

Senate Chief: Cut number of state's uninsured in half by 2006

By Steve Leblanc, Associated Press Writer, boston.com | November 17, 2004

BOSTON --The two leaders of the Massachusetts state Legislature and the governor agree that the number of people in the Bay State without health insurance should be reduced, a signal that the issue will be a priority for lawmakers in next year's session.

Senate President Robert E. Travaglini has set a goal of providing health care coverage to at least half of the roughly 500,000 uninsured Massachusetts residents by the end of 2006, promising to make the issue the centerpiece of the legislative session.

"The cost in dollar terms to take care of the uninsured when they need emergency treatment is high and unnecessarily wasteful," Travaglini said Tuesday at a forum of health care insurers and providers sponsored by the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation at the John F. Kennedy Library. "On a human level, it is morally unacceptable for a society with as much wealth as ours to leave so many fellow people without health care coverage."

Travaglini, a Boston Democrat, gave few details of the proposal, but ruled out some ideas he had previously supported, including a government-based single-payer proposal, which he said is "not economically or politically feasible." House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi said he supported the goal of reducing the number of uninsured, but wanted to see more details.

"We have to do everything and anything we can to approach this in new and innovative and creative ways so we can get control of the health care costs and extend our coverage to as many people as possible," he said. "Any new approach would be welcomed by me."

However DiMasi, D-Boston, sees little appetite for new taxes.

Gov. Mitt Romney, a Republican, said his own ideas on health care coverage are consistent with Travaglini's.

"We are all working on the same page, and there is a very good prospect that in this coming year we'll see important improvements in our health care system that will bring down the cost of health insurance for everyone, and increase the number of citizens that are insured."

Just before he became Senate president, Travaglini underwent bypass surgery and battled thyroid cancer.

"Massachusetts has the best health care in the world, and it saved my life -- twice," Travaglini said. "Every child, every working parent, every senior citizen ... should have the same chances I had."

He said the state can't achieve universal coverage simply by increasing government spending, but instead, the Senate will look to "foster innovation in the market place to introduce more affordable health insurance options and products for consumers."

The plan also will look to reduce premiums and ease reliance on the state's free care pool for the uninsured.

A proposed amendment to the state constitution that would require the state to make sure every Massachusetts resident can get affordable coverage for medically necessary health and mental health care services is helping drive the issue.

The proposal won an initial vote early this year and could head to voters as early as 2006 if it survives a second round of voting in the new Legislature.

Barbara Roop of the Health Care for Massachusetts Campaign, which sponsored the amendment, hailed Travaglini's comments.

"You are seeing the best and the brightest coming forward to work on this," she said. "The message is that there are solutions to this problem."

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts released a report Tuesday that found that rising health care costs, cutbacks in public programs and employer-sponsored coverage are contributing to the problem of the uninsured in Massachusetts. Since 2000, the number of uninsured has climbed by 25 percent, the study found.

The study also found that hospitals, community health centers and doctors provided about \$1.1 billion in medical care to uninsured patients in Massachusetts in the fiscal year that ended June 30.