

IN RESPONSE TO FATAL FIRES, LARSON INTRODUCES BILL TO REQUIRE SPRINKLERS IN U.S. NURSING HOMES

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HARTFORD- In response to fatal fires at nursing homes in Hartford, Conn. and Nashville, Tenn., U.S. Congressman John B. Larson (CT-1) today announced that he has introduced legislation that would require U.S. nursing homes to install sprinkler systems in their facilities. The Nursing Home Fire Safety Act (H.R. 4967) would require every nursing home participating in Medicare or Medicaid - which accounts for 97% of nursing homes - to be fully equipped with an automatic fire sprinkler system within five years. To help these facilities with the cost of installing these systems, the bill would reimburse nursing homes over the course of five years for the full cost of sprinkler installation through Medicare or Medicaid.

Larson made the announcement from the Park Place Health Center in Hartford - formerly the Greenwood Health Center - the site of a 2003 fire that killed 16 residents. Park Place has since been purchased by new owners and the building is now fully equipped with sprinklers.

"The fires in Hartford and Nashville demonstrate the terrible and unacceptable consequences of allowing nursing homes to continue to lack vital life saving safety equipment," said Larson. "Over 1.6 million elderly and disabled Americans live in nursing homes across the country. With limited mobility and health related impairments, this population is particularly at risk during a fire. The only way to virtually eliminate the threat of fire for these Americans, and to significantly improve their chances of survival in a fire, is to install a fully operational automatic fire sprinkler system. The federal government has turned a blind eye to this problem for far too long. Now is the time for Congress to take action to protect the vulnerable residents of nursing homes from the threat of fire, and prevent future tragedies."

"The American Health Care Association's nearly 10,000 members are committed to quality and excellence in their long term care facilities," said Hal Daub, President and CEO of the American Healthcare Association (AHCA). "To that end, ensuring the safety and security of our patients and residents is of paramount importance. Because the care of 80% of nursing home patients and residents is paid for by the federal government through the Medicare and Medicaid programs, our members believe it is the government's responsibility to fund the sprinkling mandate."

Of the over 17,000 nursing homes nationwide, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates that approximately

20 to 30 percent lack an automatic fire sprinkler system. The American Health Care Association estimates that about 24 percent lack sprinklers. On July 16, 2004, the Government Accountability Office released a report which concluded that the substantial loss of life in the Hartford and Nashville fires could have been reduced or eliminated by the presence of properly functioning automatic sprinkler systems. The report also found that state and federal oversight of nursing home compliance with fire safety standards is inadequate.

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