

Altmire relished chance to shine

(Washington, DC) — It looked like a typical news conference for a freshman lawmaker.

By Jerome L. Sherman

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

(Washington, DC) — It looked like a typical news conference for a freshman lawmaker.

Rep. Jason Altmire, D-McCandless, stood at the front of a small, drab meeting room, addressing a handful of reporters. He was promoting a bill that would prevent the military from stopping sign-up bonus payments for soldiers who had suffered serious injuries and ended their military service.

Yet the meeting was far from typical. At his side was Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, the No. 2 Democrat in the U.S. House and one of the most powerful politicians on Capitol Hill.

"I was not expected to be here," said Mr. Hoyer, of Maryland, adding that he wanted to show solidarity with one of his new foot soldiers: "Congressman Altmire understands that the policy being pursued by the Department of Defense was not a fair one."

A day later, the House unanimously approved Mr. Altmire's bill. It was his fifth victory on legislation targeting the needs of veterans, less than a year into his congressional career.

As they try to prove their ability to govern -- and maintain their majority -- House Democratic leaders, including Mr. Hoyer and Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California, have given Mr. Altmire and other members of the class of '06 repeated chances to take the lead on key issues.

"I expected to be told: 'You go sit in the back. You'll be seen and not heard,' " said Mr. Altmire, one of 42 Democrats to capture House seats in last year's election, helping his party take control of both chambers of Congress for the first time since 1994.

"But I was given opportunities by leadership to pursue the things that I'm interested in, bring them to the floor and pass them," he said.

It's a significant shift from the past.

"The Democrats were in the majority for 40 years. They never foresaw giving that up," said Ron Klink, a former Democratic congressman from the Pittsburgh suburbs who came to office in 1993. "They didn't react favorably to new members."

Now party leaders see a need to support the freshmen who helped them return to the majority. And Mr. Altmire, a former lobbyist for UPMC and a former congressional aide, is in an envious position, said Mr. Klink, who left his seat in 2000 in an unsuccessful challenge of Republican Sen. Rick Santorum.

"I think Jason has the ability of being a far better congressman than I ever was," he said.

Mr. Altmire's principal focus has been veterans' affairs, and he's moved bills that would increase screening for traumatic brain injuries in soldiers coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan, extend tax benefits for active duty service members and increase the size of federal loans for reservists or national guardsman who face long periods away from their small businesses.

It's a logical step for the freshman lawmaker. There are more than 60,000 veterans in his congressional district, which includes most of Beaver County and parts of Pittsburgh's northern bedroom communities.

But Mr. Altmire, who didn't serve in the military, says he's not making a political calculation; he's addressing a serious need at a time when hundreds of thousands of Americans are fighting overseas.

"I'm interested because I think it's the right thing to do," he said. "I don't think veterans have been treated fairly and I want to make sure we do everything we can for them."

Todd Bowers, director of government affairs for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, said Mr. Altmire's office has been a consistent ally since February, when the organization launched its 2007 legislative agenda and started lobbying in the halls of Congress.

"He really has been a champion of these issues," Mr. Bowers said.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have heavily strained the nation's support system for returning soldiers, even leading to abysmal conditions at the military's premier hospital, Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

When those conditions became public earlier this year, President Bush appointed a bipartisan commission, headed by former Sen. Bob Dole and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, to make recommendations for an overhaul of health care for wounded soldiers.

The report, released in July, included two initiatives already proposed by Mr. Altmire and approved by the House: improved screening for traumatic brain injuries and an extension of the Family and Medical Leave Act for spouses and parents of soldiers with serious injuries.

The commission also noted that the military mistakenly had stopped making payments on enlistment bonuses to some injured soldiers who had been forced to leave active duty before their service periods had ended. Defense Department officials said they would address the issue.

Mr. Altmire decided to draft a bill that would require the military to make the payments. In November, more than a month after he had started circulating his legislation among fellow House members, the news media began reporting about Jordan Fox, a private from Mt. Lebanon who had been told to repay \$2,800 of his sign-up bonus after he was injured in Iraq and discharged from the military.

The case caught national attention. House leaders decided to move Mr. Altmire's bill quickly, and the Senate approved a similar piece of legislation. The two chambers now must address minor differences between the bills before one can become law.

"For a young congressman, he's doing a hell of a job," said Skip Haswell, president of the Beaver County chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America.

Mr. Haswell is one of more than a dozen members of Mr. Altmire's advisory group on veterans' issues, which the lawmaker organized soon after taking office.

Mr. Altmire says he also benefits from having three veterans on his staff, including Lee Slater, a New Castle native who served with the Army in the Iraq war and now works in Washington, D.C. Two others work in Pennsylvania, fielding calls from constituents.

Not everyone approves of Mr. Altmire's record on military issues.

"I applaud his effort to honor the sacrifices of our veterans," said Ron Francis, a former Allegheny County councilman and an ex-Navy officer who served on a destroyer during the Persian Gulf War.

But Mr. Francis, who is among those seeking the GOP nomination to run against Mr. Altmire in next year's election, argued that the congressman has been inconsistent on the Iraq issue by approving war funds but voting to disapprove of President Bush's decision to commit tens of thousands of extra troops.

"It demonstrates his lack of military experience," Mr. Francis said. He's voting to "undercut the mission," while simultaneously keeping it going.

Mr. Altmire says he can disagree with the president's policy but still support the troops.

"While we have troops on the battlefield, I'm never going to vote to withhold their funding," he said.

As they battle with President Bush over the future of Iraq policy, Democrats have repeatedly tried to demonstrate their concern for veterans. This month, they surpassed the president's request for spending for the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2008.

And Democratic leaders likely will keep giving Mr. Altmire and other freshman chances to move legislation on similar popular issues.

"I think Jason has been given opportunities," Mr. Hoyer said in an interview. "But it's like any opportunity. You have to make the most of it. Jason has."