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Bill Will Protect Americans on Cruise Vacations

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Today, Rep. Doris Matsui (CA-05) introduced the Cruise Vessel Security and Safety Act of 2008 to keep Americans aware and protected while on cruise vacations. The bill is the culmination of months of fact-finding hearings and investigation into the matter.

For Rep. Matsui, the call to action came when one of her constituents, Laurie Dishman, wrote to her for help. Ms. Dishman was the victim of a sexual assault while on a cruise vacation, and was given no assistance by the cruise line in properly securing evidence of the assault, identifying her attacker who was an employee of the cruise ship, or prosecuting the crime once back on shore. Frustrated, Ms. Dishman reached out to her Congresswoman for help.

"When Laurie reached out to me, I knew that I had to use my position to help her and investigate the issue further. What we have found is truly alarming: there is little to no regulation of the cruise industry, and far too many crimes go unprosecuted each year," said Rep. Doris Matsui.

Rep. Matsui called for multiple hearings that brought key executives in the cruise industry to testify before Congress. Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) took up the cause in the Senate, holding a hearing just last week on the issue. Despite these fact-finding missions, the cruise industry has not yet taken sufficient action to regulate itself, spawning the need for comprehensive legislation.

"It is absolutely appalling that the cruise industry still has not instituted basic reforms so that crimes can be prevented and if crimes do occur, victims have adequate access to justice. When a goliath like the cruise industry will not act in the best interest of the customers who are entrusting it with their personal well-being, then Congress has a responsibility to step in and shed some sunlight on the problem," said Rep. Matsui.

Rep. Matsui is a leading advocate in Congress for cruise safety, and welcomed the unequivocal support of Reps. Doggett (TX-25), John Lewis (GA-05), Maloney (NY-14), and Shays (CT-04). Together, they presented the Cruise Vessel Security and Safety Act, while Sen. Kerry introduced companion legislation in the Senate.

"12 million Americans will board cruise ships this year and they should know that they are safe," said Sen. Kerry. "The tragic loss of Ken Carver's daughter reminds us we need to tighten security and crime reporting regulations. Changing legal jurisdictions in international waters are no longer an excuse for failing to report and prosecute serious crimes. It's time to hold the industry accountable for the security and protection of their passengers. I'm grateful to Senator Kerry and Rep. Matsui for their support in this endeavor."

The Cruise Vessel Security and Safety Act of 2008 incorporates the recommendations and priorities of the international Cruise Victims Association (ICV), a nonprofit organization that represents victims of crimes on cruise ships. Kendall Carver, President of ICV indicated strong support for the bill that is being introduced in both the House and Senate. In March of 2006, at a congressional hearing, ICV introduced a 10 point program to improve safety on cruise ships to protect the passengers and crewmembers.

"Over the past year our organization and other victims of cruise crimes have met numerous times with cruise lines executives in an effort to have them voluntarily take the necessary steps as outlined in our proposals. The cruise line industry has failed to step up to the challenge and make any significant changes to improve safety. That resistance to change is a clear signal to us that the only alternative left is for the United States Congress to move forward with legislation," stated Carver.

The legislation would:

•§ Improve Ship Safety

- Our legislation would improve ship safety by mandating: guard rails to reach 54 inches in height; and entry doors of each passenger stateroom and crew cabin to have peep holes, security latches, and time sensitive key technology. Ship owners would be required to implement fire safety codes as well as technology to detect when a passenger falls overboard. Procedures would also be established to determine which crew members have access to staterooms and when.

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•§ Provide Transparency in Reporting

The legislation would establish a reporting structure based on the current voluntary agreement in place between the cruise industry, the FBI, and the Coast Guard. Additionally, each ship would be required to maintain a log book, which would record all deaths, missing individuals, alleged crimes, and passenger/crewmember complaints regarding theft, sexual harassment, and assault. The log books would be available to FBI and Coast Guard electronically, as well as to any law enforcement officer upon request. Statistical information would be posted on a public website maintained by the Coast Guard.

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•§ Improve Crime Scene Response

Each ship would be required to maintain anti-retroviral medications and medications used to prevent sexually transmitted diseases after assault, as well as equipment and materials for performing a medical examination to determine if a victim has been raped. A United States licensed medical practitioner would be on every ship to perform the necessary examinations and to administer treatment. Private medical information would be protected, and would require written authorization for release. Additionally, all passengers would be given free, immediate, and confidential access to a National Sexual Assault Hotline and the FBI.

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•§ Improve Training Procedures

The legislation would establish a program designed by the Coast Guard and the FBI, and certified by the Administrator of the Maritime Administration, to train appropriate crewmembers in crime scene investigation. Each ship would be required to maintain one crewmember trained and certified under such a program.

•§ Enforce Safety and Environmental Standards

The Coast Guard is authorized to dispatch personnel to monitor discharge of waste, to verify logbook entries related to waste treatment and disposal, and to act as public safety officers by securing and collecting evidence of alleged crimes. Additionally, the Secretary of the Coast Guard shall conduct a study of passenger security needs and report findings/suggestions to Congress.

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•§ Establish Equitable Remedies

- The bill also establishes fair and equal remedies for persons injured in boating disasters.

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