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Spending bill takes aim at nursing home fire hazards

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AUSTIN – Fire hazards at nursing homes would be reduced under a spending provision approved by the House on Thursday.

Rep. Carol Kent, the Dallas Democrat who tacked the provision on an emergency spending bill, said 33 of the nearly 1,100 nursing homes in Texas have inadequate fire suppression systems.

"I was shocked," said Kent, a freshman who says Dallas nursing home administrator Loretta Roberts urged her to do something.

"Seniors deserve to have their basic safety needs met, and that obviously should include sprinklers."

Roberts, who runs Forest Lane Healthcare in North Dallas, said she invited Kent last fall to visit her nursing home.

Roberts said she wanted to nudge the newly elected lawmaker to press for money to upgrade other homes that are older and probably rely heavily on inadequate reimbursements from Medicaid, the state-federal health care program for the poor.

Robert said that according to the state agency that regulates nursing homes, 33 homes either have no sprinklers or have sprinklers that cover just part of the building.

Roberts, asked Thursday if she expected results to come so quickly, said, "No. I'm so thankful."

Kent said her provision would direct the Department of Aging and Disability Services to spend \$3 million.

She added it to an amendment stripping some \$68 million in computer purchases from an emergency bill that would use \$3.3 billion in stimulus funds to fill holes in the current two-year budget and free up state funds for the next budget cycle.