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## Push Begins For Sprinkler Systems

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U.S. Rep. John B. Larson launched a campaign Tuesday to gain support for a federal bill that would reimburse federally funded nursing homes that install sprinkler systems over the next five years.

If passed, the proposed legislation would cost an estimated \$1 billion and would become a new set-aside program under the existing Medicare and Medicaid programs, said Larson, D-1st District. It would be geared to protecting the nation's "most vulnerable citizens," who live in nursing homes, he said.

Although Larson acknowledged that it would be difficult to get any new bills passed in Congress during this legislative session, he said that introducing the bill is an "important first step."

Larson made his announcement outside the former Greenwood Health Center, the site of a major nursing home fire in February 2003; 16 people died as a result of the fire. Now known as Park Place Health Center, the new owners of the home in Hartford's Parkville section installed sprinklers, alarms and a fire protection system.

Mayor Eddie A. Perez, Fire Chief Charles A. Teale Sr. and several state lawmakers and representatives of the Connecticut Association of Healthcare Facilities stood in support of the bill.

Larson introduced the bill in part because of the Greenwood fire and another deadly fire in Tennessee, which also killed nursing home residents. "It is long overdue for the federal government to address this problem. We need to protect our most vulnerable citizens," Larson said.

He said the bill would allow for reimbursement but not outright grants. An estimated 480 nursing homes across the country do not have sprinkler systems, Larson said. Many nursing homes are federally funded through Medicare or Medicaid and they do not have enough resources to install sprinklers without federal help, he said.

Many of the nursing homes received waivers in the 1960s and they were not required to update buildings to meet current fire department standards.

Connecticut is one of 13 states that require nursing homes to install sprinkler systems by 2005. The Connecticut law was passed in response to the Greenwood fire.

Perez and Teale applauded Larson for introducing the bill, which they said could save lives.

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