

Baker's Dozen A Common Sense Healthcare Agenda for the Next Governor

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Healthcare must remain a top policy priority for the next administration. It consumes nearly half of the state budget, has been a "pac-man" eating up resources for every other public policy priority, and has been an important driver of legislative discussions around tax increase proposals. The current path is unsustainable.

Yet the problems are not limited to the public sector. They run deep in the private sector, with Massachusetts employers continuing to pay the nation's highest insurance premiums. The Bay State's future economic viability relies on thoughtful public policy that encourages innovation and removes needless regulations that have driven up costs, limited patient choice and/or stunted competition. After years of pursuing agreement to improve transparency around clinical outcomes and financial management, greater transparency is still sorely lacking in each of these areas.

The following — organized by theme, not in order of significance or impact — is a list of 13 policy actions that need urgent care from the start of a new Baker administration:

Transforming Through Transparency

1. Release the Data

The state has pressed both insurers and providers to be more transparent about cost, clinical and financial information. The time has come for the state to lead by example. The state should move to immediately release all de-identified data from the All-Payer Claims Database (APCD) to the public. Government can serve as a convening platform to help non-profits and private companies sort out the complex pricing system that exists in the state and help patients navigate it. Such an action would reinforce the Commonwealth's leadership in claims-based population research and give health researchers and economists the opportunity to mine the data for inefficiencies and improve the quality of care (see more on this topic in Proposal 5).

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Solutions

2. Post Prices that Mean Something

Two Harvard Business School professors have advocated for a radical idea: healthcare pricing should reflect how much it costs to provide a service or treatment.¹ Health plans use the fee schedule generated by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) for Medicare and make adjustments for their market or population. Providers should be encouraged to measure the cost of providing common services and rewarded for using this information to create a new payment methodology that will bring the practice of medicine in line with other industries.

Governor-elect Baker should work with providers to move toward the disclosure and public posting on their respective websites of "real" pricing for the 100 most common procedures. Doing so will empower doctors to make referrals based on both quality and price.

3. Grant All Patients the "Right to Shop" and Reward Smart Shoppers

The state should take full advantage of and greatly expand the transparency initiatives in Chapter 224 of the Acts of 2012. For example, the state could offer patients shared savings if they find a better deal for care at the same or a higher level of quality. Implementing "right to shop" would require out-of-network providers to prepare cost estimates for care and allow thirdparties to share a small piece of the savings with the patient if he or she finds a better deal. Quality of care and patient safety will be maintained by accreditation or evaluation by an independent third party such as the Joint Commission, or federally reported quality metrics. This change will benefit all patients, regardless of whether they shop, as a recent Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) study found.²

4. To Increase Fairness and Awareness About How Their Health Dollars Are Being Spent,

Give Small Business Access to Health Claim Information

Through restrictive contracting, smaller companies, unlike their larger counterparts, are often prohibited from accessing health claims from their insurer. Governor-elect Baker should work with the legislature to level the playing field by allowing companies of all sizes access to their own claims information so they can serve employees more effectively and understand and control health care costs.

To increase transparency, small businesses should also receive, as part of their annual renewal contract, a breakdown of broker services costs. Insurance brokers can be an invaluable resource for companies and individuals as they try to pick the best health plan. However a lack of clarity about how brokers are paid can lead to questions about the quality of their advice because certain compensation structures can create conflicting incentives.

5. Engage the Local Tech Community in Creating Mini X-Prizes in Health Care Administration

Releasing de-identified health care data collected by the state provides a great opportunity to increase the capacity to identify trends and opportunities for system and clinical improvement. Following the model of the X-prize contest, the state should offer a financial prize for companies that develop innovative models that save state government money and improve the quality of care.

Such prizes are proven ways to leverage ingenuity and resources. The return for the public and private sectors could be dramatic. The state has had great success with MassChallenge, a startup competition and accelerator program, it is time to unlock that same spirit in healthcare by opening the vault door that holds healthcare payment data.

