

## 5 years later, Romneycare still a bone of contention

By Christine McConville | Monday, April 11, 2011 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Local Politics

The Bay State's landmark health-care overhaul — which marks its fifth anniversary tomorrow — has gotten mixed reviews from experts, with some applauding it for making medical care more accessible to the working poor while others say it comes at too steep a price.

"We're both a model, and a whipping boy or girl," said Brandeis University national health policy professor Stuart Altman. "But I'd put the law at 85 to 90 percent successful. Obviously, nothing's perfect in this world, but the basic reason for the reform was to extend coverage, and on this, we have done amazingly well."

Altman also said the law would work better if there were more primary-care physicians to provide more preventative care, and if federal aid for medical spending increased.

But critics blasted the law for failing to curb the Bay State's skyrocketing health-care costs.

In fact, Michael Cannon, director of health-policy studies at the Cato Institute, said the promise of cost savings — by expanding the pool of people with medical insurance — fueled the law's passage.

"The cost of health care isn't lower, it's higher, and that's increased the cost of hiring, so there's probably job losses, too," he said.

And soon, he added, people will realize that with more patients getting discounted coverage, the overall quality of their medical care will decline.

"When they start deploying premium caps and denying services, that's when you are going to see the real harm," he said.

"So far, it's just been a disaster in terms of dollars and cents. Later on, we'll see the real human impact."

In the five years since the law's passage, the amount of insured Bay Staters jumped from 89 percent to 98 percent.

Also, the percentage of Massachusetts employers who offer health insurance increased from 70 percent to 76 percent, while the national average is only 60 percent, noted Thomas Glynn, the former Partners Healthcare chief operating officer.

"It's been an unmitigated success," he said.

The true cost of that care is more difficult to determine, because of federal aid and differing accounting formulas.

Overall, state officials said the increased access has added roughly \$365 million, or just over 1 percent, of the state's \$30 billion budget.

But small-business groups frequently argue that the new costs are passed on to their members.

The Retailers Association of Massachusetts has reported that its members' health insurance costs have risen as much as 15 percent each year since 2006.

And Massachusetts Inspector General Gregory W. Sullivan said the state never set up a Romney-required system to root out abuse and fraud.

Of the \$414 million that the state spent on free medical care to the previously-uninsured in 2009, \$7 million went to people who don't live in Massachusetts; another \$17.8 million went to paying off 60,000 "medically unlikely" or "medically unnecessary" claims, and \$6 million was spent on 13,000 duplicate claims, Sullivan said.

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