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Opioids Focus in Congress: House Passes Dozens of Opioids Bills; Senate Finance and HELP Committees Advance Draft Legislation

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Given broad interest in addressing opioid abuse and growing public pressure, both the House and Senate are considering a broad range of bills designed to address opioids, with lawmakers working to pass legislation during the summer to demonstrate action before the midterm elections.

The House passed 39 opioids-related bills last week, including incremental measures to reduce excess and unused prescription opioids in circulation, increase access to addiction treatment and alternative pain treatments, restrict imported fentanyl arriving through international mail, and expand coverage for telehealth treatment for substance use disorder. The House advanced most of the bills by a voice vote. On June 14, Ways and Means Committee Chairman Kevin Brady (R-TX) and Ranking Member Richard Neal (D-MA), and Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Greg Walden (R-OR) and Ranking Member Frank Pallone Jr. (D-NJ) introduced H.R. 6, the Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment (SUPPORT) for Patients and Communities Act. House Leadership intends for H.R. 6 to serve as the underlying vehicle for the majority of House-passed bills on opioids. The House has continued voting on dozens of additional proposals this week and aims to wrap up the focus on opioids legislation, including voting on H.R. 6, by the end of the week.

Concurrently, the Senate Finance Committee unanimously approved its own opioids package, the Helping to End Addiction and Lesson (HEAL) Substance Use Disorders Act, on June 12. The Senate Finance Committee's package would make a number of tweaks to Medicare and Medicaid aimed at reducing opioid abuse, including increased monitoring of over-prescribers and at-risk beneficiaries and expanded coverage for telehealth and non-opioid pain management. The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and the Senate Judiciary Committee have already advanced their own opioids legislation.

Lawmakers generally consider the House and Senate legislative packages to be relatively noncontroversial. However, while supporting the current legislation, some Democrats have criticized the package of bills as too modest and have called on Congress to do more to address opioids abuse.