

Mass. Gov. Candidates Pledge To Improve Pay For Human Services Sector

By Matt Murphy and Gintautas Dumcius September 24, 2014

BOSTON — One by one, four of the candidates for governor on Wednesday praised the work done by the men and women who provide human services throughout Massachusetts, and promised to improve rates of pay and make it easier for them to serve needy residents.

Democrat Martha Coakley, Republican Charlie Baker and independents Evan Falchuk and Jeff McCormick all committed during a forum at Faneuil Hall to fully implementing a state law known as Chapter 257, which was designed to update rates paid to providers across the spectrum of services.



Four of the candidates for governor appeared Wednesday at a forum at Faneuil Hall. (State House News Service)

A coalition of provider organizations this summer sued the Patrick administration for failing to fully implement the rate increases according to the timeline outlined in the law. The administration has committed to having 90 percent of the new rates set before the end of the year.

“I feel like 257 is the train that never gets to the station,” Baker said. “I can promise you as governor it will be funded.”

The four candidates also agreed that they would work to improve education and job opportunities for the disabled and homeless and set aside a portion of future casino revenues for human services, if the gambling law isn't repealed at the ballot box in November. All four also said, if elected, they would convene a summit on domestic violence.

The event – billed as a forum, not a debate – was the first time the major candidates for governor appeared together on the same stage since the field of contenders to succeed Gov. Deval Patrick was whittled down after the primary elections. Moderated by WCVB Director of Public Affairs Karen Holmes Ward, the event gave each candidate an opportunity to speak on the issues of importance to the human service provider community. Conservative pastor Scott Lively, who is campaigning part-time, was not invited to the forum.

Instead of defending Patrick's administration in the lawsuit over Chapter 257, which is her job as attorney general, Falchuk said Coakley should have been the one suing to ensure providers received the rates increases approved by the Legislature in 2008.

“I struggle to understand as a voter why the state doesn't follow its own laws,” Falchuk said, often the aggressor during the discussion.

While largely in agreement on major issues, Coakley, the Democratic nominee, struck an emotional chord in her closing statement as she invoked the struggles her brother Edward endured with mental illness before taking his own life at age 33. Coakley pledged to improve access to mental and behavioral health care, and to fight to reduce the stigma around mental illness.

“We should be treating mental illness as we do diabetes and cancer, and we can,” she said, choking back tears.

Baker, the Republican candidate for governor, took a more pragmatic approach to the questions posed, becoming most animated as he talked about eliminating unnecessary regulation and bureaucracy that he said gets in the way of providing quality services to people who need the state's help.

“I love this state. I love the people of this state. I love the people who work in public service and the public sector. But there is something in the water. There's something in the DNA. If there's a really complicated, preposterously difficult way of doing something and it takes forever, we will find it and we will love it,” Baker said,

drawing laughter from the audience. “And no one, no one, will be more aggressive about dealing with this problem than I will be as governor.”

Baker added, “And I can tell you right now, with a very high degree of confidence that I will climb all over this one all day every day for as long as I’m governor.”

The human services sector employs 145,000 people in Massachusetts, and serves one in 10 residents, according to Ward.

In addition to improving reimbursement rates paid by the state, McCormick, a Boston venture capitalist, said he would seek to deploy new technology to make the delivery of services more efficient, freeing up rooms in budgets for salaries.

Baker, in response to a question of workforce training for the homeless, disabled and other groups, said he recently visited the Pine Street Inn in Boston where residents are not only finding work opportunities in the shelter, but are being connected to other employment opportunities.

Noting that Massachusetts purchased \$5 billion to \$7 billion in goods and service annually, Baker said the state should “buy from provider organizations that are creating job opportunities.” “The Commonwealth can be a real leader to make sure there’s an economic engine to support those folks,” he said.

Asked whether human service workers should be able to access health insurance through the state’s Group Insurance Commission, Falchuk said high health care costs are a problem and pointed to former Republican Gov. William Weld, Baker’s former boss, seeking to deregulate the hospital market. He also criticized Coakley’s decision to settle with Partners HealthCare over a proposed merger and acquisition of Hallmark Health Systems and South Shore Hospital, which many worry will drive up costs.

“People don’t want to talk about it because groups like Partners are politically influential,” he said.

McCormick said he believed social service providers should be able to opt into the GIC, but added, “We need to rethink the model of delivery,” and work with community health centers.

Baker said a purchasing collaborative that could “plug into” the GIC is “absolutely something that’s worth pursuing,” but he also questioned whether it would be allowed under the Affordable Care Act. Baker also said transparency on health care pricing and performance is the way to combat rising health care costs.

“You know more about your refrigerator and your washing machine than you know about your health care,” he said.

“So thank you Charlie for the introduction of what I was going to say,” Coakley said, adding that over the last eight years the attorney general’s office has “shown a light” on high health care costs.

“We do need transparency,” Coakley said. “We did have a dysfunctional, and still to some degree have a dysfunctional market.”

Coakley added that the Partners settlement, which is being weighed by a Superior Court judge, is going to cut costs “and I still stand by that.”

During the lightning round of questions, Baker was the only candidate to say he would seek a ban on payments in lieu of taxes, known as PILOTs, for community-based human service organizations.

Falchuk used a question on expanding a tuition remission program to include access to graduate programs for human service workers as an opportunity to again hit the “political establishment.”

“Is the political establishment very serious about these issues or do they want to say enough to tantalize you and make you think, this time will be different,” he said.