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A Legislative Success Story in the United States Senate:
The Role of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton

Although more than 5600 bills and joint resolutions have been introduced in the 110th Congress, fewer than 300 passed through both chambers and avoided veto to be signed into law as of the August 2008 recess.¹ Even a bill conceived and written in the spirit of bipartisanship, with sponsors and cosponsors on both sides of the aisle, can take years to make its way through the House and the Senate. While the Cameron Gulbransen Kids and Cars Safety Act was inspired by a tragedy that occurred in October 2002, nearly seven years passed before the bill was signed into law in February 2008. Named after a two-year-old Long Island child who was killed as his father backed the family SUV out of their driveway, the Cameron Gulbransen Kids and Cars Safety Act is designed to prevent similar tragedies by creating new, cost-effective safety regulations for motor vehicles. As a lifelong advocate for children and families, Senator Clinton worked to gain support for the bill among members of Congress and the public, insisting that “safety is not a luxury.”²

In its final draft, the Cameron Gulbransen Kids and Cars Safety Act of 2007 requires the Department of Transportation to issue three regulations focused on reducing the hundreds of non-traffic related car accidents that occur every year.³ The first requires power windows to reverse direction automatically when obstructed, a measure that would prevent children from being trapped, injured or even strangled by car windows. The second regulation addresses the Gulbransen tragedy specifically by mandating back-over prevention technology in cars with

¹ The Library of Congress. THOMAS. <http://thomas.loc.gov/>

² “Schakowsky Introduces Kids and Cars Safety Act of 2007.” View from the Hill Online. 26 February 2007. <http://www.house.gov/list/press/il09_schakowsky/pr070226safetyact.shtml>.

³ The Library of Congress. THOMAS. <http://thomas.loc.gov/>

blind spots. Finally, the legislation requires breaks to be engaged before a passenger vehicle can be shifted out of the “Park” position, which would prevent anyone who does not intend to drive the car from accidentally shifting gears and rolling away. In addition to these three regulations, the act also created a child safety information program responsible for assembling information about non-traffic related child injuries and informing the public about the dangers associated with passenger vehicles.

Although the bill addresses a relatively non-controversial topic, creating a law that would successfully address tragedies faced by families like the Gulbrandsens was a lengthy process. Congressman Peter King, a Republican from the district where Cameron Gulbransen was killed, first began work on the bill after Cameron’s father wrote him a letter sharing his story. With the help of Representative Janice Schakowsky (D-IL), Congressman King first introduced the Cameron Gulbransen Kids and Cars Safety Act in December of 2003. Searching for a colleague who could introduce the bill in the Senate, Congressman King approached Senator Clinton’s office. The Senator’s Senior Education and Child Welfare Policy Advisor, Catherine Brown, discussed the topic with Senator Clinton, who agreed to pursue the issue in the Senate. Ms. Brown began work on the bill for Senator Clinton, and when she left the Senator’s office Mildred Otero and Legislative Aide Chelsea Maughan took responsibility for the bill. Senator Clinton’s Chief of Staff Tamera Luzzatto, Press Secretary Philippe Reines and several legislative directors, legislative aides and press assistants also worked on the bill over the course of seven years. Ms. Maughan explained that she and her colleagues kept the Senator updated on the status of the bill early in the process through weekly staff meetings. As her presidential campaign intensified, she received questions and updates from her staff in the office “Weekly,” which the Senator received every Friday and responded to, if necessary, the following week. During the

three sessions of Congress that Senator Clinton worked on the bill, she remained active in press events and worked directly with families affected by the issue, meeting with the Gulbrandsens on five occasions to discuss the proposed legislation.

Once Senator Clinton committed to the issue, her staff set out to build bipartisan support by finding a Republican who would sponsor the bill with Senator Clinton in the Senate. In addition to a number of advocacy groups, Senator Clinton's staff found support from car safety advocate and New Hampshire State Representative Packy Campbell (R-Farmington), whose son Ian died in an April 2004 accident. Representative Campbell lobbied Republican Senator John Sununu (R-NH), who agreed to sponsor the bill with Senator Clinton. In addition to serving as a Senator from Representative Campbell's home state, Senator Sununu served on the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, which had jurisdiction over the bill. Working with Senator Sununu, Senator Clinton's office spent the remainder of the 108th Congress reaching out to other offices and encouraging members on both sides of the aisle to support the proposed legislation.

Senator Clinton's office also worked with advocacy groups ranging from Consumers Union to the American Academy of Pediatrics. A number of active groups offered support for the bill early in the process. Although Senator Clinton's staff strongly encouraged Members of Congress to support the proposed legislation, Ms. Maughan insists that "the groups made all the difference." Their efforts to lobby members and encourage co-sponsorship spurred support, and once the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation scheduled a hearing many of the Committee's members signed on as co-sponsors. While some Senators agreed to co-sponsor the bill early in the process, Senator Clinton's staff worked to assuage the concerns of others. For example, Senator Debbie Stabenow, a Democrat from Michigan, hesitated to co-

sponsor the bill because of the powerful automobile industry in her home state. As Senator Clinton, Senator Sununu, Congressman King and Congresswoman Schakowsky reached out to car manufacturers and included their representatives in the process, members like Senator Stabenow grew increasingly vocal about their support for the proposed legislation.

In addition to explaining the contents of the bill to representatives of the automobile industry, Senator Clinton and the other sponsors compromised on the timeline for changes outlined in the original House bill. Though the Members refused to change any of the proposed regulations to appease the automobile lobby, their main objective was to prevent public opposition to the bill. To meet this goal Senator Clinton's staff strove to keep car manufacturers informed on the status of the bill, stressing that the new regulations would not mandate specific types of technology but rather create general guidelines to improve safety. Senator Clinton emphasized this point with the refrain that "safety is not a luxury," insisting that there were cost-effective solutions to many of the dangers the bill would prevent. As an example, Ms. Maughan contrasted cars that feature small cameras installed on the bumper that display blind spots to the driver with those that feature technology as simple as a sensor to detect objects behind the car. While the former is often a feature of luxury vehicles, the latter would also meet the requirements outlined in the bill at a low cost. Working with Senator Clinton's office behind the scenes, the automobile lobby outlined regulations they could and could not accept, and ultimately agreed to the bill privately.

Even with bipartisan sponsorship, 26 co-sponsors in the Senate, and an absence of public opposition to the bill, the Cameron Gulbransen Kids and Cars Safety Act failed to pass in the final hours of the 109th Congress. Though the bill went to the Senate floor for a vote, an anonymous hold aimed at another bill prevented the passage of S. 1948. Chelsea Maughan

recalled working late into the night as Senator Clinton fought to get the bill through, and later secured a pledge from Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to pursue the bill again in the 110th Congress. The following year Senator Clinton and her staff worked once again to gain co-sponsors, and after another year of work the bill finally reached the Senate floor for a vote. After years of meetings and media events designed to draw attention to the issue, Senator Clinton announced the success of the Cameron Gulbransen Kids and Cars Safety Act of 2007 on February 14, 2008 from the campaign trail.⁴

⁴ “Clinton and Dingell Hail Final Passage of Kids and Cars Safety Legislation Now On Its Way to Be Signed Into Law.” The Office of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. 14 February 2008.
<http://www.senate.gov/~clinton/news/statements/details.cfm?id=293026>