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Democrats getting an earful on health care during recess



David Joles, Star Tribune

With the U.S. House on break, Democratic Rep. Betty McCollum, left, was back home, visiting Minnesota Conservation Corps workers near Duck Point on Como Lake. McCollum has held one town hall meeting and says she has plans for more.

As lawmakers return home from Washington, opponents and skeptics of overhauling the health care system are turning up the heat.

By **MARK BRUNSWICK** and **ERIC ROPER**, Staff Writers

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Farmfest is typically a genial event -- a stop

elected and aspiring officials consider an easy political must-do.

But at this year's gathering in rural Redwood Falls, as First District U.S. Rep. Tim Walz, D-Minn., put in an appearance, an audience member declared loudly that plans for national health reform were a "step toward communism."

Walz, a veteran, shot back: "I didn't spend 24 years in the military to be called a Communist, I can tell you that."

A similarly harsh reception confronted Fifth District Rep. Keith Ellison, when he struggled for control of the microphone at what should have been a friendly meeting on health care reform at a north Minneapolis clinic.

Fourth District Rep. Betty McCollum felt the wrath from both ends of the spectrum at a Highland Park get-together, when one participant questioned why they couldn't get single-payer health care while another bluntly told McCollum: "I don't trust you, I don't trust the Republicans, I don't trust Democrats, I don't trust conservatives, liberals, or politicians with my health care. I trust two people, that's me and my doctor."

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Concerns over the pace and breadth of health care reform have birthed a fiery wave of activism during the congressional recess as fearful citizens make their voices heard with resounding vigor.

Across the country, congressional Democrats are being hammered by angry groups of protesters showing up at normally low-energy forums. Democrats suspect a well-organized effort, not a grass-roots uprising. Republicans say the concerns are genuine and the anger is real.

Maryland Rep. Frank Kratovil was hanged in effigy outside a district office in Maryland. In Texas protesters made a tombstone with Rep. Lloyd Doggett's name on it. Rep. Tim Bishop of New York had to be escorted to his car by police after a town hall meeting was disrupted.

Remember the Tea Party protests from earlier this year? Those same groups appear to have shifted to the health care front, armed with talking points, with horns painted on politician's pictures and, in at least one case, a sign with a Nazi "SS" logo.

The group Minnesota Tea Party Patriots is tracking the Minnesota delegation's plans for meetings in August and is planning its

own Town Hall meeting next week in Minnetonka. They also intend to visit congressional field offices to protest two days after that.

While Ellison and McCollum have already held health care town meetings, each member of the Minnesota delegation plans to make health care a topic of discussion over the recess. But only one member, Sixth District Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., has committed to holding a traditional town hall meeting. McCollum said she expects to have more later this month.

Other Minnesota representatives will attend smaller events, with stops at local cafes, restaurants and hospitals, as well as roundtables with affected groups. John Schadl, a spokesman for Democratic Rep. Jim Oberstar, said his boss prefers public meetings that are more structured.

"A public forum is much more productive if you -- obviously open it to the public -- but in addition to that reach out to constituency groups that are impacted and bring in panels of experts who can talk about the issue and shed some light on it."

As the confrontations at the bigger, widely open meetings have spread across the

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country, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office distributed a fact sheet to the caucus indicating the disruptions are funded by special interests, including the group Conservatives for Patients' Rights, which has taken credit for helping to spark the protests. She also pointed to Freedom Works, with connections to corporate lobbyist Dick Arney, whose firm represents pharmaceutical companies such as Bristol-Myers Squibb. The Democratic National Committee sent out a Web-based ad on Wednesday called "Enough of the Mob."

Pat Anderson, a former Minnesota state auditor who helped coordinate the Tea Party protests earlier this year, said Washington-based politicians do not understand the grass-roots movement they are encountering.

"They assume that somebody is behind it and it's hard for them to get their hands around the fact that it's completely grass-roots and that it's done by new forms of communications," she said. "There is no funding, no PACs (political action committees) behind it. It's all volunteer."

Jeff Davis, president of Minnesota Majority, a conservative family values group, said his organization put out an action alert after

learning of Ellison's meeting and provided those interested with questions about the Democratic reform package. He said he encouraged everyone to be civil and laughed when asked if his organization was funded by Washington special interests.

"I wish," he said. "We operate on a shoestring."

State Republican Party Deputy Director Michael Brodkorb said the Democrats, who hold majorities in the House and the Senate, should be condemned if they don't confront the anger.

"This is a plan that is coming from their party. They have a responsibility to engage the public," Brodkorb said. "These are concerns from real people," he said, rather than protests coordinated by "astro turfing machinery," political parlance for well-funded campaigns designed to give a false impression of a grass-roots uprising.

A spokeswoman for the state DFL Party said there is no organizing underway to turn out crowds supporting health care reform at public events.

"That's not the way we do things," said spokeswoman Kristin Sosanie.

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At her Highland Park meeting, McCollum said, she went around the room asking people where they were from, and a large group refused to say whether they were from her district or not. Some Democratic colleagues have considered telephone town halls, in which constituents call in with their thoughts -- thus the chances for causing a ruckus are minimized.

"The majority of what we are seeing is cookie cutter. It's all scripted," she said. "My constituents expect me to conduct myself in a civil manner. When they come to town hall meetings, they expect their friends and neighbors to do the same thing."

Even if further formal town hall meetings don't materialize this summer, there is one sticky, sweaty icon of democracy left where citizens can let politicians know what they think. The State Fair looms Aug. 27 through Sept. 7. That's "the state's largest town hall" of all, said Linden Zakula, Sen. Amy Klobuchar's spokesperson.

The Associated Press contributed to this report. Mark Brunswick • 651-222-1636 Eric Roper • 202-408-2723

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