

Moderate Democrats Set 'Doable' Agenda For Election Year

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CongressDaily

By Fawn Johnson

(Washington, DC) — The House New Democrat Coalition is preparing to launch a health policy task force this month with a legislative agenda that includes proposals that have been endorsed by the Bush administration.

The task force will be headed up by Reps. Allyson Schwartz and Jason Altmire, both of Pennsylvania, and Lois Capps of California. The group's agenda reflects items that are considered doable in an election year.

Some of the proposals, such as electronic prescribing requirements and payments for providers based on the quality of care, have been pursued by HHS.

Other proposals are more ambitious, such as creating fully portable health insurance coverage and expanding school- and work-centered prevention benefits.

"We're trying to do something that will work and will help, but equally important, something that is politically realistic in the current environment," Altmire said.

"We're hopeful the ideas we're putting forward are things that can make it to the floor and pass this year. We're serious about it."

The agenda also includes mandated comparisons of the effectiveness of drugs and treatments, as well as legislation to allow FDA to approve generic versions of biologic drugs.

The coalition, which describes its agenda as moderate and pro-growth, has done little with health issues, directing more of its efforts last year toward House Democrats' innovation agenda.

Schwartz said the coalition's focus on technology transfers easily to the health arena. "We're all interested in being more cost effective with the outcomes and embracing technology," she said.

Capps noted the most bipartisan of the agenda items are not without pitfalls.

For example, she said, e-prescribing requirements, which nearly passed last year before being yanked at the last minute from a Medicare bill, raise questions about privacy protections.

"Privacy is something that sets people's teeth ajar," she said.

Saying health providers for positive outcomes also makes some nervous, she said.

"There are many of us who are always mindful of the orphan diseases, the kinds of challenges of caring for populations that will never give good outcomes. We don't want to do things that are going to leave these people behind."

Capps said providers that care for geriatric patients or other people with debilitating conditions need to be involved in developing pay-for-performance measures.

"They need to be at the table, rather than some of the special interests around the edges like insurers, pharmaceuticals," she said.

Task force members are hoping their committee seats will bring new ideas to the health debate, which many seasoned lobbyists and staffers predict will echo fights from previous years.

Capps sits on the Energy and Commerce Committee, which has jurisdiction over the FDA, Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

Schwartz sits on the Ways and Means Committee, which has jurisdiction over Medicare and some private insurance regulations.

Altmire sits on the Education and Labor Committee, which has jurisdiction over employer benefits and some welfare rules.

