



Threats against lawmakers spread after health vote

By LAURIE KELLMAN and JIM ABRAMS (AP)

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- A fax bearing the image of a noose. Profane voice mails. Bricks thrown, a gas line cut. White powder sent to an office.

Democrats and a few Republicans revealed mounting numbers and unsettling details of threats against them Thursday in the emotional aftermath of the passage of the health care overhaul.

Lawmakers uniformly condemned the harassment, but that's where the agreement ended. Democrats said Republicans were slow to condemn the vigilantism, while Republicans said Democrats were playing politics with the threats.

"By ratcheting up the rhetoric, some will only inflame these situations to dangerous levels," said House Republican Whip Eric Cantor of Virginia. "Enough is enough. It has to stop."

At least 10 Democrats now have reported harassment, including incidents involving at least four of their offices in New York, Arizona and Kansas. More frequent have been obscenity-laced, sometime-threatening phone messages. An undisclosed number of lawmakers have been given increased police protection.

"It is unfortunate that a small but vocal group of people are using insults to convey their opinions and alarming that anyone would make threats against me or my family," said Rep. Kathy Dahlkemper, D-Pa.

On Thursday, two Republicans said they, too, had been menaced.

No arrests have been reported. A threat to assault a member of Congress in retaliation for the performance of official duties is punishable by up to a year in prison.

House historian Fred Beuttler said there have been few acts of violence against lawmakers over legislation. The worst occurred in 1954 when four Puerto Rican nationalists shot up the House chamber, wounding five members. A cross was burned on Speaker Sam Rayburn's front lawn in Texas during debate on civil rights legislation in the 1960s.

This week, hate-filled rants have been showing up in voice mails, e-mail boxes and on fax machines of lawmakers since the House approved the health care bill 219-212 Sunday night. President Barack Obama signed it into law on Tuesday. A package of fixes

to the new law was winding through Congress Thursday on the brink of a two-week recess that begins on Monday.

On one point Thursday, there was bipartisan agreement: No act of Congress - health care reform or anything else - merits threats of violence against lawmakers or their families. House Republican leader John Boehner met with Speaker Nancy Pelosi about the incidents and both condemned them.

Pelosi was careful to avoid blaming Republicans directly for inciting the harassment, though she said that words "weigh a ton." Such threats of retaliation "have no place in a civil debate in our country," she said.

Boehner followed moments later. While many are angry over the health care measure, he said, "threats and violence should not be part of a political debate."

The fact that lawmakers were being harassed took attention away from the package of fixes to the health care law.

Rep. Jean Schmidt, R-Ohio, released a recording of a voicemail she said she received in which a man repeatedly accuses Republicans of being racists.

Cantor, meanwhile, said he has received e-mail threats and that a bullet struck the window of his campaign office building in Richmond. But Richmond police said the bullet apparently had been randomly fired skyward. It hit the front window of a building that houses Cantor's campaign office as it fell at a sharp downward angle around 1 a.m. Tuesday, police said.

Cantor said the House's Democratic campaign chairman, Chris Van Hollen, and Democratic National Committee Chairman Tim Kaine had incited retribution against Republicans by telling The Huffington Post that the GOP would "own" responsibility for retaliatory slurs.

Schmidt, meanwhile, released a tape of a profanity-laced phone message in which the caller said Republicans were racists and, referring to an accident two years ago when she was hit by a car while jogging, said, "You should have broke your back."

Rep. Anthony Weiner's office in the Queens borough of New York City received a letter with white powder in it Thursday that mentioned his vote for the health care bill, the police department said. Police later said field tests showed the powder was not hazardous.

In addition to Dahlkemper, Ohio Rep. John Boccieri, one of eight Democrats who switched to "yes" on the most recent House vote, said he had received threats.

E-mails sent to Rep. Suzanne Kosmas, D-Fla., another member who switched her vote, urged her to commit suicide and said she and her family should rot in hell."

Rep. Louise Slaughter, a New York Democrat and chairwoman of an influential House committee, said someone had left her a voicemail that used the word "snipers."

Some of the anger spilled over in a flood of threat-filled phone and fax messages to the office of Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich. Stupak had pledged to oppose the health care package unless given greater assurance that it would not allow federal funding of elective abortions. He voted in favor after the administration agreed.

"I hope you bleed ... (get) cancer and die," one caller told the congressman between curses.

A fax carried a picture of a gallows with "Bart (SS) Stupak" on it and a noose. It was captioned, "All Baby Killers come to unseemly ends. Either by the hand of man or by the hand of God."

Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., received a letter that also contained a shredded American flag. The letter contained expletives and said, "I will hound you. I will intimidate you and your family."

Senate Sergeant at Arms Terry Gainer told The Associated Press Thursday that there was "no evidence that annoying, harassing or threatening telephone calls or e-mails are coordinated."