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Protecting the Elderly from Falls

Remarks by: **Bobby Jackson, Vice President for National Programs**

(Commentary appearing in the Chicago Tribune on March 29, 2002.)

When Ronald Reagan fell at his home last year, it brought to our attention a growing public health problem. Falls caused or led to 15,400 deaths in America last year. More than half of all falls occur in the home or on home premises. But the fall that ended former Washington Post Co. chairman Katharine Graham's life happened in a public place. Both Reagan and Graham were over 80 years of age at the time of their falls.

While all age groups are vulnerable, 60 percent of fall-related deaths occur among people 65 and older. Falls are the No. 1 cause of injury-related death for males 80 and older and for females 75 and older. One-fourth of those who sustain a hip fracture die within one year and another 50 percent never return to their prior level of mobility or independence.

This growing national problem has not gone unnoticed in Washington. Sen. Tim Hutchinson (R-Ark.) and Rep. Frank Pallone Jr. (D-N.J.), strongly supported by the National Safety Council (NSC), have introduced the bipartisan Elder Fall Prevention Act of 2002 in the Senate and the House.

At a press conference introducing the bill in February, Hutchinson said, "The Elder Fall Prevention Act will provide needed resources for education, research and demonstration projects aimed at reducing the risk of falls, identifying vulnerable populations and preventing repeat falls."

Fall-related medical expenses cost Americans more than \$20 billion each year, according to estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Projections show these expenses will climb to more than \$32 billion over the next 20 years. Our already strapped Medicare and Medicaid systems will be hard-pressed to meet these new costs.

If this bill succeeds, the congressionally chartered National Safety Council will spearhead several initiatives, along with the Centers for Disease Control, the Administration on Aging and the Agency for Health Care Research and Quality.

The NSC's goals are to prevent almost 50,000 fall-related fatalities by 2008 and 75,000 such fatalities by 2012, and to prevent 13.2 million fall-related injuries over the next 12 years. To address the problem, the NSC will work to reduce falls and fall-related injuries in adults age 50 and over through collaborative activities of federal agencies and other health and professional organizations.

The NSC envisions a broad range of approaches to reduce the number of falls in the home and community--providing information, resources and training to individuals, families, medical practitioners, community organizations, the media and policymakers on the economic impact and prevention of falls. Information will include home environment modification; medication, vision and physical activity review; enhancement of balance and strength; risk assessment; behavior change; fall-prevention counseling; and other emerging preventive measures that can help to mitigate the risks of falls as we age.

It is heartening to know that falls among our older population are recognized in Washington as a critical public health problem. No family should have to endure the

heartbreak of losing an elderly relative to a preventable fall. All Americans should find it in their best interest to support this bipartisan legislation.

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