Reforming Public Health Programs

6. Protect Resources for the Needy by Reforming MassHealth (Medicaid)

Few realize that the MassHealth program has grown to serve over 25 percent of the state population and accounts for 40 percent of the state budget. The growth of the program is crowding out spending on education, local aid, and transportation. It is arguable that recent tax increases have more to do with healthcare spending and Medicaid than the public reasons used to justify the hikes.

MassHealth is on an unsustainable path, and the ACA Medicaid expansion brings with it major unintended consequences. The enhanced match rate for the expansion population will be discriminatory to those previously on the program, as state budget writers realize they would lose many more federal dollars by cutting from the expansion population than by cutting the needier individuals on "old Medicaid" who come with fewer federal dollars.

Major and immediate reform is needed. Governor-elect Baker should open the program to managed Medicaid solutions under which hospitals and providers take full-risk for patient care. The state should move in the next three years to have all appropriate patients in similar care arrangements.

Following the model of bipartisan reforms in Florida, beneficiaries should be given a choice of plans with the help of independent choice coaches and be rewarded for healthy behaviors.³

Greater competition in Medicaid can lead to better care, more services, greater accountability and taxpayer savings. In other words, Medicaid reform can be both pro-patient and pro-taxpayer.

Governor-elect Baker should also work to reform the Health Safety Net that is set to spend over \$600 million a year for uncompensated care for medical institutions even as the rate of insurance coverage in Massachusetts is reportedly at 98 percent.

The new Governor should also put a halt to the \$100+ million IT project scheduled for MassHealth until he has a chance to review how that upgrade fits into a comprehensive overhaul of IT systems across agencies.

Protect Needy By Verifying, Monitoring, and Prosecuting Fraud on Medicaids

As the Massachusetts State Auditor has written, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) has placed the "U.S. Medicaid program on its list of government programs that are at "high risk" of fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement."⁴

Following the failure of the first Connector website, close to 350,000 residents have been placed on a temporary Medicaid program without *any* eligibility check. To make matters worse, the eligibility determination problems pre-date the Connector failure. The state should take the following three steps to reduce fraud and protect resources for the needy.

First, perform better screening upfront by using a third-party vendor to independently verify that people are who they say they are when applying for MassHealth. Vendors can then utilize enhanced data-matching technology using federal, state and commercial databases to verify and crosscheck income, residency, identity, employment, citizenship status and other criteria for all Medicaid enrollees and applicants. Roughly two dozen databases can be checked.

There is a strong precedent for immediate action. In Illinois, the Democratic legislature passed a bipartisan initiative that has resulted in almost 10 percent of the Medicaid population being found ineligible. It was discovered during the process that the state of Illinois was spending over \$12 million a year on individuals who were already deceased.

Second, the state needs to regularly verify income and eligibility after individuals are on the program. The safety net is meant for those who really need it, and it is meant to be a transitional program, not one that traps residents in poverty because of eligibility benefits and income limits. Whenever vendors receive updated data, enrollee files should be reviewed electronically. In Pennsylvania, similar enhanced checks found that more than 160,000 ineligible individuals were receiving Medicaid benefits, including people who were in prison and even millionaire lottery winners. This led to nearly \$300 million in savings in the first 10 months alone.

Finally, as Massachusetts has moved toward managed care and alternative payment contracts, it is important to recover improper payments. The GAO estimates that managed care overpayment runs upwards of \$14.4 billion year.⁵ The Governor should work to incorporate anti-fraud efforts into the Annual Cost Trends Hearing. For enrollee fraud, the state should consider garnishing wages and state tax refunds until the fraudulently obtained aid has been recovered, similar to how the ACA sets up the exchange subsidies clawback provisions.

Massachusetts was first in offering sliding scale subsidies for low and middle-income citizens on the Connector, so it is important to place individuals in the right program to prevent state taxpayers from having to pay for ineligible individuals on Medicaid. In addition, it is unfair for individuals to claim benefits for which they do not qualify, as this waste has led to access issues around the Commonwealth and benefit cuts.

