

## **Groups Urge Congress to Require Child-Safety Features on Cars**

by **Marcela Carrera** - Scripps Howard

07/20/2004

Greg Gulbransen thought his 2-year-old son, Cameron, was inside with his baby-sitter as he parked his SUV in their driveway. But as he backed in, he felt the car hit a bump.

Scripps Howard Foundation Wire, Washington, D.C. - "There on the driveway was my son, Cameron," Gulbransen said. "I can't begin to describe the shock. He was in the house, and I knew where I was going. I never had a chance to see him. He was too small."

Gulbransen, a pediatrician from Oyster Bay, N.Y., was just one of the parents who told stories about the deaths of their children at a press conference Tuesday at the Capitol. The parents were joined by the child safety advocate group, Kids and Cars and Consumers Union.

According to Kids and Cars President Janette Fennell, at least 91 children were backed over and killed in 2003, a 57 percent increase from the previous year. Fennell said her group must collect this kind of data because the government won't.

"The government collects only data that involves a crash on a public highway," Fennell said.

Fennell said that every year, children are injured or killed because drivers don't see them while backing up on private property. She said this problem could easily be prevented if Congress enacted new regulations to require that vehicles have more safety measures.

Fennell also called on Congress to correct the problem of power window deaths.

Britt Gates, of Anthony, Kan., said she and her husband blame themselves every day for learning the dangers of power windows the hard way.

Gates' daughter, Zoe, 4, was crushed by a power window almost three years ago. She was trying to pet a dog outside the car when she accidentally hit the window button and was killed

when the window closed on her neck.

Fennell said that when it was discovered that garage doors were unsafe and causing accidents, the government and automakers took action to fix the problem. But efforts to make cars safer are being ignored, she said.

"Congress has an opportunity to correct this tragic problem," Fennell said.

Sally Greenberg, senior product safety counsel for Consumers Union, said government officials have told her the number of deaths isn't big enough to warrant extreme attention.

"We say bologna," Greenberg said. "There are so many problems we can't fix. This one we can fix."

Consumers Union released a poll showing 8 in 10 Americans want more car safety regulations to protect children. The poll, conducted in May, also showed that 82 percent of respondents would choose vehicles equipped with a backup warning device and safe power switches. Seventy three percent think the government should collect information on non-traffic, non-crash incidents.

Consumers Union polled a random sample of 1,221 adults in an online survey. The margin of error is 3 percentage points

A conference committee of House and Senate members is considering requiring safety measures as part of the Safe and Flexible Transportation Efficiency Act of 2004 (SAFETEA).

The Senate has approved the provisions requiring the federal government to collect data on non-traffic, non-crash incidents, issue a safety standard that requires child-safe power windows and to evaluate backup warning devices to see which are most effective in detecting small children behind vehicles.

The House version of the bill, however, does not include any of these.

As part of their campaign to get the House to agree to provisions and to get the bill passed, Kids and Cars is planning to hand out books that resemble storybooks to transportation conference committee members. The books contain one-page stories about how children die in cars without the safety measures the groups support.

Rep. Janice D. Schakowsky, D-Ill., encouraged fellow members of Congress to stop ignoring the danger.

"We shouldn't wait for one more child to die - we should act now," Schakowsky said. "We have at our fingertips solutions that could save children's lives. The technology is available. The cost is not remarkable."

The parents at the news conference said that as hard as it was for them to tell their stories, they

felt it was necessary.

"My tragic story could happen to anyone," Gulbransen said. "No one should live my family's horror."