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House counteroffer to primary care may focus on prescription drugs

New rule, NCSL in Chicago mean last week in July will be different this year

Ella Adams

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House Speaker Ron Mariano, Rep. Jack Patrick Lewis, and House Ways and Means Chair Aaron Michlewitz (pictured from left) gather to talk to reporters after a House Democrat caucus on July 15, 2026 at the State House.

Ella Adams / SHNS

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, July 15, 2026....House Speaker Ron Mariano has expressed skepticism about the Senate's primary care bill, but said he's got his eye on "prescription drug stuff" with only about two weeks remaining to get major bills before negotiating panels.

Mariano last week said he was "not sure yet" when asked if his branch plans to tackle primary care or healthcare reforms this session.

"I'm talking to folks," Mariano told reporters Wednesday after a closed-door Democrat caucus when asked if healthcare is on his agenda. "There are some things I'd like to see if we could fix up, since we have a vehicle from the Senate. I don't know how close it will be to the Senate bill, but we're talking to a few people to see if we can make some improvements."

Pressed about aspects of a potential healthcare bill, Mariano said, "I know the committee, healthcare policy, has done an awful lot of work in prescription drug stuff, so we'll start probably with that, and see where that takes us."

The Senate on June 18 passed primary care reform legislation (S 3141) designed to create a much higher spending target for the sector without raising overall healthcare costs or premiums. Healthcare entities that don't meet a gradual 15% target could face financial penalties under the bill, which also proposes a standardized capitated payment model to replace the traditional fee-for-service structure.

Lawmakers face a July 31 deadline to get major bills into conference committee for potential action later in the year. When pressed in early July about the limited amount of time left for formal sessions and the Senate passing its primary care bill, Mariano said, "Yeah, without any idea of how much it was going to cost."

Asked if there's anything that either House Ways and Means Chair Aaron Michlewitz or Mariano are hoping to get to Gov. Maura Healey's desk by July 31, or if they're "comfortable" with items being in conference and getting worked on through the summer and fall, Mariano said, "We extended the deadline because we didn't want to be rushing to get things done by July 31, consequently not putting in the time that some of these bills take to get perfected."

The Legislature's July 31 work stretched through the night and past sunrise on Aug. 1 in 2022 and 2024, when lawmakers had to get bills through negotiation, out of conference committee and onto the governor's desk before the end of that session. In 2024, the Legislature bent its old rules to finish work on several major bills after the July 31 deadline. Lawmakers will now be able to meet in formal sessions throughout the summer, fall and winter to take up bills that have already been placed into conference by July 31.

"Why would we now go back to the old ways of trying to make it by the deadline of July 31? I think the conference committees will do — they'll continue to meet. They're all meeting, and you know, when they get to a point where they can agree, they'll bring it forward," Mariano continued. "So it'll all work out in the end."

The week leading up to July 31 this year aligns with the annual National Conference of State Legislators summit, which is convening in Chicago, Illinois from July 27 through July 29. The city of Boston hosted the 50th anniversary NCSL in August 2025, where thousands of lawmakers and staffers attended for numerous panels, speakers and events.

"I think some members are going to go," Michlewitz said when asked if representatives are allowed to attend. "Probably because it's the earlier part of the week, it won't be up until July 31. I'm actually, I'm going to be going for a couple days."

Mariano's office said he will not attend NCSL this year. Senate President Karen Spilka's office said that during the last week of July, Spilka "will be on Beacon Hill working with her colleagues to continue to lowering costs and making life better for Massachusetts residents."

During a Senate Committee on the Census hearing last week, Sen. Will Brownsberger said he was not going to NSCL in response to an expert who testified virtually and suggested they'd see each other in a few weeks in Chicago.

"I wish I was going to be at NCSL," Brownsberger said. "Not this year. It's a tough week for us."

But July 31 "is going to be different this year," Michlewitz maintained Wednesday.

"It's not the old, traditional July 31. It's more about things getting into conference definitively than actually getting to the governor's desk," he said. "If things work out in conference committee to get to the governor's desk before July 31, then obviously that'll be helpful. But

the deadlines have changed, and so I do think we're going to operate with those new structures going forward, and that will certainly create a different last week of July than I think most people have been used to."

Bills already in conference include those addressing child welfare, environmental borrowing, data privacy, bell-to-bell cellphone bans in schools, immigrant protections and higher education infrastructure. Lawmakers also face decisions on youth social media regulations and energy policy, and likely eventually economic development. The House passed an economic development borrowing bill last week, and the Senate plans to potentially take up its own version next week.

Conference committees are not the only method that lawmakers have available to come up with consensus bills. Over the years, branch leaders have also worked out differences informally and then united around those accord by passing them as further amendments rather than as conference committee reports.

[Alison Kuznitz contributed reporting]

Ella Adams is a reporter for the State House News Service and State Affairs Massachusetts. Reach her at ella.adams@statehousenews.com.

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