

House Republican Press Release

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**Governor Rell, Legislators to Make Bill Banning Funeral Protests
Effective Immediately**



*Bipartisan Effort Will Change October 1 Effective
Date of “Disruption of a Funeral” Law*

Governor M. Jodi Rell, the Chairs of the Select Committee on Veterans’ Affairs and other legislators today called for an amendment on a suitable bill to make House Bill 6060, *An Act Concerning Disruption of a Funeral* effective immediately. The funeral of 1st Lt. Keith Neal Heidtman, who died May 28 in Iraq, is Friday, June 8th and the Governor and legislators will try to ensure that the bill is in effect by that date .

“Our veterans serve and sacrifice -- and risk and lose their lives -- to protect our vital freedoms and national interests,” Governor Rell said “We take this immediate action so that no more families of our fallen heroes suffer the additional trauma of a protest at the funeral of their loved one.”

The legislation passed both Chambers with an effective date of October 1st and an amendment will included in HB 6949 *An Act Concerning National Guard Bonuses*, scheduled for legislative action today. The action is especially timely because Lt. Heidtman’s funeral has been targeted for a protest by the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, a group that has protested and disrupted military funerals across the country.

“The funeral of a veteran is a solemn event and the veteran’s family and friends are entitled to a peaceful ceremony unmarred by people who seek to make political statements,” said Representative Ted Graziani, House Chair of the Select Committee on Veterans’ Affairs.

“While the First Amendment guarantees the right to free speech, our Supreme Court has repeatedly stated that government may place reasonable time, place and manner restrictions on such speech, which the bill appropriately does,” said Andrew Maynard, Senate Chair of the Select Committee on Veterans Affairs.

The Governor and legislators noted that the restriction is limited only to speech or action intended to disrupt the funeral and places a careful and narrow restriction on such time, place and manner of free speech. It is limited in time to one hour before and after the funeral and in scope to 150 feet of the location of the funeral or 300 feet of ingress or egress of the funeral if the activity is an attempt to prevent such ingress or egress.

“The passing of a loved one is hard for any family to endure and the funeral for a military family should be treated with the highest respect for loved ones and be remembered as a lasting tribute for the deceased,” said Senator Andrew McDonald, Senate Chair of the Judiciary Committee.

“Disruption of a military funeral has happened once in Connecticut and it has been threatened on a few occasions. This bill will allow police to make an arrest if people intentionally disturb a funeral,” said Representative Mike Lawlor, House Chair of Judiciary.

“We have an obligation to balance the right to freedom of speech with the need for dignified, respectful funerals and memorials for our veterans,” added Senator Leonard Fasano, Ranking Member of the Veterans’ Committee.

“The disruption of the funerals of veterans by protesters is something that I think any citizen would agree is disrespectful and I am pleased to support this action,” said Representative Mike Alberts, Ranking Member of the Veterans’ Committee.

Lt. Keith Neal Heidtman of Norwich died May 28 when enemy fire took down the OH-58D Kiowa reconnaissance helicopter he was co-piloting over Diyala, Iraq, north of Baghdad. He was deployed to Iraq in December 2006.