## Special Commission on State Institutions

**May 15, 2025 3:00PM – 5:00PM**

**Virtual / Zoom**

**Dr. Kate Benson Anne Fracht Co-chair Co-chair**



## Agenda

1. Welcome
2. Recap of Last Meeting
3. Vote to Approve 5/8/25 Meeting Minutes
4. Recap of the work of the Special Commission
5. Discussion on remaining items
6. Next Steps
7. Vote to Adjourn



# Welcome

**Senator Barrett and Representative Garballey**



**Commission Business**

* + Recap of Last Meeting
	+ Vote to approve 4/10/25 meeting minutes



# Accomplishments of the Special Commission

**June 2023- May 2025**



## Together we have:

### Research & Legal Work

* + - Conducted extensive interviews with descendants seeking to access their family member’s institutional records
		- Developed legal research scenarios for Harvard Law School students to explore historical and legal issues tied to patient records from state institutions.
		- Drafted a formal letter to Governor Healey and Secretary Walsh regarding concerns about the Fernald State School.
		- Analyzed the official response to the Commission’s letter of inquiry and authored a comprehensive follow-up to Secretary Walsh.

### Records & Data Collection:

* + - Created a data collection tool to inventory records not currently held by the Massachusetts State Archives, for use by government agencies.
		- Provided input on a gap analysis tool used to assess the condition of institutional cemeteries across the state.
		- Researched best practices for handling the discovery of potential unmarked graves.



## Accomplishments of the SCSI

### Burial Sites & Memorialization:

* + - Participated in presentations from five organizations on cemetery restoration and honoring former residents of state institutions.
		- Compiled names of individuals buried in institutional cemeteries, including many previously undocumented.
		- Collected names from publicly available sources for nine state institutions and from Massachusetts Archives records, including those buried at Bridgewater State Hospital or whose remains were donated to medical schools.
		- Secured permission from the Department of Mental Health to access records from Foxboro State Hospital to reconstruct burial lists.
		- These conversations deeply influenced our recommendations for how Massachusetts should move forward.



## Accomplishments of the SCSI

### Overall

* + - Formed the first disability-led, disability-majority human rights commission of its kind in the world.
		- Successfully held 16 Commission meetings over two years.
		- Created small working groups tied to the goals of the Commission
			* Letter of Inquiry
			* Records and Records Access
			* Burials and Burial Locations
			* Framework for Remembrance
			* Recommendations
		- Completed a report of approximately 400 pages, the most extensive of its kind in

U.S. history.

* + - Completed our work on time and within budget.



## 24 Policy Recommendations

* 3 recommendations focused on memorialization and public acknowledgment, including:
	+ Issuing a formal public apology,
	+ Conducting a feasibility study for a disability history museum,
	+ Incorporating disability history into Massachusetts K–12 social studies curriculum.
* 4 recommendations related to burial practices, including:
	+ Improving maintenance of institutional cemeteries,
	+ Identifying and marking unmarked graves,
	+ Repealing Chapter 113 (governing anatomical donations),
	+ Establishing a registry of former patients whose remains were donated to medical schools.
* 17 recommendations aimed at addressing systemic problems with records, including:
	+ Reforms to record management, preservation, and access protocols,
	+ Legal changes to improve transparency and access rights,
	+ Enhancements to facilitate access for former residents, their families, and researchers,
	+ Development of pathways for transferring institutional records to the Massachusetts Archives.



# Discussion on Open Items



## Open Items

* Vote on Publishing the Report
* Awaiting Response from Sec. Walsh to the Special Commission’s letter
* Potential Continuation of the Special Commission
* Publicizing the Special Commission’s report and recommendations
* Oversight and advocacy for the implementation of the Special Commission’s recommendations
* Mapping of DMH Foxboro cemetery and identification with records



## Next Steps

* Vote to Adjourn

