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By GARRY RAYNO, State House Bureau  
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CONCORD — A measure to increase protections for grieving families at funerals for their loved ones killed in service to their country was praised by veterans, representatives of military organizations and family members of servicemen.

A bill recently signed into law will increase the buffer zone from 300 feet to 500 feet around a military funeral service and from 150 feet to 300 feet along routes to and from a funeral, increase the quiet time before and after military funerals from 60 minutes to 120 minutes, and increase civil penalties for violators.

At a press conference with U.S. Rep. Charlie Bass, who sponsored the federal legislation, Jean Durgin of Henniker, whose son was killed in Afghanistan in 2006, said she feared her son's funeral would be disrupted, although it was not. Members of the Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas had disrupted services for other soldiers, she noted.

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

The federal law comes after the Supreme Court ruled the First Amendment protects fundamentalist church members who hold protests outside military funerals. The court voted 8-1 in favor of the Westboro Baptist Church upholding an appeals court decision that threw out a \$5 million judgment for the father of a dead Marine who sued the church when they picketed his son's funeral.

"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.

Bass said that while he expects the American Civil Liberties Union will sue over the federal law, he is convinced it is constitutional as it has been carefully vetted by two House committees, including the Judiciary Committee, and the law does not prohibit protests.

"This law should have happened a long time ago," said New Hampshire American Legion Commander Ken Maynard. "People should be respected, not yelled at from across the street."

Bass said the additional protection for funerals was on the top of the list of veterans he talked to after winning re-election in 2010.

"I couldn't have been prouder to introduce legislation in the House last April to ensure that the men and women who have fought and died for our country receive the greatest dignity and respect as their families grieve," Bass said.

