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By KEVIN LANDRIGAN, Staff Writer
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CONCORD – Congressman Charles Bass, R-N.H., celebrated with veteran groups Thursday the signing into law of his proposal to give more protection to military funerals from protests.

On Monday, President Obama signed a veterans benefits bill that included Bass' bill he introduced in 2011 and attracted a bipartisan list of 70 cosponsors.

"This measure will preserve the dignity of these somber events while still protecting the First Amendment rights that our nation's heroes have fought and died for," Bass said at a press conference Thursday.

Jean Durgin of Henniker, whose son Russell died in Afghanistan in 2006, said it was unfortunate a federal law was needed.

"I'm sorry that we need legislation to compel people to behave themselves but we have many events in this country where people need sensitivity training. I would be glad to participate in that," Durgin said.

The new law increases the buffer around a military service to 500 feet from the current limit of 300 feet.

Disruptive protests at a military funeral could not occur for two hours; the current limit in federal law is one hour.

It increases civil penalties for those who violate the law.

In 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a \$5 million court judgment against the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kan. for staging a protest near the funeral of a Maryland soldier.

The controversial church protested at the military service of Army Capt. Jonathan Grassbaugh of Hampstead in 2007.

In the high court's ruling, Chief Justice John Roberts said these demonstrations can be "hateful" but are protected by free speech and the proper response of government is to pass laws such as this one with buffer zones.

New Hampshire and more than 40 states have buffer zone laws along with the federal government.

Bass predicted the American Civil Liberties Union or like-minded groups will challenge this law but he believes it is constitutional.

"The right to protest is limited all the time," Bass added.