

## LARSON ANNOUNCES NURSING FACILITY FIRE SAFETY LEGISLATION AT EAST HARTFORD NURSING HOME

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**LARSON ANNOUNCES NURSING FACILITY FIRE SAFETY LEGISLATION AT EAST HARTFORD NURSING HOME**  
EAST HARTFORD – Today, U.S. Congressman John B. Larson (CT-1) toured Riverside Health and Rehabilitation Center in East Hartford to announce the reintroduction of bipartisan legislation to improve fire safety in nursing facilities by encouraging universal installation of automatic fire sprinklers within the next five years. Larson toured the facility with Riverside Administrator Karen Chadderton, Connecticut Association of Healthcare Facilities Executive Vice President Toni Fatone, and American Health Care Association Vice President of Public Affairs Susan Feeney.

The Nursing Facility Fire Safety Act of 2007 (H.R. 2521) would provide financial assistance for nursing facilities to install life-saving sprinkler systems while urging the Centers for 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 automatic fire 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 killed 31 patients in nursing homes in Hartford, Conn. and Nashville, Tenn. that had no sprinklers killed.

“When the care of a loved 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 16,000 nursing homes across the country still lack adequate fire sprinkler systems. This bill creates mechanisms for stronger fire safety standards, which are long overdue.”

“As our profession works to improve care quality, we understand that our first, most basic priority is to guarantee the physical safety of frail, elderly, and disabled residents within each facility,” remarked Bruce Yarwood, President and CEO of the American Health Care Association (AHCA) – the nation’s largest organization representing long term care. “Even though nursing home fires are rare, this bill brings necessary, renewed attention to fire prevention while ensuring through key financing mechanisms that every facility in the nation can be equipped with a modern, effective fire sprinkler system. AHCA supports H.R. 2521, and appreciates Representatives Larson and King for their efforts to have government help shoulder the responsibility of ensuring the most elemental part of quality long term care—patient safety.”

A 2004 report of the Government Accountability Office (GAO) 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 cared for 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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