

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-1309**

July 18, 2011

Mr. Ralph Vasami  
Executive Director  
Window Covering Manufacturers Association  
355 Lexington Avenue, 15th Floor  
New York, NY 10017

Dear Mr. Vasami:

As a long-time consumer product safety advocate and a member of the House Energy and Commerce, which has jurisdiction over consumer protection, I am writing to express my serious concern about the ongoing safety risk and strangulation hazard that corded window coverings present to children. This problem was raised in a recent Chicago Tribune article, which I have enclosed. In addition, I understand that you received a letter dated June 1, 2011, on this topic from Consumer Product Safety Commission Chairman Inez Tenenbaum, and I want to echo the issues that Chairman Tenenbaum raised in that communication.

It is unacceptable that children are still being injured and killed in entirely preventable accidents involving window coverings. The organization Parents for Window Blind Safety has documented 495 deaths and injuries from corded window coverings since 1982. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, a child dies from window cord strangulation about once a month and several children are injured. The window covering designs that would prevent these tragedies are not only already in existence, but they are already on the market. Some of the very same companies that sell the safer products are also continuing to sell the more dangerous designs.

I support the effort that your organization, the Window Covering Manufacturers Association (WCMA), is currently undertaking to revise the voluntary safety standard for these products. As WCMA represents the largest number of manufacturers, it is in the unique position to influence substantial, positive change throughout the entire industry. If your industry can reach agreement on improving consumer protections and act promptly to eliminate this threat, it will prevent the necessity for any Congressional action to address safety concerns that have not been remedied.

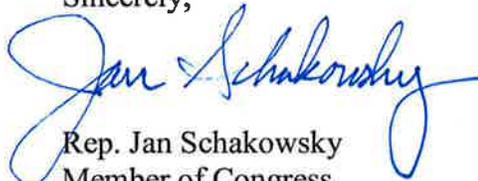
I want to take this opportunity to encourage WCMA to adopt a voluntary standard that doesn't just reduce injuries and deaths, but completely eliminates them. Given the safe products that are already on the market, that goal is not only desirable, but it is also completely achievable. WCMA should not approve a standard allowing for a superficial fix that will ultimately still leave children at risk such as allowing tension devices, which have, in the past, proven to pull away from walls, and allowing operational cords which have wrapped around the

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neck of children causing strangulation. Our kids should not be the test subjects for product safety. This is a chance for your industry to save lives, and I hope you will take full advantage of the opportunity.

Thank you again for your movement forward on this issue. I look forward to reviewing additional progress on this matter.

Sincerely,



Rep. Jan Schakowsky  
Member of Congress

Enclosure

[www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/ct-met-blinds-20110608,0,2925988.story](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/ct-met-blinds-20110608,0,2925988.story)

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## **Loose standards for window blinds lead to strangulation risk for children**

**The window blind industry isn't doing enough to eliminate the risk of strangulation for children, regulators and safety advocates say**

By Ellen Gabler, Tribune reporter

5:25 PM CDT, June 8, 2011

Brandyn Coppedge was alone in the living room for only a few minutes while his brother advertisement Rogan, 21, went into the bathroom. When Rogan returned, 3-year-old Brandyn was hanging from a cord on the window blinds.

The cord was around Brandyn's neck and his feet weren't touching the floor.

Rogan performed CPR to try to revive his brother, but paramedics said the little boy from Norfolk, Va., had died quickly after being strangled by the window blind cord.

Cords on window blinds and shades have been a known strangulation hazard for decades, as children can get caught in the cords that hold the products together or are used to pull them up and down. About one child dies this way every month, U.S. government regulators say. Brandyn died in 2009.

Last summer, safety regulators in the U.S., Canada and Europe told the window covering industry to enact safety standards that would eliminate strangulation hazards. Now, government regulators and safety advocates say that more children could die if the latest proposals being considered by the Window Covering Manufacturers Association are adopted.

That's because the proposals allow manufacturers to still use cords that children can wrap around their necks, according to safety consultants and regulators who are part of a committee to oversee the standard-setting process.

Inez Tenenbaum, chairman of the federal agency that regulates window blinds, had urged the trade group to eliminate exposed cords on window blinds and shades.

Last week, in a sign of mounting frustration, Tenenbaum chastised the group in a stern letter.