7. Get the Connector Back on Track by Promoting Transparency and Overhauling the Board⁶

Governor-elect Baker should take six concrete steps. First, support a full audit of the Connector. *The Boston Globe* and current state auditor concur in calling for such an audit; the Governor now must make sure it is comprehensive and public.

Second, the Governor should commit to total transparency on all aspects of Connector finances and operations past, present, and future. Everything — Board votes, meeting minutes, budgets, consulting contracts, staff salaries, etc. — should be available for public review in one user-friendly place online.

Third, the new administration should evaluate the return on Connector-related investments every year. It is important to continuously examine the effectiveness of programs and agencies, and the Connector should not be an exception. Where the Connector may prove unable to add value to the marketplace, the state should consider reforms and programmatic changes.

Fourth, the Connector staff and its Board should, on an ongoing basis, enlist the help of civic-minded tech talent, seeking collaborations and advice about ways to keep the site and its supporting systems running optimally. In some ways, they might follow the Obama administration's example during the so-called "tech surge" and establish an ongoing mechanism for feedback.

Fifth, the state must lead by example. The Governor-elect Baker should empower members of his team and legislators to obtain their health insurance through the Connector. Nothing will send a clearer signal to taxpayers that the Connector is reliable than seeing state leaders themselves using the revamped site. Once the site is fully functional, it might even make sense to have the Connector serve as a new platform for open enrollment for state and municipal workers in the Group Insurance Commission (GIC). Such moves would demonstrate to all that there is no question that the enrollment process is working and the entire apparatus of state government has a direct stake in making sure it continues to function at a high level.

Finally, the current administration failed to fully integrate the MassHealth and Connector eligibility systems. Governor-elect Baker should evaluate this as an option. The move could reduce duplication and allow for a streamlining of eligibility systems over the next couple of years.

8. State and Municipal Health Reform: Offer Employees Plan Choice and Reward Smart Shopping

The GIC should set up new health accounts which act like flexible health savings accounts (HSAs). All eligible workers would receive a deposit at the beginning of the year for health expenses. That money would be used to purchase one of the plans offered for comprehensive coverage. If the employee decided to purchase a lower-premium plan, they would have extra money left in their account to choose good value health care services and packages directly from local providers (like direct primary care or acupuncture), or use the money to pay for out-of-pocket expenses at any medical provider throughout the year.

Funds that are left over at the end of the year in an employee's account would be rolled over to the next year. This process allows the employee for the first time to feel a sense of ownership over the dollars they spend on healthcare, and they directly reap the benefit of being a wise patient and living a healthier lifestyle. The incentives are properly aligned for state employees to be empowered and engaged as patients.

The state of Indiana has been a leader in moving toward similar accounts, and 91 percent of employees now participate, with outside independent analysis documenting doubledigit reductions in the state's costs compared to traditional health coverage. Employee premiums were much lower and account holders had accumulated \$54 million in savings.

The state should also add consumer tools to facilitate value-seeking behavior. For example, a New Hampshire-based company called Compass has found success helping government workers save money. Compass pays employees for picking high-quality low-cost providers. The GIC should add a similar tool to help state and municipal employees be more engaged in their care. Shared savings benefit the employee and the Commonwealth.

<u>Creating a More Patient-Oriented</u> <u>Medical System</u>

9. Increase the Supply of Care Settings for Patients By Reforming or Phasing Out Antiquated Determination-of-Need Laws

Determination of need (DON) laws are the healthcare equivalent of the rules and regulations that require all students to fit into the same one-size-fits-all public schooling model developed in the 19th century. Public educational systems are moving toward reform that embraces more flexibility in the form of public charter schools, district school autonomy and even online learning. Similar approaches are needed in healthcare.

