

REPS. LARSON AND KING PROPOSE GREATER FIRE PROTECTION FOR NURSING HOMES

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WASHINGTON- Today, Rep. John B. Larson (D-CT-1) and Rep. Peter King (R-NY-03) re-introduced bipartisan legislation to improve fire safety in nursing facilities by encouraging universal installation of life automatic sprinklers within the next five years.

The Nursing Home Fire Safety Act of 2007 would provide financial assistance for nursing facilities to install life-saving sprinkler systems while urging the Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to adopt fire safety standards, such as, those developed by the National Fire Protection Association in the 2006 Life Safety Code. The bill calls for CMS to require Medicare Program participants to be fully equipped with sprinklers.

Both industry and government officials have cited cost as the greatest barrier to sprinkler protection in nursing facilities. The bill addresses that problem by providing low-income loans as well as a Sprinkler Retrofit Assistance Grant Program grants to qualifying nursing homes for installation of sprinklers. It authorizes \$450 million for loans and \$100 million for grants over five years.

Larson has pursued legislation to address this issue since 2003 when fires in nursing homes in Hartford, Conn. and Nashville, Tenn. that had no sprinklers killed 31 patients.

"When the care of a loved one is entrusted in a nursing facility, you should be confident that they will be protected from fire dangers," said Larson. "It is alarming that between 20 to 30 percent of the 17,000 of nursing homes across the country still lack adequate fire sprinkler systems. This bill creates mechanisms for stronger fire safety standards, which are long overdue."

"We must ensure that everything is done to protect our nursing homes," King stated. "By providing low interest loans and grants to install sprinkler systems and implement the latest safety standards, we are taking the steps necessary to prevent this senseless loss of life."

A 2004 report of the General Accountability Office 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 study also noted that no multiple-death fires had ever occurred in a long-term care facility that had fully automatic sprinklers. Underscoring the particular vulnerability of the elderly and sick population who reside in nursing homes, the GAO also concluded that, in general, federal oversight of fire safety standards was weak.

CMS mandates only new and renovated nursing homes to install full sprinkler systems. CMS responded to the GAO report by requiring all other nursing homes to install battery-operated smoke alarms.

The Hartford and Nashville fires demonstrated the terrible and unacceptable consequences of ignoring this issue, Larson added. While Tennessee and Connecticut took steps to increase fire safety in nursing homes as a result of these tragic events, the federal government has only taken small steps to increase fire safety. Protecting nursing home residents from fire is a shared responsibility between the long term care industry and the federal government. The industry has demonstrated that it is ready to step up but they cannot do it alone. It is time for Congress to take action to protect our most frail and vulnerable from the threat of fire and prevent these senseless tragedies in the future.

Connecticut and Tennessee both required that all nursing homes have full sprinkler protection in response to the fatal fires there. Connecticut extended its deadline for compliance after nursing homes said that financing difficulties made it difficult to make the improvements in time.

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