

With Eyes on Maintaining Majority, Democrats Put Freshmen in Spotlight

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By Kathleen Hunter, CQ Staff

(Washington, DC) - As House Democrats prepare for a floor fight over government-subsidized children's health insurance, they are spotlighting the role of freshman Jason Altmire.

The career hospital association executive has been working behind the scenes with his leadership on legislation that would expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). When the bill (HR 3162) goes to the floor Wednesday, the newcomer has secured floor time to help make a case for its passage.

Altmire, who upset three-term incumbent Melissa A. Hart, R-Pa., is one of the freshmen that Democratic leaders have identified as rising stars among the 42 who helped the party gain control of the House last fall.

House leaders are offering the freshmen unusual opportunities to quickly burnish their legislative credentials: allowing them to serve on important committees, headline news conferences, offer popular amendments on the floor and meet weekly with Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

Just days into the 110th Congress, Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer, D-Md., baptized the Democratic freshmen as "majority makers." To stay in the majority, he and other leaders are doing all they can to ensure that the ones who only narrowly won their seats will survive their first re-election challenges in 2008.

"We've had a lot of help in a very coordinated way from the leadership in . . . focusing both on the broad agenda and also on the needs of our particular districts," said Paul W. Hodes, D-N.H., who was chosen to head the freshmen class during its early weeks on Capitol Hill.

"If we identify an opportunity that we know aligns with an area of interest, then of course we present it to them," said a House leadership aide.

Military veterans Patrick J. Murphy of Pennsylvania and Tim Walz of Minnesota have been standard-bearers on Iraq policy. In February and again in March, Pelosi shared the stage with the two freshmen during news conferences highlighting Democratic victories.

Pelosi and other leaders deferred to the duo at the microphones March 23 after the House passed a bill (HR 1591) calling for a troop withdrawal timetable.

"Central to our victory today . . . was the unanimous support of our new members of Congress," Pelosi said then, adding that the freshmen "had a serious impact on our caucus, on this Congress and on our country."

Murphy, a former Army paratrooper and the only member of Congress who has served in Iraq, has spoken on Iraq policy at least 17 times during House floor debate. He was one of the party's final speakers July 12, when the House passed a bill (HR 2956) calling for redeployment.

After less than a month on the job, Walz was entrusted to offer the Democratic response to President Bush's weekly radio address. Walz touted his military credentials as "the highest-ranking enlisted soldier ever to serve in Congress" before lambasting Bush's troop surge.

Altmire, who served on a task force that aided former President Bill Clinton's ultimately unsuccessful 1993 attempt to overhaul the health care system, has been pushed to the forefront on health policy, such as embryonic stem cell research.

"They know I have a background in it and they know I can talk about it," he said.

Leaders also have provided freshmen with opportunities to sponsor high-profile legislation and amendments.

Nancy Boyda, who edged out GOP incumbent Jim Ryun in her Republican-leaning east Kansas district, is the lead sponsor of a House-passed ethics bill that has been incorporated into the broader lobbying package (S 1) that lawmakers hope to clear before week's end. Boyda's legislation (HR 476) would deny pensions to lawmakers convicted of felonies including bribery.

Three bills sponsored by freshmen have become law - although all would merely name things - and more than a dozen others have been passed by the House.

The chamber also has passed freshman-sponsored resolutions and amendments.

Altmire, for example, convinced Michael H. Michaud, D-Maine, to incorporate into a bill (HR 2199) that the House passed May 23 elements of his legislation (HR 1944) to increase traumatic brain injury screenings for veterans.

House leaders are "always looking to help get us involved as sponsors and co-sponsors," said New York freshman John Hall.

In May, Hall teamed with Patrick J. Kennedy, D-R.I., to offer a successful amendment to legislation (HR 1429) that would reauthorize the Head Start early childhood education program. The amendment would make Head Start classrooms more inclusive for children with disabilities, House Democratic appropriators have been generous toward freshmen in the fiscal 2008 spending bills, taxpayer advocates say. "The leadership is making sure that they have things to crow about back home," said Steve Ellis, vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense.

Committee Assignments

Democratic leaders have given several freshmen plum committee assignments that allow them to play roles in major issues or cater to their districts' needs.

Two freshmen are among the nine Democrats that Pelosi put on a select panel on global warming. Hall, who upset six-term Republican Sue W. Kelly, and California's Jerry McNerney - a wind turbine company executive who defeated former House Resources Chairman Richard W. Pombo - are both members of the panel, which will assist in efforts to pass an energy bill before the August recess.

The new representative of a district including the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Hall was also awarded the chairmanship of the Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, which provides oversight of veterans' benefits.

Another freshman, North Carolina's Heath Shuler, who unseated eight-term Republican Charles H. Taylor, also began his Capitol Hill tenure with a gavel in hand as chairman of the Small Business Committee's Subcommittee on Rural and Urban Entrepreneurship.

Nine freshmen, most with rural constituencies, had a hand crafting the five-year, \$286 billion proposal to overhaul the nation's farm policy (HR 2419) that the House passed July 27. Freshmen hold more than one-third of the Democratic seats on the Agriculture Committee.

During floor debate on the farm bill, three freshman committee members - Boyda, Walz and Zack Space of Ohio - were among the final speakers in opposition to a failed amendment that would have gutted key provisions of the committee's bill.

The House Rules, Armed Services, and Transportation and Infrastructure committees also are stacked with freshmen. The newest members of those panels say they are not shy about reminding their seniors that the party owes its majority status in large part to the first-term Democrats.

"They're looking for our input, and we're not shy about giving it," Hall said.

Twenty-five of the House Democratic freshmen won their seats with less than 55 percent of the vote, and nearly as many won districts President Bush carried in 2004.

Each party's House campaign committee is keeping a watchful eye on its vulnerable freshmen. The Democratic list includes Altmire, Hall, Hodes, McNerney, Murphy, Shuler and Walz. All but five of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's (DCCC) 29 at-risk "frontline" candidates are freshmen. A DCCC aide estimated that Pelosi and other leaders have each attended at least 10 fund raisers for "frontline" freshmen this year.

At the same time, those freshmen are drawing early fire from the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC). In addition to dedicating a Web page to defeating 28 freshmen, the GOP routinely lobs e-mail blitzes into the target districts. When the NRCC accused Democrats of holding "America's farmers hostage to massive tax hikes," 15 of the 28 House members targeted were freshmen.