Most states have incrementally moved away from DON regulations. Massachusetts is an outlier in that it recently strengthen its DON statutes.⁷ DON statutes and regulations artificially restrict the variety and number of care settings and equipment that can be utilized to treat patients. As the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has noted, such laws and regulations create barriers to new health care competitors entering the market.⁸ DON is a shortsighted approach that has been demonstrated to increase prices and diminish patient health.

Vivian Ho of Rice University, a nationally recognized expert on DON, has concluded that removing DON regulations can actually reduce mortality rates for certain procedures like coronary artery bypass grafting for heart surgery.⁹ Professor Ho has also found that DON regulations appear to raise the number of procedures and average costs for specific services like cardiac and cancer care.¹⁰ She along with others have noted that states without DON regulations have experienced lower patient care costs.¹¹ For example, after dropping DON regulations for open-heart surgery, bypass surgery patient costs fell 4 percent in those states.¹²

Currently, 12 of Massachusetts' 14 counties are designated as "Health Professional Shortage Areas" for primary care by the federal government.¹³ State government needs to focus on "cutting the red tape," thereby allowing more practitioners to operate in a more flexible system, rather than continuing to restrict their practices.

10. Grant Patients Greater Choice of What Medical Professionals To See For Care By Reforming Scope of Practice Laws

The new administration should recognize the proper role of "scope of practice" restrictions on medical professionals: Medical professional should not be allowed to perform procedures they are not trained to perform. Restrictions that go beyond that are protectionist, limit patient choice, and keep costs high. Any serious effort to contain the rise in healthcare costs requires that patients have more care options and therefore a medical licensing system that is driven by facts not special interest lobbying. Providers at all level of training should be allowed to practice at the 'top of their license' and conduct any test, procedure, or make any diagnosis that is within their training.

The legislature has been moving to allow medical professionals like nurse practitioners to practice closer to the top of their license. Yet instead of engaging in the years-long, politically charged process driven by lobbyists, the legislature should flip the regulatory paradigm on its head. That is, they should set up a regulatory sunset review panel every two years to review the most recent medical literature, and restrict only those areas of practice where there is a compelling and conclusive reason to restrict medical professionals from performing services and treatments.

Loosening these restrictive regulations is critical to creating a more consumer-oriented healthcare system, and one that will slow the rise in costs.

Competition among providers will allow for a child to get a camp physical from a nurse practitioner at the mall (currently prohibited by law) for a fraction of the price of seeing a MD for the same check-up at the local hospital. It will also help to reduce the long wait times in Massachusetts.

The impacts on doctors and practitioners is also clear. Certainly doctors will have more time to spend with more complicated patients. Recent research has also shown that states that have liberalized scope of practice regulations now have *more* primary care doctors per capita. Moreover, the research demonstrates that there is little to no impact on the earnings of doctors.¹⁴ A reasoned approach to scope of practice is a win for patients, doctors, and taxpayers.

11. Remove Artificial Insurance Regulations, Start with Reforming the Massachusetts Medical Loss Ratio (MLR) Rules

The Commonwealth mandates that 90 percent of all premium dollars collected be spent on direct medical care and some specific activities to increase the overall quality of care. While it might sound like a good idea at face value, the regulation has numerous unintended consequences.

First, current regulations do not incentivize the sale of consumer-oriented tools like health insurance plans paired with HSAs, a proven tool to help lower healthcare costs. Dollars spent out of an HSA by a patient on medical care do not count as "medical spending" by the insurer for the MLR calculation, and since many HSA plans are paired with lower-premium insurance plans, the insurers have little incentive to sell them, as they end up with even less money for administration.

Second, the MLR regulation limits the incentive for plans to invest in robust transparency initiatives that are needed to keep costs down. They have taken important steps in this direction under Chapter 224 of the Acts of 2012, but much more is needed.

