

Insurance Times: Portland voters narrowly approve universal health referendum
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PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Voters here narrowly approved a nonbinding resolution on Nov. 6 calling for universal health care in the city, even after the insurance industry fought the measure with a TV ad blitz.

The final unofficial tally showed the advisory referendum passing by 532 votes, with 6,979 residents voting for the measure and 6,447 against it.

The tally “shows that it’s time to take a look at a plan that has worked in every other industrialized nation,” Jesse Graham, a community organizer for the Maine Peoples Alliance, said.

“Anyone that you talk to is upset with the health care system, whether it’s the high cost of prescription drugs or the fact that we have 165,000 people without insurance in Maine,” he said.

But the opposition said that the margin of victory was too narrow to send any clear message.

“We went at this guns blazing because we didn’t want to send a mandate to Augusta that Maine’s biggest city supports a single-payer universal health care referendum,” said Daryn Demeritt, campaign coordinator for Citizens for Sensible Health Care Choices.

Anthem, Maine’s largest health insurer is the biggest contributor to Demeritt’s organization.

The approval comes in the form of a nonbinding resolution, which supporters hope to use to build support for universal health care, as the debate on a Canadian-style single-payer system that provides comprehensive coverage shifts from the national to state level.

Under a single-payer plan, a public agency would collect health care premiums and pay bills for all state residents.

Advocates acknowledge that such a program would require higher taxes, mostly for higher-income residents, but say people would not pay much more than they do now for private insurance, and everyone would be covered.

Opponents acknowledge that Maine’s current system is imperfect, but they caution that scrapping it in favor of a government-run health care system would raise taxes and limit consumer choice.

Maine already has experimented with ways to cut health care costs and expand coverage. The state forced drug discounts under threat of price controls, and it obtained a federal Medicaid waiver that allows it to raise the minimum incomes that determine eligibility for discounted drugs.

Duncan Wright, a Portland psychiatrist helping to run the campaign for universal health, suggested Maine is a good candidate to lead the way.

“We’re a rural state, we’re not wealthy, but we have a humane political tradition. I think we can do it. We can be the first,” he said.

A study last year concluded that 165,000 Maine residents — 13 percent — lack health insurance and that the state’s percentage of uninsured adults is the highest in New England.

State lawmakers already rejected a proposal last year to create a \$3.4 billion single-payer system administered by the state. Instead, the Legislature created a board to study the issue and issue a report by March.

The proposal’s sponsor, Democratic state Rep. Paul Volenik, said the Portland referendum shows that the single-payer issue is beginning to resonate at the local level.

“Just the fact that the insurance industry is putting a lot of money into television ads shows that they’re worried about this,” Volenik said. “Win or lose, it’s a wake-up call for the people.”

Campaign finance reports filed with the city show that opponents raised more than \$382,000 as of Oct. 25. Supporters collected less than \$1,500 during the same period.

That level of spending is unusual in a place where \$500,000 is enough to mount a serious congressional campaign, said Oliver Woshinsky, a political science professor at the University of Southern Maine.