

House Democrats create 'message teams'

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By Peter Brand

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In an effort to voice their domestic policy message before the November elections - and amid the homeland security debate in Congress - the House Democrats have organized five "message teams."

Each team is focused on a core Democratic domestic issue and is lead by the following members:

.Social Security: Reps. Robert Matsui (Calif.), Karen Thurman (Fla.) and Eddie Bernice Johnson (Texas);

.Environment: Reps. Ed Markey (Mass.), Earl Blumenauer (Ore.) and Hilda Solis (Calif.);

.Pension Reform: Reps. Albert Wynn (Md.), Ben Cardin (Md.) and Lynn Woolsey (Calif.);

.Education: Reps. Bob Etheridge (N.C.), Ruben Hinojosa (Texas), Patsy Mink (Hawaii) and Major Owens (N.Y.); and

.Prescription Drugs: Reps. Frank Pallone (N.J.), Marion Berry (Ark.) and Jan Schakowsky (Ill.).

The teams, appointed by House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.), were placed under the supervision of Assistant to the Democratic Leader Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.).

Each team will be responsible for organizing one event per week on its issue.

"This effort is fundamental to driving Democratic issues and priorities over the next six months," DeLauro said. "We want to engage the entire caucus."

With the Energy and Commerce, and Ways and Means Committees currently marking up a Republican bill on prescription drug benefits, the Democrats see this as a make-or-break moment for articulating their message.

"I think the Democrats are coming together on message better than they have since I've been here," Berry, who is in his third term, said.

The prescription drug team will organize district town hall meetings, write newspaper editorials, try to get Democrats booked on television talk shows and hold press conferences, said Schakowsky, who is also a chief deputy whip.

"I think one of the main functions is going to be working with and coordinating with the many advocacy organizations for senior citizens and persons with disabilities," she added.

The effort, according to Pallone, will also be on the House floor, where members will use special orders and one-minute speeches to address the issue.

Even with the homeland security avalanche now smothering Congress, the Democrats are confident they can successfully highlight their agenda.

"Yes we have to deal with homeland security, but at the same time we have to" tackle drug

benefits, Pallone said. "The two are not mutually exclusive."

The caucus is also working with Senate Democrats, who have their own message teams. Today, Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), a longtime education advocate, will brief his House counterparts on his message efforts. DeLauro's office has also been working closely with Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.), who is on the Senate prescription drug team. And last week, Senate and House Democrats launched a website called fairdrugpolicies.org.