

Governor-elect Charlie Baker meets with President Obama



JIM LO SCALZO/EPA

Governor-elect Charlie Baker (left) and other newly elected governors met with President Barack Obama in the Oval Office Friday.

By [Matt Viser](#) Globe Staff December 06, 2014

WASHINGTON — Massachusetts Governor-elect Charlie Baker came to Washington on Friday pressing for more flexibility in health care, urging collaboration with other states in fighting opiate addiction, and exploring new ways to implement federal job-training programs.

Baker, who has sought to showcase a bipartisan approach, emerged from seven hours of meetings with administration officials, capped by an Oval Office session with President Obama and a group of six other governors from both parties.

He said afterward that he was confident he could collaborate with an administration more accustomed to dealing with Democrats from Massachusetts, particularly Governor Deval Patrick, a friend of the president.

“Every single person we met with started their conversation with, ‘Republican, Democrat — that’s not important to us,’ ” Baker said in an interview. “And it did not seem canned at all. It seemed very legit.”

One of Baker's primary goals for the day was to initiate discussions with the Obama administration about relief from some requirements of the Affordable Care Act. During the campaign, he had said he would seek a Medicaid waiver that would increase pay for primary care doctors. Baker said that in Friday's meetings he didn't get into specifics.

"Obviously the devil in a lot of this stuff — for them and us — is as we try to shake detail out over time," Baker said.

His trip marks a transition for Massachusetts, from an outgoing governor who has had a long and warm relationship with Obama — Patrick, a fellow Democrat — to an incoming one who has almost no connection with the president. Baker had never met Obama until they shook hands in the White House on Friday.

Patrick, by contrast, had been at the White House numerous times, has shared dinner with the president on Martha's Vineyard, and has used those connections to secure funding for Massachusetts.

"I don't expect to have the kind of relationship that the governor has with the president," Baker said. "Let's face it, that's kind of a unique circumstance. But I came away feeling, and I think the others did as well, that there was a genuine effort."

Much is at stake in Baker's relationship with Washington. The Patrick administration has provided Baker's transition team with information about the state's federal operations and has provided a detailed memo on information about upcoming deadlines with the federal government.

Baker and Obama could each benefit from one another politically: Obama could use a Republican governor to rely on, and Baker could benefit by having a conduit to the White House, and being seen as bipartisan.

Baker hadn't been at the White House since the 1960s, when he went to a Christmas party with his father, Charles D. Baker Sr., who held several top positions in the Nixon and Reagan administrations.

Baker's trip was essentially a school orientation day for new governors as the group was briefed on issues that included education, health care, and immigration.

After an early-morning flight, Baker met for lunch with Vice President Joe Biden, eschewing the offered crab cakes due to an allergy and taking chicken instead. He later tweeted the desert, chocolate cake, "was killer." He marveled at the White House, which was decorated for the holidays, calling it "one beautifully appointed building."

During one session Friday, Baker said, Sylvia Mathews Burwell, the secretary of Health and Human Services, brought up that combatting drug addiction was under her department. Baker said it was an issue he was passionate about and wanted to learn what other states are doing to fight addiction.

“I said, ‘I would love at some point to have you help me and help our team get in touch with folks in states that you think are doing interesting things to preventing addiction and dealing with opiates,’ ” Baker said. “She said that was something she’d be happy to help with.”

Baker said he emerged from the lunch with Biden interested in working with the administration on job training programs, and prepared to read a report Biden gave him.

“He had some very encouraging things to say about making sure job training programs end with making sure people are getting employed,” Baker said. “For me, this could be a very positive thing I wasn’t expecting.”

Baker also met with senior Department of Homeland Security officials about matters that a Baker spokesman would not discuss, citing the sensitivity of security issues.

Obama supported Baker’s Democratic opponent, Martha Coakley, and Biden campaigned for her. But Baker has tried to showcase a bipartisan approach, hiring Democrats to serve as his chief of staff and secretary of housing and economic development. He has played down interest in national politics or ties to national Republicans.

When the Globe asked Baker shortly after he won the Massachusetts governor’s race whether his campaign provided lessons for the national Republican Party, he said, “I don’t view myself as a national anything.”

The other governors at the meeting were Bill Walker of Alaska, Bruce Rauner of Illinois, Larry Hogan of Maryland, Tom Wolf of Pennsylvania, Gina Raimondo of Rhode Island, and Greg Abbott of Texas.

Raimondo and Wolf were the only Democrats. Several of the Republicans have spoken out vociferously against Obama. Abbott of Texas, for example, has sued the Obama administration over health care and its new immigration policies.

During the meeting in the Oval Office, Baker sat on a plush couch several seats to Obama’s right.

“My main message to them is that we’re here to help,” Obama said at the start of the meeting, before reporters were escorted out. “The good news about governors is they usually don’t have time to be ideological because people expect them to deliver. And that’s very much my attitude going into my last two years of office.”