

WASHINGTON -- The loaded title of the congressional hearing was "The Consequences of ObamaCare." And the introduction before testimony included this caustic comment from a GOP congresswoman: "Looking forward to what you have to say about a failed program in your state, MassachusettsCare."

But for Deval Patrick, the only Democratic governor asked to discuss implications of the national health care overhaul yesterday before the Republican-run House Committee on Energy and Commerce, the moment was more of an opportunity than an inquisition.

Patrick seized the chance to staunchly defend the state's own health care plan and sought to assuage fears about President Obama's national overhaul, which was based on the Bay State's program.

"We chose to try something, and we moved, and it worked," he said, noting that the Massachusetts plan has accomplished many of the goals of the national law, including near-universal coverage. He added that officials continue to make adjustments to the law and work to rein in the costs.

He also emphasized that the law was created in a bipartisan fashion, with a GOP governor, Mitt Romney, working with a Democratic legislature and a US senator, the late Edward Kennedy.

The comments on Romney echoed praise Patrick had offered his predecessor last week. Such Democratic support for Romney on a potentially explosive issue in the 2012 presidential elections could prove to be problematic for the Republican, who is expected to make a second attempt for the GOP nomination.

Patrick's testimony was mostly politely received, with few hostile barbs -- except for the opening "failed program" comment by Republican Representative Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee. Yet his appearance illustrated the deep divisions on Capitol Hill and in state houses across the nation over health care.

Even before the hearing started, Patrick gave a forecast of sorts of the bitter fight ahead over GOP plans to repeal the law and GOP-led court fights to declare it unconstitutional. As he walked to the hearing room from a meeting with the Bay State's all-Democratic House delegation, the governor said those working to undermine the law should expect stiff opposition.

"You should prepare for the fight of your lives, because this is worth defending," Patrick said. "And you know what? Here's what the real issue is: It's not about . . . a particular policy, it's about what kind of country we want to live in."

Among the panelists testifying yesterday, Patrick was a lone voice in defending the president's overhaul. Flanking him were Governors Haley Barbour of Mississippi and Gary R. Herbert of Utah, both Republicans who have sued the federal government over the law.

Herbert wasted no time reminding the committee of where he stood on the health care law. In the first words of his opening statement, he told lawmakers "let me begin by stating that I am a firm believer in the principles of federalism, as embodied in the 10th Amendment" -- the basis of a legal position that argues state rights should supersede national efforts to impose the health care law.

The Republican governors made their differences with Patrick clear, both over the state law and the federal law.

"Massachusetts has a state health insurance program that they're obviously happy with. We think that's their right," Barbour said. "We don't want that. That's not good for us."

Herbert, too, said that the Massachusetts model was not for Utah.

"Mitt Romney is a friend of mine. In fact, we looked at the Massachusetts model when we started out. It just didn't work for Utah. It's not in Utah's best interest, so we picked a different path. There's probably pros and cons to both of them," he said.

While the differences were clear, there was also shared interest in policies that would benefit all three. When **Representative Lee Terry**, a Nebraska Republican, asked whether the governors were interested in forming insurance exchanges -- standardized markets for individuals or small businesses -- that are regional rather than state-based, both Patrick and Herbert said they supported that idea.

"Frankly, economically, our people are moving regionally. The idea of having portability of their case, I think, is very responsive to their needs," Patrick said.

While Patrick enthusiastically championed both the federal law and the state law he helped implement, Senator Scott Brown, a Republican who ran for Kennedy's seat on a platform of repealing the federal law, was more circumspect. He reiterated his opposition to the federal overhaul, while offering no opinion on the success of the Massachusetts law, deferring instead to Patrick.

"Best to check with him what his position is on that," Brown said. "He's the governor."

Glen Johnson of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

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