color, those with limited English proficiency, and individuals who are homeless or who experience unstable housing, as they may not receive redetermination notices in the mail or be able to respond promptly. This would strike a blow to much-needed efforts to improve health equity.

► WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We want to hear your opinion on the issues you read about in the Boston Business Journal. Submit letters to Editor Doug Banks at dbanks@bizjournals.com.

A few guidelines: Keep it brief and civil and remember to mention the news story you're writing about. No anonymous letters will be printed, and submissions will be edited.

Individuals who lose coverage could have potentially devastating health impacts due to the delay of preventive, primary and even acute care. In addition, there can be enormous financial consequences for individuals and health care providers alike. Without coverage, individuals risk incurring staggering medical debt. Health and human services institutions that rely on MassHealth reimbursement for a significant portion of their revenue face a potential increase in uncompensated care.

To prevent people from unjustly losing coverage during this year's MassHealth eligibility-redetermination process, we need a multipronged, multisector approach. Laudably, MassHealth and the Health Connector are partnering with Health Care For All on an extensive outreach campaign. Called "Your Family, Your Health," the campaign is designed to educate members and community- and faith-based organizations that redetermination begins on April 1 and that MassHealth members need to take certain steps to maintain coverage. The state has hired additional staff to assist with applications and customer service, and Health Care For All is running a major advertising campaign and knocking on doors.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

How to revitalize downtown Boston

As a concerned citizen, a Bostonian, I am writing to express my worry about the precarious state of downtown Boston and the city post-Covid, especially with the rise of remote work. While we have already seen the implications through the New York Office market, we are beginning to experience them here in Boston as well.

In the fiscal year of '23, a staggering 74% of the City's revenues came from property tax collection, with 41.7% from residential taxpayers and the remainder from commercial taxpayers. This is a significant concern, and the city needs to be more proactive in addressing the issue of drawing people and utilizing downtown.

In the face of past crises like 9/11 and the Marathon Bombing, the community came together swiftly.

However, in this case, the crisis is happening in slow motion. As such, I would like to suggest a few ideas that could help revitalize downtown Boston:

Firstly, Boston Common hosts numerous events throughout the year that attract thousands of people. Moving these events to City Hall Plaza or Post Office Square could help attract more people to downtown.

Secondly, we could give expanded access to downtown venues for outdoor dining, which would be a great way to attract more people to the area.

Thirdly, hosting Red Bull-like events and fourthly, setting up farmer markets could also help bring people back to the city.

Tim Cook
Boston



GARY HIGGINS / BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Boston attracted visitors in April 2022 with the Boston Blooms Block party in Downtown Crossing. Above, a letter to the editor makes other suggestions.

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For our part, Health Law Advocates will soon be launching a special initiative funded by The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts to prevent MassHealth members from losing coverage and to also rapidly provide direct legal services to members who incorrectly lose coverage and, as a result, lose access to care or incur medical debt.

The stakes are high. The Healey-Driscoll administration is forecasting that 300,000 people will be found no longer eligible for MassHealth and will be removed from the program over the next year. Our system presumes those who are no longer eligible for MassHealth have other options for health insurance and no longer need to rely on the

safety net that MassHealth provides. If, however, people who remain eligible for MassHealth lose coverage during the eligibility redetermination process, they will likely become uninsured. That is simply the reality.

Having the lowest rate of uninsured in the country has provided our commonwealth and its residents with enormous benefits. The state, as it should, is leading the way to make sure that all goes well, but those of us outside of government who work with MassHealth members have an important role to play too.

With 2.4 million MassHealth members about to undergo this process, even a small percentage losing coverage will result in tens of thousands of people becoming uninsured. We can't let that happen.

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