

Union wages \$250,000 ad offensive against Charlie Baker, charging he take ‘responsibility’ in Soldiers’ Home tragedy

By [Matt Stout](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 1, 2021, 2 hours ago



Governor Charlie Baker. SAM DORAN/SAM DORAN/STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVI

Union officials are launching a \$250,000 campaign-style attack on Governor Charlie Baker, criticizing the second-term Republican for appointing an “incompetent,” politically connected hire to lead the Holyoke Soldiers’ Home before COVID-19 swept

through the facility last spring.

The National Association of Government Employees, which represents just a handful of employees at the Holyoke home, plans to run three months of digital ads and launched a new website targeting Baker, according to its president, David J. Holway.

The timing and tone of the campaign is notable. An initial [30-second](#) ad says that “it’s time [Baker] took responsibility” for the failures at the facility, borrowing the look and feel of a political advertisement more familiar to viewers in the weeks ahead of an election.

NAGE, along with other public unions, are currently in collective bargaining talks with the Baker administration. The campaign is also launching just days after Baker faced renewed questions about his administration’s handling of the crisis following a [Boston Globe Spotlight Team report](#) that found an often misleading narrative has surrounded the tragedy.

Baker [on Friday acknowledged](#) that he interviewed Bennett Walsh for a half-hour before he appointed Walsh to lead the Holyoke Soldiers’ Home, publicly reversing himself after saying last year he had never met the now-disgraced superintendent before swearing him in.

ADVERTISING



Baker said he “forgot” he had interviewed Walsh, who now [faces charges of criminal neglect](#).

“We have the governor, who is one of the smartest people in the state, not remembering a 30-minute conversation with somebody. So we decided to question his credibility,” said Holway, who said the campaign has a roughly \$250,000 budget.

Holway said the ads aren’t connected to the ongoing collective bargaining talks, but are intended as a “public education ad.” NAGE has typically donated to Democrats in the past, and spent \$125,000 on television ads through a short-lived super PAC attacking Baker during his successful 2014 campaign.

NAGE represents non-clinical staff at the Holyoke home, a group that includes about seven employees.

“Our members want somebody who is honest and forthright and if they do make a mistake, they want them to admit [it],” Holway said. “They made a decision [in hiring Walsh] that they thought would help in his reelection bid.”

Aides to Baker did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Baker has not said whether he’ll seek a third term in next year’s election, where a [slate of Democrats are already weighing campaigns](#).

The union ads portend how political opponents could seize on the facility’s failures should Baker, or Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito, decide to seek the GOP nomination. [Several lawmakers](#) have called for Baker to appear before the Legislature to answer questions, and NAGE’s initial ad charges that Walsh had no medical experience, “had never run a nursing home, had anger management issues, and was in way over his head” before the virus overran the aging facility.

“Baker knew and he did nothing,” the ad says, adding that a COVID-19 outbreak then hit, [killing 76 veterans](#) last spring in one of the highest death tolls of any senior-care center in the country. “Charlie Baker put a total incompetent in charge of the Holyoke Soldiers’ Home.”

The Globe Spotlight report showed that Marylou Sudders, Baker’s health and human services secretary, was directly involved in supervising Walsh and addressing serious management problems under his leadership that were evident long before the pandemic.

The story also detailed how an outside investigation by former federal prosecutor Mark Pearlstein — commissioned by Baker — contained errors and omissions, several of which deflected blame from Baker and Sudders and focused blame on others below them. Pearlstein has said he stands by [his report](#).

Baker didn’t directly answer last week when asked whether he would testify before lawmakers on the tragedy. Instead, the governor said he expects to talk with the Legislature “in the weeks ahead” about how to enact many of the recommendations included in both the legislative committee and Pearlstein reports to reshape governance of the facility.

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