

POLL: RESIDENTS BACK CIGARETTE TAX HIKE TO EXPAND HEALTH CARE ACCESS

By Amy Lambiaso
STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE
amy.lambiaso@statehousenews.com

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, APRIL 20, 2005....To pay for expanded health insurance access, a majority of Massachusetts residents support raising the cigarette tax, but oppose raising income or sales taxes, according to newly released poll results.

The poll, conducted for the Affordable Care Today Campaign, also shows a growing number of residents are more concerned with the state's health care system than they are about education, the number of available jobs in the state, taxes, or traffic issues. In November 2003, the same question yielded different results, with concern over health care falling below jobs and education in the public's opinion.

According to the poll of 600 residents, 70 percent of respondents favor increasing the state's \$1.51 tax on cigarettes by 50 cents to provide a revenue source for increasing access to health insurance. Sixty-five percent would favor a new tax on employers that do not provide health insurance and whose employees turn to the state-administered program that pays health care providers who care for the uninsured. But 61 percent of those polled are opposed to increasing the sales tax by one cent to pay for health care expansion, and 57 percent similarly said they were against raising the income tax rate to 5.5 percent. John McDonough, executive director of Health Care For All, the advocacy group leading the campaign, said the poll's results signal that there's a "strong desire statewide to see something done" about health care access and costs.

"The public in general is more open to a variety of ways of addressing (health care) than public officials might realize or recognize," McDonough said.

The poll was conducted by Thomas Kiley, president of the Boston-based Kiley & Company that headed polls for US Sen. John Kerry's presidential campaign, and was commissioned by the campaign – a coalition of 32 health care advocate groups, labor unions, consumers, doctors and hospitals. The poll surveyed 600 residents between March 15 and 17 and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.9 percent.

"Compared to what we've seen in the past, it seems clear that the public is becoming more receptive to making major changes in the health care system," said Kiley. "Voters are prepared to support a proposal that combines a significant increase in access with real efforts to hold down increasing costs."

Roughly 90 percent of respondents had health insurance, a ratio similar to the state's population that is currently insured. Experts estimate between 450,000 and 650,000 residents are without health insurance. According to the poll, 46 percent said they are "most concerned" about the lack of health insurance in the state, while 40 percent were most concerned about the cost of health care, and 9 percent indicated the quality of health care was most concerning.

When respondents were asked which result of health care expansion they were concerned "a great deal about," 40 percent said they were mostly concerned by imposing new costs on businesses, eventually leading to layoffs; 38 percent said that such a plan may cost too much and lead to a tax increase; 37 percent said it may lead to a "large new bureaucracy," and 30 percent said they were concerned it would place too much of a burden on small businesses.

The figures come as Beacon Hill leaders consider several proposals to reform the health care system. Last month, Gov. Mitt Romney and Senate President Robert Travaglini filed separate bills that would reduce the number of residents without health insurance without raising taxes or imposing an employer mandate. House leaders have yet to propose an expansion plan.

Romney says his plan would be paid for by shifting current health care costs, while Travaglini has targeted \$168 million of state reserves to pay for any expansion, with \$60 million in federal money. Both plans depend on continued federal Medicaid funding, which is the target of reform efforts in Washington.

Health Care For All is pushing a separate bill that would expand health care services and access to affordable care. Under the plan, new revenue to pay for the changes would come from an increase in the cigarette tax and a requirement for employers to provide health insurance or pay into a state fund.

When given a broad description of the campaign's plan – a proposal to expand health care coverage, reduce increasing costs, improve the quality of care, but require new state tax revenue – 51 percent of respondents said that would favor the proposal, with 14 percent in opposition and 35 percent “not sure.”

The poll did not specifically address whether respondents would favor imposing a flat fee on employers who do not offer health insurance. Business groups oppose an employer mandate and have vowed to fight any plan that would include such a provision. Lawmakers, in turn, have also shied away from supporting such plans, recalling the failure of a “pay or play” law in the early 1990s under Gov. Michael Dukakis.

McDonough, who served in the House when that law passed, said not much has changed to make lawmakers more inclined to support a mandate. Dukakis' plan did have the support of business groups. “Every survey in the 80s and 90s showed that a significant and comfortable majority of the public agreed that employers need to contribute a fair share to the health care system,” he said. “That was true then and that is true now.”

Sen. Richard Moore (D-Uxbridge) is co-sponsoring Travaglini's plan, as well as the campaign's legislation with Rep. Deborah Blumer (D-Framingham). The Health Care Financing Committee, which Moore co-chairs, intends to hold public hearings on the bills after the House and Senate complete their fiscal 2006 budget debates, according to House committee chairwoman Patricia Walrath (D-Stow).

The Legislature has also advanced a constitutional amendment that would require lawmakers to draft a plan to deliver health care coverage to all state residents and present that plan to the voters for their approval. The earliest that question could appear on the ballot is 2006.