

Ruckus for the benefit of the media

By Don Corrigan



Members of the Tea Party protest at the SEIU office. Photo by Amir Kurtovic.

Warning: Attending town hall forums on health care reform issues may be dangerous to your health. Meetings in the St. Louis area may prove especially risky, according to media reports.

Since Congress went on summer recess, forums conducted by Sen Claire McCaskill, D-Missouri, and Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, have been interrupted by shouting, name-calling and brawls. Some in attendance have labeled disruptions as “mob actions.” Members of the St. Louis Tea Party conservative activist group have hailed all the ruckus as “democracy in action.”

At a Carnahan meeting in south St. Louis County and a McCaskill meeting in Hillsboro, scuffles between health care reform opponents, and those who support Democratic initiatives on health care, have resulted in police intervention. Injuries and arrests have occurred in these incidents.

“Sadly we’ve seen stories about disrupters all around the country, and we have a handful of them here in Missouri,” said Carnahan in the aftermath of a fracas at a

Mehlville school location.

“Instead of participating in a civil debate, they have mobilized with special interests in Washington who have lined their pockets by overcharging Americans for a broken health care system,” Carnahan said. “I will continue to engage with constituents that I am honored to represent in Congress,” Carnahan added. “And I will fight to achieve long-overdue health insurance reform in our country.”

Craig Niehaus of Webster Groves has attended several St. Louis Tea Party events, a group which has organized a number of the protests over President Barack Obama’s effort to reform U.S. health care. The group has targeted Democrats in Congress who support an initiative which has yet to be taken up by the U.S. Senate.

“I went to the Carnahan event and could not get in—it was too crowded,” said Niehaus, regarding the forum

at a Mehlville elementary school on Aug. 6. "I think people were perfectly in their rights to organize and ask tough questions about Carnahan's vote in Congress on the health care bill.

"If you looked at the folks who came, most were older and carried hand-made signs. I don't think they looked like an organized mob," added Niehaus. "They are upset because health care is a complicated issue, and the new plan is just being shoved through too fast."

However, John Hickey, also of Webster Groves said protests against the health care plan recently passed by the House are not grassroots. He said people who are supportive of the efforts by Obama and Democrats in Congress—whom he said are in the majority—have not attended forums because they are happy to see that health care issues are finally being addressed.

"I think the protests have been organized by the Republican Party, FOX News on cable, and the medical insurance industry," said Hickey. "How would your Average Joe decide to go picket at a place like the SEIU labor union? That is a Republican target, but not something your Average Joe could even find."

Hickey said the St. Louis Tea Party protests are purely meant to intimidate legislators and to get TV coverage to hurt Obama. He said they remind him of protests against the recounts in Florida in 2000 during the contested presidential election.

Meant to intimidate

At her Hillsboro event, McCaskill pointed to the interruption caused when an anti-reform member of the audience tore up a black woman's sign. McCaskill remarked to the audience that the news media were likely to cover the scuffle, and not the discussion of issues regarding the need for reform.

"Give me a chance to hear from everyone in a way that is orderly and fair," said McCaskill to an audience of more than 2,000. "This can't be about who is the loudest."

Nevertheless, some in the audience shouted out about deficits, global warming, cap and trade, and Cash for Clunkers as a boondoggle. Virtually everything McCaskill said was met with boos, hisses and catcalls.

Supporters of health care reform worry that the noise and the prospect of violence are holding down the numbers of pro-reform proponents at the meetings. As a consequence, say supporters, news media coverage is giving a false impression about the number of Americans who actually oppose health care reform.

Kevin P. Kelley of St. Louis County prefers to write letters to newspapers in support of reform that would include a public option for health care coverage. Kelley said he will not dignify the Tea Party protests by counter-demonstrating.

"I don't care to get into a shouting match with these misguided people," said Kelley. "Many are extremists who have been manipulated by the right wing and the insurance industry."

Kelley said people need to read the bill in Congress, not the "lies on the Internet and on blogs." He said the biggest lies of all are that government and Obama will kill old people, neglect the mentally challenged, and ration the country's health care.

"These people who all hate government will surely be there when it's time to collect their Social Security," said Kelley. "They need some facts in their head, not all the lies on the Internet. We pay for health care—one way or another. When the poor need health care and end up

in emergency rooms, we pay for it now. It is passed on to us. So why not devise a rational delivery system for health care?"

Tea baggers' message

Bill Hennessy, a head organizer in the St. Louis Tea Party events, has slated several dates for upcoming demonstrations locally. He said protest events will continue to take place outside the offices of McCaskill and Carnahan, as well as at the congressional offices of U.S. Rep. Lacy Clay.

According to Hennessy's Web site and literature distributed by the St. Louis Tea Party, "the government screwed up TARP, screwed up the stimulus, and bankrupted Cash for Clunkers in less than a week. This administration and its myrmidons in Congress are wicked idiots who will kill innocent people if health care passes."

"They will destroy American industry if Cap and Trade passes," the Tea Party advisory continues. "We are the last line of defense... Get your walking shoes on and your signs ready. . ."

Republicans have been trying to capitalize on the Tea Bag protests. Earlier this summer, a party directive told leaders not to cooperate with health care reform legislation. The directive noted that a failure by Barack Obama to pass legislation would "break" his presidency.

U.S Rep. Todd Akin, R-St. Louis, told an audience that they should "terrorize" legislators during the summer recess, so that they dare not vote for Obama's health care reform when they return to Congress in September.

Although Republicans hope to capitalize on the current mayhem in the 2010 congressional midterm elections, it's unclear whether the demonstrators are interested in electing more Republicans. Many protesters seem more in tune with the Constitution, Libertarian and newly revived Whig parties.

Cindy Redburn of south St. Louis County, an opponent of so-called "Obamacare," said she has a Constitution Party sign ready for the protests in St. Louis. Redburn said she is for non-violent, but vigorous protests to put a stop to out-of-control government spending.

"Government at the federal level has no constitutional authority to be involved in medical care," insisted Redburn. "Also, we see physician-assisted suicide in states like Oregon, and I think this is something the Obama administration is looking at as a part of its health care plan.

"I fully support the Tea Party's right to let legislators know that we are not happy with government in our health care," said Redburn. "I plan to hold my own sign at Rep. Carnahan's office that will say: 'Stop The Insanity: Vote Constitution Party In 2010.' We have lots of candidates lining up to run for office." ■

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