

Martha Coakley Candidate Questionnaire Responses 2014

1. What will be your top public health priorities if elected governor?

Ensuring equitable access to health care, and to the kind of housing, transportation, and environmental conditions that lead to better health, will be one of my top priorities as Governor. As part of this effort, I believe we need to ensure that every worker in Massachusetts has access to earned sick time; that safe, healthy housing, along with access to fresh food and open space is a right for every resident; finally, that we reduce stigma and increase support for community-based services, to help support individuals and families struggling with mental health and substance abuse issues.

2. We know that our health is closely related to our zip code – people living in low income communities and communities of color live shorter lives and have a higher burden of illness. What are three specific actions you would take to change this?

To effectively reduce the burden of illness, and increase life expectancy, in low income communities and communities of color across the state we need to address the damaging environmental conditions that lead to poor health, expand access to fresh food and open space, and make quality, community-based health care affordable.

To accomplish these goals, I will make it a priority to ensure that Massachusetts' stock of public and affordable housing is clean and safe, so we can ensure that health problems aren't created or exacerbated by a family's living conditions. I will continue my leadership on brownfields reclamation, so that these previously blighted areas can be transformed into community gardens and playgrounds, and I will promote farm-to-table and farm-to-school programs that provide regular access to fresh, healthy food. Finally, I will increase support for community health centers that provide care for underserved communities, and increase funding for culturally competent, community-based behavioral health services in underserved communities.

3. We know the best way to control healthcare costs is through focusing on prevention-oriented solutions before we ever get sick; however, Department of Public Health programs whose purposes are to prevent chronic diseases have been affected most by budget cuts during the recent recession. As governor, would you support increased state funding for chronic disease prevention programs?

Yes, I support increased funding for proven prevention programs.

4. We know that actions by state agencies related to housing, development, and transportation impact our health. How would you support and encourage these “non-health” agencies to consider the health impacts of their policies and practices?

As Attorney General, I have experience building a team that is able to work collaboratively to reach our shared goals. As Governor, I will be committed to continuing this work, in order to break down silos and utilize all the resources available to state government. In addition, I believe our budget should be a reflection of our values and I will prioritize investments, across agencies, that leverage the greatest positive impact on public health.

5. This year hundreds of people in Massachusetts died as a result of opiate overdoses. As governor, what would you do to prevent substance abuse and overdose?

Throughout my career in public service, I have seen the consequences when we fail to address the root causes of substance abuse and don't do enough to support those seeking to break the cycle of addiction. Just recently, I sat with a group of mothers in Somerville whose children have suffered from addiction and heard about their ongoing struggles; I understand the tremendous impact opiate addiction has on individuals and families, and how too many people continue to feel that they are in this fight alone.

Addressing the rising crisis of drug addiction in Massachusetts means focusing on prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation. It starts with doing more to educate young people about the dangers associated with prescription drug and opiate abuse. I support expanding programs for young people, especially in schools, that offer peer counseling and information about the signs and effects of opiate addiction. These programs will not only increase prevention and early identification, but they will also help remove the stigma around drug abuse.

We need to expand the use of specialized drug courts, to connect individuals struggling with drug addiction or other behavioral health disorders access the treatment and other services that will improve long-term outcomes, rather than simply locking them up, and failing to deal with the behavioral health issues that is the underlying cause of their crime.

We also need to increase the capacity in our service system, both for acute, inpatient care and for community-based services. I have called for more investment and better reimbursement rates for both inpatient care and community-based services, including case management, transition services, and emergency care. Access to these services is critical to helping rehabilitate individuals struggling with behavioral health disorders, and ending the cycle of admission and re-admission to hospitals, or incarceration. In addition, we need explore licensure and payment reforms that will encourage comprehensive health care, which integrates primary, physical care with behavioral health care, in order to decrease access points for patients and increase the coordination of care.

My office recently wrote a letter and worked with members of Massachusetts' congressional delegation to urge the FDA to reconsider its approval Zohydro, a high-potency pain killer that could exacerbate the problem of opiate addiction in Massachusetts and around the country. We are now working with Governor Patrick to explore banning the drug at the state level. As we become more cognizant of the challenges associated with opiate addiction, and do more research into the causes and most effective treatments, the next Governor must take the lead on implementing strategies to both stem the flow of potentially harmful opiates and connect those suffering from addiction with critical services.

6. Do you think our state's tax system is stable, equitable, aligned with health policy, and sufficient to meet our public needs? If not, what changes do you support?

Our first priority should be to increase economic prosperity across the board, in order to lower the tax burden on everyone. In addition, I firmly believe that those at the top should not be paying a lower effective tax rate than those at the bottom, and am open to changes that will make our tax system more progressive. I have said repeatedly that if it becomes necessary to raise new revenues to fund our shared priorities, I am committed to doing so in a manner that does not increase the burden on those in the middle class or who can least afford it.

7. How do you plan to vote on ballot questions 1 and 4 on the upcoming November ballot?

a. Q1: Repeal of gas tax indexing

I will vote against repealing the indexing provision that accompanied the recent 3-cent increase. The gas tax remains a critical element of our transportation funding framework, and repealing the indexing provision would eliminate hundreds of millions for projects that could improve public health by expanding public transit, as well as opportunities for walking and biking.

b. Q4: Earned paid sick leave

I will vote in favor of earned sick time and, if it fails to pass, I will make it a legislative priority as governor. Earned sick time is a matter of basic fairness for working people and their families across the state; it reduces income inequality, and actually increases business productivity. No worker should ever have to choose between keeping their job and looking after their health or the health of a loved one.