

Opioids Still On House Democrats' Very Full Health-Care Plate

By Shira Stein

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- Advocates say 2018 package didn't go far enough
- Senate also plans to do more work on opioids

Combating the opioid crisis is still on House Democrats' health-care agenda even as they try to review Trump administration actions on Obamacare, write legislation to lower prescription drug prices, and consider "Medicare for All."

Key House Democrats say they intend to pursue new legislation to address the deadly epidemic in 2019 as well as look at how existing funds—including billions of dollars in grants—are being spent.

Lawmakers continue to be under pressure to address the crisis as advocates say last year's package of bills that involved the work of 13 committees in both chambers didn't go far enough. Over 70,000 people died of a drug overdose in 2018, 47,000 of which were opioid overdoses, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

House Energy and Commerce Chairman Frank Pallone Jr. (D-N.J.) said combating the opioid crisis remains a top concern for Democrats. "The epidemic persists—I would argue is getting worse—we need to keep that as a priority," he said.

Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.), chairwoman of the House Appropriations Health subcommittee, acknowledged that Democrats have a lot on their plate this Congress. "We got a lot we're doing already, but we will get there."

Pallone said his top prerogative for opioids is to reauthorize the \$6 billion in appropriations for grants that expires at the end of the fiscal year in September. "We certainly don't want to backtrack," Pallone said.

Then Pallone plans to review how the measures in 2018 opioid package are working and look at what else needs to be done.

The House Appropriations Health subcommittee also plans to look at where the money that Congress has allocated to combating the opioid epidemic is going and how it's being spent, DeLauro said in an interview.

Pallone said it was ironic that Republicans are asking Democrats to do more on opioids "when they didn't do much" in the package of bills passed last Congress.

"We had always taken the position during the whole debate last year on the opioid package that a lot more needed to be done," Pallone said.

"We need to find out about that in a serious way," DeLauro said, and she added that her subcommittee would take a look at adding more money for the epidemic in this year's budget.

The Senate also is starting up again with work looking at preventing the opioid crisis. The Senate Appropriations Health subcommittee held a hearing Feb. 28 to review the epidemic and look at preventative measures.

Subcommittee Chairman Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) said there is progress with reducing opioid prescriptions, and he wants to continue that work. Blunt added that the panel likely will hold more hearings on the issue.

—With assistance from Alex Ruoff

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