WASHINGTON – Two weeks ago, Laurie Dishman, a 37-year-old food services manager from Sacramento, took a trip to the Port of Miami. She wanted to face her fear.

It was the first time she had gone near big ships since 2006, when she was raped on a cruise by one of the ship's janitors. Back then, she was appalled when the crew responded by telling her she needed to control her drinking. So on a Sunday, at one of the busiest ports in the nation, she handed out more than 300 pamphlets to people as they boarded for their vacations, warning them of the dangers.

"There are no laws out there," Dishman said in an interview. "All kinds of things can happen on this floating city in the middle of the ocean, and there's no security. There's no protection. You think you have American rights when you board a ship, but you don't."

Dishman, who calls the little-regulated cruise line industry "a giant beast," is confident that her message will result in a new federal law. When Congress returns to Washington from its summer recess on Sept. 8, she and other crime victims will be on Capitol Hill to lobby aggressively for a plan that would force industry officials to make unprecedented changes in their operations.

Critics say that immediate changes are needed because under current law, cruise ships aren't required to report even the most serious crimes that happen in international waters.

Congress is considering legislation that would force them to maintain log books that record all deaths, missing people, and reported crimes, including theft, sexual harassment and assault. That information would be made available to the FBI and the Coast Guard, and the public would have access to it on the Internet.

The legislation also would require cruise ships to have security latches and peepholes on the doors of passenger rooms. And ships would be required to keep medication to prevent the transmission of diseases after a sexual assault, along with equipment to perform evidentiary medical exams.

"Twelve million Americans will board cruise ships this year and they should know they are safe," said Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., who has teamed up with Rep. Doris Matsui, D-Sacramento, to lead the
proposed crackdown.

The industry is fighting back, saying Americans are safer on cruise ships than on land and that no regulatory changes are needed.

"The cruise industry's No. 1 priority is safety of its passengers and crew," said Terry Dale, president and chief executive officer of the Fort-Lauderdale, Fla.,-based Cruise Lines International Association, which represents 24 cruise lines and 16,500 travel agencies. "Quite simply, Americans are extremely safe at sea today."

**Rep. Matsui gets involved**

Matsui said she began investigating the issue after Dishman contacted her, frustrated after receiving no help from the Royal Caribbean cruise line in identifying the attacker or in properly securing evidence after the rape.

As part of the congressional investigation, Matsui said, she discovered that there have been no convictions in rape cases on cruise lines in 40 years.

"What we have found is truly alarming. There is little to no regulation of the cruise industry, and far too many crimes go unprosecuted each year."

At a recent Senate subcommittee hearing, Dale said questions about the industry's safety record have been raised because "our care and compassion in the past toward those who have suffered injury or loss has not always been satisfactory."

He did not mention specific cases but noted that the industry creates thousands of jobs and said that it has made "great strides" in improving its safety procedures in the past two years.

Among the measures now in place, Dale said: Passengers and luggage are screened; passenger lists are sent to U.S. authorities before departure; each ship has a qualified security officer and trained security staff; and all major cruise lines have trained staff to counsel and support passengers during emergencies.

He said independent surveys show that 95 percent of cruise passengers are satisfied with their experience and that more than half of cruise-line customers are repeat customers.

"I submit this would not be the case if safety or security were perceived as a serious problem," Dale said.

Kerry became involved in the issue when Merrian Carver of Cambridge, Mass., disappeared on a cruise in 2004. Kerry said the case was shocking because employees didn't tell the FBI she was missing for weeks, after her family started asking questions, and then donated her clothing to charity. He said the cruise line was unsure whether she had ever disembarked from the ship.

"Merrian's story is not an isolated case," Kerry said. "Despite being owned by American citizens and headquartered in the United States, cruise ships operate under foreign flags, allowing them to avoid United States law when they are beyond U.S. territorial waters. With respect to jurisdiction over crimes, the law is murky at best."

**Like visiting a foreign country**
The situation is similar to a U.S. citizen taking a vacation in a foreign country, where the responsibility for crime prevention and response lies with the country that a person is visiting, said Rear Adm. Wayne Justice, assistant commander for response with the U.S. Coast Guard. At a House hearing, he argued that it's better to ask cruise lines to voluntarily report crimes instead of making it mandatory.

"While some alleged homicides, disappearances and serious sexual crimes have garnered appropriate attention and concern, there is no data to suggest that crime on cruise ships is more prevalent than in any other vacation venue," Justice said.

Dishman said it's clear the federal government must get more aggressive in protecting its citizens.

She was sexually attacked in her stateroom during a cruise to Mexico by a janitor who was doubling as a security guard. She passed out during the attack. When she woke up, her neck was sore and there were marks from the pressure that had been applied.

"After she reported the incident to the crew authorities, she was handed a trash bag and told to collect her own evidence," said Matsui, who called Dishman a hero for going public and testifying before Congress last year.

Dishman said the experience has made her want to be an advocate for rape victims. And after working closely with Matsui, she said, she has found a mentor and might even run for office herself.

"The way she reached out to me, right away, once I wrote to her — I just want to be someone like her," Dishman said. "And if it means I have to be a congresswoman, that's what I'll do."