

□ **Congress Urged to Save Kids From Automobile Hazards**

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WASHINGTON -- "Year after year, hundreds of young lives are needlessly lost because Congress has failed to pass legislation that would make cars safer for children," says one Democrat in Congress.

Rep. Janice Schakowsky (D-Ill.) is among the lawmakers introducing legislation that addresses non-traffic safety problems, such as children getting their heads caught in power windows and children being run over by cars that are backing up.

The goal of the bill is to decrease the incidence of child injury and death that are "entirely preventable," Schakowsky said.

More regulations

A broad coalition of consumer, health, medical and safety groups is pushing for passage of a bill that would direct the U.S. Secretary of Transportation to issue rules on power windows, backup warning systems, and emergency brakes.

Consumer advocates say power windows should automatically reverse direction when they detect an obstruction; and they want all new cars to come with backup warning systems, such as beepers or cameras.

They're also calling for a child safety information program to warn parents about non-traffic vehicle hazards; and they want the federal government to start collecting data about "non-traffic" incidents involving children and cars.

The government does not collect such information right now. But a group called Kids and Cars

does collect data on non-traffic child deaths and injuries, relying on news reports and other anecdotal sources.

"Every week at least four children needlessly die in and around cars," said Janette Fennell, president of Kids and Cars. She insists that federal action is required to "stem the tide of future tragedies."

According to Kids and Cars, since 2000, at least 1,000 children have died in non-traffic incidents, with 219 in 2006 alone. Back-over incidents have increased dramatically, claiming the lives of 474 children from 2002-2006 compared to 128 from 1997-2001, Fennell says.

Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.), a cosponsor of the House bill, noted that the technology exists to prevent such accidents and he says those safety features should be standard in all new vehicles.

Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) and John Sununu (R-N.H.) are sponsoring the Senate version of the bill.

"By taking simple, common sense steps using technology that already exists at low cost, we can make our cars safer for our children and protect them from these deadly, avoidable accidents. We owe it to families to do everything we can to give drivers a warning and give kids a chance," Clinton said in a news release.

"Senator Clinton and I have reintroduced our child safety legislation because this issue remains an urgent public safety matter. By taking responsible, affordable precautions -- such as installing backover warning systems, power window strangulation prevention mechanisms and brakeshift interlocks -- we can save lives," Sununu said.

In a 2005 report on safety hazards involving children and cars, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration noted that it's up to adults to protect children.

Nevertheless, the report concluded, "Child endangerment in motor vehicles is a serious problem that, until recently, was widely ignored. NHTSA and advocacy organizations are struggling to improve public awareness of this issue. As awareness increases, so will culpability and criminal liability."

In April 2006, NHTSA issued a new rule requiring that all passenger vehicles manufactured for sale in the United States come with safer power window switches that are less likely to be accidentally engaged by children who lean on them.

But the 2005 NHTSA report did not address back-up accidents, which apparently have become more frequent as cars have become larger.

A group called SUV Owners of America is encouraging drivers to learn more about blind spots of larger vehicles and the danger they pose to pedestrians. The group points to an August 2006 Consumer Reports study, which measured those blind spots.

"The area behind your vehicle can be a killing zone," Consumer Reports warned in August 2006. "Your best defense against backover accidents is to get out of your vehicle and check behind it just before you back up. If kids are nearby, make sure you can see them while backing up," the group concluded.

While some vehicles come with back-up sensors, SUV Owners of America notes that they can also be installed after a vehicle is purchased. After-market sensors are available at stores and on the Internet.