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Candidates weigh in on service workers

By Jim O'Sullivan

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Independent gubernatorial candidate Evan Falchuk took square aim at the two leading candidates in the race at a forum Wednesday, saying the current two-party system stunts progress and rewards insiders.

“We need a new framework; we need a new set of leaders,” Falchuk said to a crowded Faneuil Hall.

In the candidates' first joint appearance since the primary election narrowed the field, Falchuk, who continues to score support in the low single digits in most polls, said the state has failed to fully implement a 2008 state law that regulates reimbursement rates for service providers because political insiders are resistant to change.

All four candidates who took part in the forum hosted by the Providers' Council, a statewide association of health and human services agencies, said they would implement the law, which has prompted providers to sue the Patrick administration for failing to establish new rates.

The law, known as Chapter 257, created a process for the administration to set provider reimbursement rates based on public testimony, say advocates for service providers.

Attorney General Martha Coakley, the Democrat in the race; Republican Charlie Baker, and independents Falchuk and Jeff McCormick pledged that they would fully fund and implement the law.

The event — a forum, not a formal debate — was designed to compel candidates to commit to the service providers' priorities and appeared to accomplish that. All the candidates spoke in favor of higher compensation and increased educational assistance for human service workers. And all agreed that, if elected, they would convene a summit to address domestic violence.

Only Falchuk used the most storied stage in Massachusetts politics to truly sting his rivals, singling out Baker and Coakley as examples of political intractability.

Separately, he contrasted what he called insufficient funding for youth jobs and homelessness with the state's decision to spend \$1.1 billion to expand the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center.

After the event, Falchuk said his performance was consistent with the outsider message he has been trying to highlight. The Newton health care executive is hoping to draw at least 3 percent of the vote in the Nov. 4 election, which would allow his United Independent Party to receive the designation of an official party.

Polls show that Coakley and Baker are locked in a tight race, with Falchuk, McCormick, and conservative pastor Scott Lively trailing.

Wednesday's session, moderated by Karen Holmes Ward of WCVB-TV, came as the candidates are scheduling a host of debates and other issues-based forums.

Coakley sought to frame the discussion in her broader campaign theme of reducing the income gap.

"This really is a question about our values and addressing what we know is income inequality," she said.

Appearing to choke up at one point while discussing her brother's suicide, a topic that has become a cornerstone of her campaign messaging, Coakley also defended her decision to settle with Partners HealthCare and allow it to take over South Shore Hospital and Hallmark Health System.

"It's in the full process of transparency, and it is going to cut costs," she said, adding, "That settlement has a great impact, immediately, on consumers' costs."

Baker reeled off a memorable line in response to a question about curtailing state government's bureaucracy, saying, "There is something in the water, there's something in the DNA, if there's a really complicated, preposterously difficult way to do something that takes forever, we will find it and we will love it."

He added, "I won't appoint anybody to work in my administration unless they come through the door, salute smartly, and say this is one of their fundamental priorities."

McCormick, a Boston venture capitalist, turned in a low-key performance. In response to a question about barriers to employment, he said, "We better start thinking long term. If anyone thinks long term, it should be the state."

Jim O'Sullivan can be reached at Jim.OSullivan@globe.com or on Twitter at [@JOSreports](https://twitter.com/JOSreports).