

Health Policy Commission: Nurse staffing ballot question would cost \$674 to \$949 million

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By [Shira Schoenberg](#)
sschoenberg@repub.com

The Massachusetts Health Policy Commission said Wednesday that a ballot question mandating nurse staffing ratios will cost \$676 million to \$949 million a year once it is fully implemented.

There would be another \$57.9 million in one-time costs for implementation.

The Health Policy Commission is an independent state agency tasked with analyzing health care policy, and the cost estimates provide the first independent analysis of the ballot question.

The question's supporters and opponents have also released studies.

The November ballot question would mandate specific nurse to patient staffing ratios, with the exact ratios varying by unit.

Supporters, led by the Massachusetts Nurses Association, say this will make patients safer by ensuring nurses are able to provide adequate care.

Opponents, led by the state's hospital trade association, say this will limit the flexibility of hospitals to set the staffing ratios that make sense for the circumstances, and will cost hospitals too much money, potentially forcing unit closures.

The Health Policy Commission analysis found that the ballot question would require Massachusetts hospitals to hire the equivalent of an additional 2,286 to 3,101 full-time nurses.

Community hospitals with a high percentage of Medicaid and Medicare patients would have to hire the most new nurses, compared to current staffing, with an expected increase of 21 percent to 30 percent. Psychiatric units and labor and delivery units would face the largest percent increases in staffing required under the ballot question.

The Health Policy Commission said there would be some cost savings based on reduced hospital stays and fewer health problems stemming from inadequate staffing. The commission pegged this savings at \$34 million to \$47 million, though it could be somewhat higher after factoring in lower turnover and fewer injuries among nurses.

The cost estimate reflects both the cost of adding new nurses and the cost of raising wages for existing nurses. Higher demand for nurses is expected to increase wages by 4 to 6 percent, according to the commission.

In a statement, Julie Pinkham, executive director of the Massachusetts Nurses Association, called the estimate "irresponsible and inconsistent" and said it "resembles nothing that the HPC has ever done before."

She suggested that the cost estimates were based on data provided by the hospitals, who oppose the ballot question. "This is the fox guarding the henhouse," Pinkham said.

Dan Cence, a spokesman for the Coalition to Protect Patient Safety, which opposes the ballot question, said in a statement, "The Health Policy Commission's analysis confirms that the negative consequences are too great and the costs are too high for rigid, government mandated nurse staffing ratios in the Commonwealth."

Cence warned that if the ballot question passes, community hospitals will close, mental health beds will be cut and emergency room wait times will increase. "The entire healthcare ecosystem will suffer irreparable harm with no increase in the quality of patient care," Cence said.

The study was conducted by David Auerbach, director for research and cost trends at the Health Policy Commission, and Joanne Spetz, professor at the Institute for Health Policy Studies at the University of California, San Francisco.

California is the only other state that has implemented mandatory nurse staffing ratios.

This is a breaking news story that will be updated.