

Hospitals now must contact next of kin

December 14, 2001

BY GARY WISBY STAFF REPORTER

Thanks to a bill signed into law Thursday, people like Elaine Sullivan won't have to die alone.

Sullivan, 71, lay in a Chicago hospital without her family's knowledge for six days before dying because the hospital had no obligation to find her next of kin.

"No one called us," said Sullivan's daughter, Janet Greenwald, outside Gov. Ryan's Thompson Center office after the governor signed the bill.

Greenwald and her daughter, Laura Greenwald, thought they would find out a law had been broken because they were not notified. "We found out there was no law," she said. Sullivan fell in her apartment on Elston Avenue on April 21. Paramedics carried her to Our Lady of the Resurrection Medical Center, 5645 W. Addison.



She struck her mouth when she fell and couldn't talk. Because Sullivan had been at the hospital previously, her daughter's phone number was on her chart. But no one called it.

Six days later, when the hospital finally reached Janet, it was too late. She said the hospital refused to place a phone by her mother's ear. And by the time she made it to Chicago from her Los Angeles home, her mother was dead.

Sullivan's granddaughter, Laura, thinks the delay made the difference between life and death. There was no one to answer the questions noted on Sullivan's medical history.

"And when a family member is there, things get done," Laura said.

She and her mother are suing the hospital for malpractice and wrongful death. Hospital officials declined comment.

The Greenwalds pushed for the law that was sponsored by two Chicago Democrats, state Sen. John Cullerton and state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz. Under the measure, when a patient cannot communicate, a hospital must make every effort to reach next of kin within 24 hours.

Six states have next of kin laws, and Laura and her mother said they are working for passage of a federal law. Details of their proposals are at <http://clik.to/nok>.