"I encourage you to guard against accepting ... requirements that would continue to allow strangulation risks ... out of a misplaced desire for convenience, aesthetics or placating anyone who may wish to continue moving slowly, rather than proactively addressing this longstanding problem once and for all," wrote Tenenbaum, who is chairwoman of the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Linda Kaiser, who founded Parents For Window Blind Safety and is a safety advocate on the committee, said she would withdraw her support from the group if the standards weren't strict enough by the

October deadline.

"I'm not going to risk the lives of children just so (companies) can have their products out and make money," said Kaiser, whose 1-year-old daughter, Cheyenne, strangled in her crib in 2002 after she got caught in the inner cord of blinds near her crib.

More than 200 children in the U.S. have died in the last two decades from being strangled in window-cord related accidents with blinds and shades, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. The annual rate has remained steady, the commission said.

The window-blind trade association sets voluntary standards for its products. Regulators and safety groups sometimes give suggestions, but the industry usually has the final say and more input. In rare cases, government regulators step in and require mandatory standards, which Tenenbaum said she would consider.

Federal law reduces regulators to bit players in the process of writing voluntary product standards. Amendments passed during the Reagan administration bar the Consumer Product Safety Commission from issuing mandatory safety requirements unless those regulators can prove that the voluntary ones won't cut the risk of injury or that most manufacturers aren't following them.

When asked by the Tribune about concerns raised by regulators and safety advocates, the trade group's executive director, Ralph Vasami, said it would be "premature" to discuss the committee's deliberations or predict the final draft for the standards.

Vasami pointed out that the committee includes not just professionals from the window covering industry but representatives from the Consumer Product Safety Commission and consumer safety groups such as Kaiser's.

Kaiser and other safety experts, however, said their input is being ignored.

"The whole point ... of us working together is to eliminate the hazard, not to just band-aid it again which is what we've done for 20 years," Kaiser said.

One of the "band-aids" that regulators and safety advocates are concerned about is what are known as tie-down or tension devices. The pieces, which are sometimes made of plastic, fasten onto the end of a looped cord that pulls blinds or shades up and down. The device is supposed to be screwed into the wall or windowsill to hold the cord taut. The blind can then be moved up and down on a sort of pulley system.

In theory, the taut cord reduces the risk that a child can wrap it around his or her neck. But safety advocates and regulators do not think those devices are safe because they break easily and often aren't installed correctly.

The tension device at Brandyn Coppedge's house broke away from the wall, his parents said. It may have happened as he hung on the cord after climbing up on the couch to look out the window — just seconds before he died.

"They need to somehow fix this so this doesn't happen to any more children," said Brandyn's mother, Karen Coppedge.

Over the years, the window covering industry and regulators have tried to educate parents about the

safety hazards, and companies have made tweaks to the products in hopes of making them safer. In 1994, for example, some pull cords with continuous loops were cut to eliminate the loop. Tassels were added to each cord. But the tassels can become tangled.

At the same time, not all loops were eliminated. Companies could provide the tie-down or tension devices to secure loops to a wall or windowsill.

Regulators and the industry also have tried recalls. In 2009, millions of Roman shades were recalled after regulators received reports of five deaths and 16 near-strangulations in the products over a three-year period. Children were getting their necks stuck between the exposed inner cord and the fabric on the back of the blind.

Recalls, however, are not noticed by many consumers and don't always eliminate the strangulation hazard.

In 2010, Tenenbaum formed the task force to eliminate the problem.

"The chairman has never believed that recalls are the long-term solution," said commission spokesman Scott Wolfson. "The solution is improving the standard."

Carol Pollack-Nelson, a safety consultant also on the committee, said the technology and prototypes already exist to eliminate the risk of strangulation. Companies already are making models that are cordless or have the cords enclosed in fabric.

But many homes still have older blinds, and even new blinds have exposed cords.

Less than three months ago, 5-year-old Gavin O'Bryant died when he strangled in the blinds covering French doors that went out to his backyard. Gavin's family had moved into the rental home in Mill Creek, Wash., just three weeks earlier. The tension device for the blinds hadn't been screwed into the door.

Gavin's father, Cyrus, said his son loved superheroes and probably thought he was being like Spiderman as he swung on the cord. Gavin's 15-year-old sister, Mariah, found him hanging from the door when she came in to check on him after doing dishes.

Cyrus O'Bryant, a police officer, said he and his wife, Reshelle, warned their kids constantly about other safety hazards like speeding cars and light sockets. But they didn't know children could strangle in blinds.

"It was one of those things where it didn't even cross our minds," he said.

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