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CAREGIVER GROUPS OUTLINE OPPOSITION TO QUESTION 1

By Chris Triunfo

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

BOSTON, OCT. 30, 2018.....Community health center officials on Tuesday called for voters to reject Question 1, attaching higher costs and patient wait times to a proposal that the state's largest nurses union claims will improve health care.

Officials gathered at the South Boston Community Health Center to offer their thoughts on nurse staffing requirements and how they would affect community-based organizations.

Former Department of Public Health Commissioner Cheryl Bartlett, who currently serves as the CEO of the Greater New Bedford Community Health Center, said wait times will become longer and services will be lost if health care facilities are forced to comply with nurse-to-patient ratios.

"Many of our patients struggle with chronic diseases, including diabetes, heart disease, substance abuse and depression," Bartlett said. "The threat of service cuts and increased wait times that will come as a result of mandated staff ratios at hospitals will disproportionately impact our patients who will have limited or potentially no access to essential hospital-based services."

Nurses who support Question 1 say hospitals can afford to redeploy resources to hire more nurses and address what many nurses claim are gaps in direct care.

Over the weekend, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders announced his support for Question 1, saying it "would set a safe maximum on the number of patients nurses can treat, so that patients can receive the quality care they deserve. Nurses are behind this initiative, and I trust them when it comes to knowing what is best for their patients."

Meanwhile, the campaign against the question is continuing to assert that prices will go up as care providers hire more nurses, while care access will be threatened at facilities that struggle to meet requirements. Patients will face longer wait times if the proposal passes, opponents argue.

Michelle Costa, the senior vice president at Genesis Healthcare, spoke at the press conference on behalf of the Massachusetts Senior Care Association, which according to Costa represents over 150,000 patients and employees in the Commonwealth.

"Question 1 will have drastic and unintended consequences on our seniors and nursing homes," Costa said. "Senior citizens are relying on care outside hospitals, and this is the very care that is most threatened by this law."

A majority of the speakers previously served as nurses, a fact they highlighted in their remarks.

"I have been a nurse for 25 years," said Karen Bain, vice president of resident care at Benchmark Assisted Living. "I know from my experience that the nurse shortage has become more and more severe, and we need to make the right decision."

The issue of nurse shortages is among the most contentious between the two sides. During a Question 1 debate on WBUR last week, Nancy Gaden, the chief nursing officer of Boston Medical Center and Donna Kelly-Williams, the president of the Massachusetts Nurses Association, presented opposite responses.

Kelly-Williams, who is in favor of the question, claimed that there is no shortage, while Gaden said there was.

"We can't even decide on the number of nurses in the state," host Deborah Becker said. "It makes it hard for people to discern what to vote for."

Both campaigns have deployed personal anecdotes in ads and press conferences as they appeal to voters.

Tuesday's event ended with a word from Lisa Burgess, a home care advocate and mother of a home care patient. Michael Curry, senior vice president of government affairs at the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers, introduced her as "the most important speaker we have here today."

"My son is diagnosed with a total of 23 complex medical conditions," Burgess said. "We have some of the best hospitals in the world, and by the time my son was 16, he had been to the hospital over 400 times. Now, he receives home care. Question 1, if passed, stands to literally decimate home care. From continuous skilled nursing to hospice care, community hospitals would be more aggressively competing for registered nurses to meet the new guidelines because they would be facing exorbitant fines."

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