

Reporting from Chico

'May you die in pain': Northern California GOP congressman gets an earful at town hall

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"May you die in pain."

That was the nastiest moment of Republican Rep. Doug LaMalfa's early morning town hall in Chico on Monday.

The wish was uttered by an older man who criticized LaMalfa for voting for the House GOP plan to replace the Affordable Care Act. He was also holding a pink sign that read "Lackey for the Rich!"

The open hostility and intransigence inside the Chico Elks Lodge came as the political divide in the country has grown more inflamed, with Trump's election unleashing a wave of both liberal activism and conservative empowerment.

As a result, Washington's deeply partisan fights over issues such as health care, immigration and environmental protections have followed members of Congress home, turning once sedate town halls into in-your-face venting sessions that in left-leaning California have Republican House members on the defensive.

LaMalfa stood his ground on stage as person after person ripped into him for his votes and positions on healthcare and climate change, as well as for his unyielding support for President Trump.

A few speakers asked LaMalfa to resign, including one dressed up as the "Wicked Witch of the West Coast."

Most comments and questions during the hour-long town hall were fairly cordial, although they were laced with plenty of boos and catcalls.

Norma Wilcox, a retired nurse who lives in Chico, also questioned LaMalfa's healthcare vote. Wilcox told LaMalfa the House plan would take away healthcare for millions of Americans while providing tax breaks to the rich.

"I am open to new ideas," LaMalfa told her, describing the House GOP bill as a placeholder that everyone expected to be improved during negotiations with the Senate. (The Senate's healthcare efforts now appear dead.)

But the Richvale congressman, who represents California's massive 1st Congressional District in the northeast corner of the state, said he will support only a new healthcare program that provides affordable coverage to middle-class Americans.

LaMalfa said Obamacare is quickly become unaffordable and unsustainable, with premium costs rising and the number of insurance companies offering coverage declining.

"People across the board are being hurt by this," LaMalfa said.

When shouts and boos rained down on him, he chastised the crowd saying, "I have the mic folks. Yep, boo away."

Ann Sisney of Chico told LaMalfa that her son, William, died of an opioid overdose two years ago. She held up a picture of the 19-year-old, asked the congressman to take it, and told him more people will die if GOP leadership in Congress gets its way on healthcare.

"These are life-and-death decisions that you are making," Sisney told him.

LaMalfa assured her that Congress was working to find funds to address the nationwide opioid epidemic.

The Republican congressman also raised the ire of the crowd when he was asked about climate change and the degraded air quality in this stretch of Northern California.

"I don't buy the idea that man-made activity is responsible," LaMalfa said bluntly.

The crowd of several hundred did include some LaMalfa supporters, though most stayed silent.

Ron Jones, 67, of Paradise said he's been to a few of LaMalfa's town halls and all have been dominated by his critics.

"Most of the time people want to ... complain," said Jones, a self-described conservative, after the event ended. "The people who support him are quietly in the background."

LaMalfa does indeed have a lot of support in the district that also overwhelmingly voted for Trump over Hillary Clinton in last year's presidential election. LaMalfa won his last election by almost 15%, and though he has attracted a few Democratic challengers, the district is not considered a battleground for 2018.

Unlike many California Republican members of Congress, LaMalfa hasn't shied away from holding town halls, though it's rarely a pleasant experience for him. He held one in Nevada City in March and another in April in Oroville. No other California Republicans are scheduled to hold town halls during their August recess.

Near the end of Monday's town hall, a woman criticized LaMalfa for inviting only Christian pastors to provide invocations at his town halls and other events, and urged him to include religious leaders of all faiths.

"If you want to have your own town hall, you can invite whoever you like," LaMalfa told her.