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BAKER WAITING FOR QUESTION 1 ANALYSIS, GONZALEZ SUPPORTS NURSE STAFF PLAN

By Chris Triunfo

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

BOSTON, SEPT. 26, 2018....Gov. Charlie Baker on Wednesday declined to take a stance on Question 1, which asks voters to decide if hospitals need to comply with nurse staffing requirements.

"I'm waiting to see the report that comes out from the Health Policy Commission," Baker said at an unrelated press conference, referring to an analysis the that the commission just announced will be presented next week. "I was glad to see them make that part of their agenda."

On Monday, the state Health Policy Commission (HPC) announced it plans to present findings on cost impacts of mandated staffing ratios on hospitals and non-hospital settings that employ registered nurses.

Working with a consultant, the commission began its exploration of Question 1 in mid-August and plans to present the analysis during a subcommittee meeting on Oct. 3. The full commission plans to discuss the analysis results during hearings on health care cost trends Oct 16-17 at Suffolk University Law School.

In June, the News Service inquired about the potential for an analysis. An agency spokesperson said then that the commission had not conducted a review and would have no further comment, but planned to offer an update if anything changed.

Question 1 supporters on Wednesday blasted the commission's pursuit of the analysis, describing it as the result of secretive deliberations and questionable since the commission would implement nurse staffing regulations, if the proposal passes. A spokesman for the campaign opposed to Question 1 called a public records request by backers of the question a "desperate attempt by the [nurses] union to disparage a quasi-public agency that was established specifically to look at questions of health care costs, because they know the more voters learn about the costs of Question 1, the more likely they are to vote no."

U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren on Tuesday declared her support for the ballot question.

"Nurses work hard to take care of all of us when it matters the most, and we should do the same for them by establishing standards to ensure they have the help they need to do their job safely," Warren said in a statement released Tuesday by the Yes on 1 campaign committee.

Baker's opponent, Jay Gonzalez, supports Question 1. According to his campaign manager, Kevin Ready, Gonzalez addressed the initiative last year as it was in its early stages.

"We need to ensure that there isn't cost cutting going on that is compromising the health and safety of patients. I do think this is a worthwhile issue," Gonzalez said at a campaign event last year in Pittsfield.

Kate Norton, a spokesperson for the Yes on 1 campaign, said the campaign is aware of Gonzalez's statements.

"Jay Gonzalez has been publicly supportive of the ballot initiative," Norton said. "But we have not asked either gubernatorial candidate for a formal endorsement."

Congressmen James McGovern, Joe Kennedy, Michael Capuano and Stephen Lynch support Question 1, as well as Democratic Congressional candidates Ayanna Pressley and Lori Trahan. In the state legislature, there is only one Republican, state Rep. Timothy Whelan, listed as a supporter by Question 1.

The Massachusetts Nurses Association, the labor union behind a majority of the funding for the Yes on 1 campaign, sent out a letter late Tuesday questioning the independence of the HPC's study.

"The largest and most alarming concern is the complete lack of transparency in this process and the blatant effort to keep it hidden from proponents of Question 1 and other independent data researchers and sources," ballot campaign director Eileen Norton said in a letter to the commission.

Union officials also submitted a public records request to learn more about the commission's conversations with hospital executives and how the analysis was developed.

Hospital executives have requested an analysis from the HPC, and have also said the ballot measure would cost \$1.3 billion in the first year and more than \$900 million a year after that.

Baker cited the data being released by both campaigns as a reason for his lack of endorsement.

"I think there's a tremendous amount of information out there right now on Question 1," Baker said. "It's very hard to separate real data from advocacy, and I think the questions that the HPC is going to address in their report are going to be real important to how people think about that question."

In a WBUR-MassINC Polling Group survey this week, public opinion on the ballot initiative was evenly divided.

HPC spokesman Matt Kitsos defended the commission's pursuit of an analysis of Question 1.

"The analysis, conducted with expert consultation, is fully consistent with the HPC's statutory purpose and mission and is not intended to promote or oppose the pending ballot question but rather to add data-driven analysis to the policy discussion on this issue," he said in a statement. "Consistent with the HPC's transparent process, we plan to present and discuss the analysis at a public meeting (October 3) in advance of the hearing and welcome comment and feedback. At the hearing, the five person panel will feature participants with diverse perspectives on the impact of mandated nurse staffing ratios. The panel will discuss the analysis as well as evidence and experience of implementing hospital nurse staffing ratios in California, and the potential impact on health care cost, quality, and access in Massachusetts."

[Michael P. Norton contributed reporting]

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