The ACA sets a goal of 80 percent for direct medical care under MLR. Nonetheless, it is far from clear that the MLR rules provide anything but instability at local health plans. Local health plans have had multiple rounds of lay-offs to get their costs in line with the state rule. Yet the Commonwealth's own report states, "Overall Massachusetts payer performance on selected quality measures continued to meet or exceed national performance."¹⁵

The key word is continue. Massachusetts had the highest quality scores long before the MLR rules came into effect. The National Committee on Quality Assurance rates American health plans on quality of care. This year, Tufts, Blue Cross-Blue Shield of Massachusetts and Harvard Pilgrim Health Care offerings occupy seven of the top 11 spots. Again, it has been like this since NCQA stated the process over a decade ago. The new MLR rules do not affect quality of care; they just make it harder for plans to function and limit the selling of innovative products.

Lowering Insurance Costs

12. Review All Health Insurance Mandates By Conducting a Comprehensive Independent Review

Massachusetts is a leader in mandating forms of health insurance coverage that are driving up premiums to small businesses and individuals. As a result, small businesses in the Bay State pay some of the world's highest premiums.

The Center for Health Information and Analysis (CHIA) is required to review many proposed mandates and provide information about costs. A recent analysis shows that the aggregate is over \$100 million for the Commonwealth.¹⁶

The impact falls disproportionately on those least able to handle extra costs: small employers and individuals purchasing coverage on their own or through the Connector. Larger employers can afford to become self-insured, which exempts them from most state mandates. Since 2006, the number of self-insured employers has grown considerably and the 14+ new mandates passed since 2006 may help explain some of that trend.¹⁷

Ironically, each new mandate leads to more selfinsured employers, which leads to fewer people covered by each new mandate. Governor-elect Baker needs to pull together a commission with medical and policy experts, actuaries, and patient advocates to review existing mandates and recommend which can be discontinued. Many mandates are outdated (all insurers cover mammography now), medically questionable (mandated coverage for bone marrow transplant for breast cancer), cosmetic (hair prostheses for chemo patients) or politically motivated. The Governor should have these reviewed and offer legislation to sunset those the Commission recommends.

13. Repeal Health Insurance Premium Caps Before They Become a Public Health Problem

From 2013-17, Massachusetts health care premiums are linked to overall state economic growth. After 2017, the target gets tighter: 0.5 percent below state growth. This connection is misplaced, as there is little connection between health care growth and state economic growth.¹⁸

So far, this has not been a big issue for consumers, health plans and providers. They are basically locked into the status quo with each other. The highly leveraged providers who drive Massachusetts health care costs are still the highest paid providers. Their costs are now simply going up more slowly. There is still a lot of waste in the system that can be addressed to hit the cost targets and, in general, a move to a system where providers take risks and thus factor the cost of care into clinical decisions is more likely to reduce this waste.

But after 2017 the ability of plans to push providers to take on more financial risks to hit the more aggressive targets will be diminished, as they will already have been doing that for five years. After that, there are two other things a health plan can do to hit the premium targets:

- restrict covering certain providers, and
- restrict covering new technologies.

Prices for new drug therapies, called specialty drugs, are rising by 18 to 25 percent per year. The same is true for new surgical procedures and better technology being used in MRIs and other forms of imaging. The new drug for hepatitis C costs \$100,000 per patient. It is not hard to foresee a future where a health plan in Massachusetts faces a troubling choice: hit a premium target or cover new disease cures. The caps should be repealed and the Governor should work instead to engage patients by rewarding them for making value-seeking care decisions for high-quality, and lower-cost care. **Josh Archambault** is a Senior Fellow at Pioneer Institute. Prior to joining Pioneer, Josh was selected as a Health Policy Fellow at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. In the past, Josh served as a Legislative Director in the Massachusetts State Senate and as Senior Legislative Aide in the Governor's Office of Legislative Affairs. His work has appeared or been cited in outlets such as USA Today, Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Fox News, NPR, Boston Herald and The Boston Globe. He is the editor and coauthor of *The Great Experiment: The States, The Feds, and Your Healthcare*.

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Dr. Minkoff is a frequent contributor to NPR and National Review.

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