

CARBON MONOXIDE POISONING PREVENTION

Written Statement of

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Subcommittee Hearing

**Subcommittee on Consumer Protection,
Product Safety & Insurance
Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee**

Good afternoon. My name is Cheryl Burt, and I am from Rochester, Minnesota. Thank you, Chairman Pryor and members of the Committee for giving me the opportunity to talk to you about carbon monoxide poisoning. I'd also like to thank Senator Klobuchar for inviting me to tell my story. I commend her and Senator Nelson for their commitment to take the issue of C-O awareness to a national level.

When you have a fire in your home, you know it. You can see smoke. Smell the fumes. Feel the heat. And since smoke alarms have been required in homes for many years, chances are you will also hear your smoke alarm sound.

When you have carbon monoxide in your home, you cannot see it. You cannot taste it. You cannot smell it. You will feel its effects – a headache, nausea, dizziness – but you don't realize that you're being poisoned. You don't comprehend the danger, and if you do, you are completely helpless to take action to save yourself or your family.

I know. Fourteen years ago, this January, carbon monoxide poisoned my family, and killed two of my three children.

Let me start by saying that I lived by life's safety rules. I had smoke alarms in my home. I used safety gates and child locks, and I thought my home was safe. I was wrong.

On this particular evening, I progressively got sicker and sicker, with what I thought was a family-sized case of the flu. In fact, I had brought my sons to the doctor each week for about two months because they kept having flu-like symptoms. My instinct told me something was wrong, but by the time we reached the doctor's office, my sons were better. Many, including the doctors, thought I was overreacting. I now know that they would feel better whenever I took them out of our CO-filled house and into fresh air. But back then, I never thought that we were being poisoned. By the time I did realize something was terribly wrong, I had no idea just *how terribly wrong* it was. I didn't realize that my babies were dying, just rooms away from me. I couldn't help them, or even help myself.

A carbon monoxide alarm would have saved my children's lives. But I didn't have one in my home. So that night, my two youngest children died in their sleep from CO poisoning due to a malfunctioning furnace that was venting dangerous levels of CO throughout our home. The rest of my family, while severely injured, managed to survive this horrific experience....only to wake up the next afternoon in the hospital, with our lives tragically changed forever.

I was asked to give testimony today.... to give reasons why I support S 1216, which would give states that pass CO alarm laws incentives to raise awareness, and would require a mandatory standard for all CO alarms sold in the U.S.

I can give you three very good, very precious reasons for my support: Nicholas Todd Burt, Zachary Todd Burt, and Ryan Todd Burt.

My little Nick turned four years old just 8 days before his death. In fact, we had been too sick to have his birthday party. I now know that our illness was really the beginning of CO poisoning. But at the time, we decided to wait to celebrate once we all "got better." That day never came. He is reason number one.

Reason number two is Zach. Zach was just shy of 16 months old when he died. I was up with Zach many, many times during that horrible night. Looking back, I should have realized that

something was very, very wrong in my home, but I was too sick, too poisoned to know. Instead, it was Zach who I could not pick up to rock back to sleep. It was Zach who was having trouble breathing. But, the carbon monoxide made me too weak to lift him or soothe him. Instead, I hung onto his crib rails, trying to keep myself standing, trying to keep from passing out, and I prayed that he would go back to sleep. I listened to his labored breath, but was unable to comprehend the danger my baby was in, unable to realize he that was dying.

Now, I listen to Zach's labored breathing *every night* in my sleep. I would give *anything* to have that night back, to have been able to think clearly and save my baby.

Reason number three is Ryan. He was five and a half when we were poisoned. He barely survived. He has lived the past 14 years with the knowledge that while he lived, his two brothers died right next to him.

What haunts me is that I could have prevented their deaths. As a mother, I feel I should have prevented it. I knew a little about carbon monoxide alarms, but didn't realize their life-saving value. In fact, just a few weeks before this incident happened, I was shopping for the holidays with a friend, and we talked about buying alarms. I opted to buy my son another toy truck instead. Now I have the truck, but I don't have my son.

In the years since my children died, I have made it my mission to tell anyone who will listen about the need for CO alarms in our homes. I've heard from families who bought an alarm because of my story, and who later had the alarm sound, saving their lives or their loved ones. These stories are why I continue to do my part to raise awareness.

Knowledge is power. We warn about all sorts of health and safety issues: the flu, H1N1, proper seatbelt usage, and other dangers. But there is no national awareness about CO poisoning. I won't rest until every family has a CO alarm in their home. This bill would help provide funding to educate people about carbon monoxide dangers and the need for alarms.

This December 28th would have been Nick's 18th birthday. He would be graduating from high school. Zach would be 15 and probably just getting his driver's permit. I often think of how different my life would be today had I had a CO alarm in my home. I wish with all my heart that my state would have had a law in 1996 like the one we have now, requiring all homes to have a CO alarm. I know without a doubt that I would have had one in my home. Had there been more public education at that time, I would have bought the alarm instead of that toy truck, and I would not be speaking before you today. Instead of extreme sadness during this time of year, I would be home baking, enjoying the holiday season, and probably stressing about what to get my three active boys for Christmas.

I couldn't save my sons. But you have an opportunity to save someone else's family. I urge each of you to consider the safety of the citizens of your state and help protect them by supporting S1216. Again, thank you for allowing me to speak before you, and thank you for all you do to protect the citizens of the United States.