

# STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

## WELLNESS PROGRAM BACKERS ANXIOUS OVER FUNDING SHUTOFF

By Andy Metzger  
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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, JUNE 6, 2017.....Proponents of a wellness program established under the 2012 health reform law say it only has one major problem: the funding shuts off June 30.

Seeded with \$57 million in assessments from insurers and major health care providers for four years of financing, the Health and Wellness Trust Fund has become a model around the country, according to Senate Majority Leader Harriette Chandler and other supporters.

"It's a national model. The whole country is watching us. And it's still in its infancy. So we don't want to dismantle it now," said Maddie Ribble, director of public policy and campaign strategy at the Massachusetts Public Health Association, before testifying in front of the Public Health Committee on Tuesday.



A Benjamin Franklin impersonator and advocates from the Massachusetts Public Health Association walked 1,000 ounces of apples into Speaker Robert DeLeo's office Tuesday as they urged lawmakers to continue the Prevention and Wellness Trust Fund.

The program knits together health care providers with municipalities and community organizations such as the YMCA to provide preventative care to the population in a geographic area for conditions including asthma, hypertension and injuries from falls.

Residents with asthma or a risk of falling can receive a home inspection for risk factors under the program, which can also provide a direct line of connection between a doctor and the local Y to coordinate medical care and exercise regimens, according to Ribble.

The Senate's budget bill would continue the program, funding it with the proceeds from increased taxes on flavored cigars. Two bills (S 643/H 2480) before the Public Health Committee on Tuesday would tap the insurance industry for \$33 million per year to continue the prevention trust, a step insurers oppose.

"Health plans have been pioneers in developing and implementing care management programs that assist patients with chronic diseases and complex conditions, such as diabetes, asthma, hypertension and smoking cessation," the Massachusetts Association of Health Plans said in a statement. "Imposing a new, annual assessment to fund local initiatives would be redundant of these efforts as many of the programs the Prevention and Wellness Trust Fund would support are being done or supported by health plans."

The health insurance lobby said since passage of the landmark 2006 health reform law, the state has enacted nine new assessments on the industry totaling \$2.5 billion. Eric Linzer, executive vice president of the health plan association, said the Senate budget provision taxing flavored cigars is "a more sensible approach."

Ribble said the Senate budget provision sponsored by Sen. Jason Lewis, co-chairman of the Public Health Committee, is estimated to generate roughly \$7 to \$25 million annually for the program. Lewis's office said the Senate budget provision would generate an estimated \$5 million to \$10 million.

The bills before the committee sponsored by Lewis and Rep. Aaron Vega, a Holyoke Democrat, would essentially double the current annual funding and allow it to expand to cover about a third of the state's residents, according to Ribble, who said he would support either funding source.

"We're open. The most important thing to us is that we don't dismantle these services. There's a million who have access to these services now, and this is not the time to dismantle them," Ribble told the News Service.

Blending the adage that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" with "an apple a day keeps the doctor away," supporters of the prevention trust on Tuesday delivered bushels of apples to House Speaker Robert DeLeo, who they credited with helping establish the program in 2012.

There are nine partnerships around the state funded by the trust, coordinating efforts to tamp down tobacco use, prevent falls, lower blood pressure and relieve childhood asthma.

Vega said that under the program in Holyoke, a home health aide found mold in the home of a girl who was missing school because of asthma, and officials worked with the housing authority to remedy the situation so she is now no longer missing school.

Margaret VanCleve-Rocchio, a school nurse at the Trotter Innovation School in Boston, told the committee a similar story about the successes of the program at the school where about 30 percent of students have asthma. She said the prevention trust helped connect her to providers, allowing her to administer preventative asthma medication. Before the program, VanCleve-Rocchio said, more students had to be sent home from school because of the condition.

Edythe Soule, an 86-year-old, said the prevention trust allowed her to get a free membership at the Natick YMCA, enabling her to improve her balance.

"I can walk up and down stairs now," Soule told the committee. She said, "I can again be active."

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