

HEALTH CARE QUESTION PROPONENTS FACE EIGHT-MONTH WAIT FOR KEY VOTE

By Cyndi Roy
STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE
cyndi@statehousenews.com

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, SEPT. 14, 2005...While the gay marriage debate has consumed lawmakers and dominated the headlines, backers of another sweeping plan to make health insurance access a constitutional right learned Wednesday they'll have to wait eight more month before lawmakers vote on their plan.

Senate President Robert Travaglini recessed the Constitutional Convention Wednesday until May 10, 2006. That means the Health Care for Massachusetts Campaign's proposal, which was advanced by the 2003-2004 Legislature, will hang in limbo all fall and winter.

Lawmakers approved the proposed amendment last July 153-41.

The proposal requires the Legislature to enact a law, subject to voter approval, that "will ensure that no Massachusetts resident lacks comprehensive, affordable, and equitably-financed health insurance coverage for all medically necessary, preventative, acute, and chronic health care and mental health care services, prescription drugs, and devices."

Because it is an initiative petition forwarded by a grass roots campaign, the plan needs only 50 votes this legislative session to be put before voters in November 2006.

The amendment's sponsors said they did not expect lawmakers to advance their proposal Wednesday, but were disappointed by the new convention date set by Travaglini. If lawmakers take up and approve the proposed amendment again next May, backers have less than six months to build support for their plan.

"We would have preferred sooner rather than later," said Barbara Roop, co-chair of the campaign. "It does make it more difficult for us."

Travaglini said he chose to recess the convention until May so lawmakers can focus on issues like auto insurance reform and welfare legislation, as well as health care reform and an economic stimulus bill.

"We have a number of major initiatives that are going to take up the bulk of our time that I'm very serious about," Travaglini told reporters after today's convention. "It's going to take some time to get done and those are now my primary focus. And it's only five months, by the way. It's not the end of the world here. Let's not suggest that I put this off into another time zone."

Roop said supporters are working to raise money and public awareness about their proposal, but say it's challenging given that there's no guarantee

the proposal will appear before voters.

“The more time we have, the bigger political mandate we can deliver,” Roop said. “The longer this is before the voters, the more support they’ll be prepared to give legislators.”

Since lawmakers approved the proposal last July, Beacon Hill leaders have begun drafting their own plans for new laws that would help more people get insured. According to a recent US Census Bureau survey, 748,000 Massachusetts residents are without health insurance.

In a letter to circulated to lawmakers before today’s convention, campaign co-chairs Roop and Dr. John D. Goodson had called on them to bring the amendment up for a vote “as soon as possible.”

Roop and Goodson said the momentum for health care reform has been building, and suggested passage of their constitutional amendment would amount to a “popular mandate” for the Legislature to act.

Lawmakers admit they haven’t thought much of the proposal since it was initially approved last summer, but say they’re confident it will pass before the Constitutional Convention adjourns.

Sen. Richard Moore (D-Uxbridge), co-chairman of the Health Care Financing Committee said the proposal has “good PR value,” but said he doesn’t know what will happen to the proposed amendments now that legislative leaders are working on their own plans. A separate group of advocates has also filed a proposed ballot initiative they hope to put before lawmakers next year.

“I really haven’t give it much thought,” said Rep. Frank Hynes (D-Marshfield), a member of committee. “The presumption is, the advocates have been up here talking about it and it would pass this year. It’s parallel to the health reform that’s being done now.”