

Group wants care on ballot

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Bay Staters would be assured access to health care and be guaranteed certain rights as patients under a proposal health care activists want to put on the November 2000 ballot.

Doctors, nurses and other members of the Committee to Defend and Improve Healthcare took aim at core issues in the crisis afflicting health care in their ballot initiative, filed yesterday with state offi-

cial. The measure would:

- Mandate universal health care access for all Massachusetts residents by July 1, 2002.

- Freeze further conversions of non-profit hospitals, HMOs and insurers to for-profit organizations.

- Implement a patients bill of rights by January 1, 2001.

"We're the only industrial nation in the world that doesn't have health care for all," said John O'Connor, co-chairman of the group. "All polls show the urgent

need to cover the uninsured," he said, adding that there are nearly 1 million uninsured residents in Massachusetts.

According to a study by Prof. Alan Sager at Boston University's School of Public Health, health care costs \$5,800 per person in the Bay State.

According to O'Connor, Massachusetts' residents spend more on health care than anyone in the nation.

Without arguing that there are

issues that need to be resolved, medical organizations said yesterday that the ballot measure may not offer the best medicine, from a financial standpoint.

The Massachusetts Association of Health Maintenance Organizations is not opposed to mandated universal access to healthcare coverage, but MAHMO President Robert Hughes posed a key question: "Where's the money?"

"Everyone is concerned," Hughes said. But when it comes to the for-profit conversions of nonprofits, Hughes says that is a "red herring" in his view.

The Massachusetts Medical Society, which represents doctors and is working together with MAHMO on patients' rights issues, said it is taking a close look at the activists' objectives and will continue to study better ways to deliver health care. But it continues to support a multi-payer health care system.

"Overall we support many but not all of the (activists') goals," said Frank Fortin, the group's spokesman.

"They address important issues, but we'd have to see if they would work."

Sager, however, says he thinks the three elements are affordable.

He pointed to a BU study that found it's possible to cover everyone in the Bay

State who is uninsured and provide insured residents much better benefits, while reducing total spending by \$1 billion.

"With HMO costs and premiums on the rise HMOs should not ask how they'd pay for universal health care but should ask why they've spent so much without covering every patient."

Proposal backer O'Connor, who ran unsuccessfully for the 8th Congressional District seat, also tried unsuccessfully to repeal the state's utility deregulation law, using a ballot initiative. O'Connor runs Greenworks Inc., an environmental management business in Cambridge.

O'Connor said the new measure would be his priority for the next 18 months and said he'd work with his team to push for passage of the initiative.

To put the measure on the ballot, O'Connor and other activists must first obtain 100,000 signatures on petitions.