WASHINGTON — Senator Robert C. Byrd, the longest-serving senator in United States history, is "seriously ill," his office announced Sunday afternoon.

Mr. Byrd, a 92-year-old Democrat from West Virginia, was admitted to an undisclosed hospital late last week with symptoms of heat exhaustion and severe dehydration as temperatures in the Washington area approached 100 degrees. Though he was initially expected to remain hospitalized for only a few days, Mr. Byrd's condition deteriorated and his doctors are now describing it as "serious," a spokesman said.

Mr. Byrd's absence could pose a challenge to Senate Democrats as they try to pass the final version of the financial overhaul bill and win other procedural battles in the week before the Independence Day recess. Democrats will need every vote they can get. With the midterm elections on the horizon, Washington is as polarized as ever and, for the second time in just over six months, President Obama's agenda could once again hinge on Mr. Byrd's health.

In the final days of the health care debate, Mr. Byrd appeared for several crucial votes—pushed each time to the Senate floor in his plaid wheelchair and greeted by handshakes and applause from his colleagues. He spent six weeks in the hospital last spring with a staph infection, prompting persistent speculation about his health and who would replace him if he became too sick to finish his term.

Mr. Byrd served as the Democratic leader of the Senate for 12 years in the 1970s and 1980s, and he later served several times as chairman of the Appropriations Committee. In November 2008, as the country grappled with the greatest economic crisis since the Depression, Mr. Byrd agreed to relinquish the gavel amid fears that he was no longer up to the task of leading the committee.

Mr. Byrd, the president pro tem of the Senate, has been a senator since January 1959 and served six years in the House before that.

He is known as a fierce guardian of Congressional authority, including spending power,
and is an authority on Senate procedure.

“The rules, precedents, customs, practices, traditions and courtesies of the Senate have been forged over hundreds of years and after much trial and experience,” Mr. Byrd said last month. Some senators may be frustrated with what they see as abuses of Senate rules, he said, but “the Senate’s purpose is to carefully and critically examine, not to expedite.”

Mr. Byrd became a hero to many liberals in 2003 when he denounced the invasion of Iraq, and he said he was appalled by the silence in the Senate on the eve of the war. Gov. Joe Manchin III of West Virginia, a Democrat, said on Sunday that he was praying for Mr. Byrd, whom he described as “a true champion for our state.”

As a senator, Mr. Byrd has cast more than 18,000 votes, many of them for bills that funneled money to projects in his state, where highways, bridges and federal buildings are named in his honor.
Editorial: The Return of the Superfund

Congress needs to reinstate the corporate taxes that finance Superfund, the program that cleans up hazardous waste sites.