BENNINGTON, Conn. -- A bill introduced by U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy and named for a local EMT who died in the line of duty that will extend death and disability benefits to emergency medical personnel who work for volunteer or nonprofit ambulance services passed the U.S. Senate Thursday.

The Dale Long Emergency Medical Service Provider Protection Act had long been stymied by Oklahoma Republican Sen. Tom Coburn, who objected to expanding an existing federal program that offers benefits for government-employed emergency personnel. It passed Thursday as an amendment to a Federal Aviation Administration bill. The FAA bill to re-authorize programs for two years also passed by an 87 to 8 vote.

Leahy, a Democrat and chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, had previously tried several times to expand the federal Public Safety Officers Benefits (PSOB) program following the June 2009 death of Dale Long, an emergency medical technician with the nonprofit Bennington Rescue ambulance service. Long was driving a Bennington Rescue ambulance when it crashed, causing his death.

The PSOB program was created by Congress more than 30 years ago to provide help to the surviving families of police, firefighters and medics who lose their lives or are disabled in the line of duty. Under current law, however, the PSOB program applies only to emergency personnel employed by federal, state or local government agencies.

As a result, Long's family has been ineligible for death benefits because of Bennington Rescue's nonprofit status. Leahy said the bill will address the oversight.

"I'm glad that all the work to get the Dale Long Act into law is finally gaining traction. The plain and simple goal of this bill is to update a program that has helped permanently disabled or fatally injured first responders and their survivors for more than three decades. The only change I have proposed is to cover emergency rescue workers with nonprofit EMS services," Leahy said following the Senate's approval of the measure by voice vote. "These are hardworking people in our communities who put their skills, their training and their lives on the line for us every day. With the need as clear as it is, it is difficult to explain to them, and to Dale Long's family, why anyone would want to block this. I have brought this to the Senate floor many times before, and now that it has passed the Senate I will keep going forward until this goal is met."

The legislation will qualify about 1,200 Vermont emergency medical personnel for the PSOB program, which is run by the U.S. Department of Justice.

The bill was first unanimously approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee in December 2009. Leahy spokesman David Carle said Leahy had attempted to attach the Dale Long Act as an amendment to various bills five separate times and was also introduced as stand-alone legislation. But Coburn had successfully stymied Leahy's efforts to pass the expansion each time.

Leahy drafted a letter to Coburn last October asking the Oklahoma senator to remove his hold on the legislation. Carle said Coburn offered no response, and continued to block it. Coburn spokesman John Hart said Coburn, a medical doctor, is opposed to expanding the program because of the country's "debt crisis."

"Dr. Coburn believes it is reckless to expand health care programs when we are facing a debt crisis and are struggling to keep the promises we have already made. State and local governments should address
this need," Hart said.

The bill is fully paid for, however, and does not add to the deficit, Carle said. The cost of expanding the PSOB program is offset by with cuts elsewhere within the Department of Justice, he said. Coburn said on the Senate floor Thursday night that he would allow the voice vote to proceed, ensuring the legislation would move forward. But he questioned whether it is the responsibility of the federal government to provide such benefits. He said the Constitution calls for no such responsibility.

Nothing was offered to Coburn to secure his cooperation. "There was no deal. It was Senator Leahy's perseverance. It took seven tries to overcome one senator's obstacles but he kept at it," Carle said.

Leahy said the legislation is supported by the American Ambulance Association, the National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians and the International Association of Fire Chiefs.

*Republished with permission of the Bennington Banner*