

Opening Statement of Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.),
Judiciary Committee Hearing on
“VAWA Next Steps: Protecting Women from Gun Violence.”
July 30, 2014

As Prepared For Delivery

On June 18, 1999, Carmen Cruz was watching television with her eight year-old son, Travis, when her ex-boyfriend, Frederick Escobar, broke into her apartment and calmly walked toward her, carrying a pillow. When he was just a few feet away from Ms. Cruz, Mr. Escobar pulled a gun from the pillow, pointed it at her, and pulled the trigger. Travis watched as his mother collapsed, felled by a bullet shot by his own father.

Ms. Cruz spent hours in surgery while doctors removed the bullet from her abdomen. She was hospitalized for three weeks and wore a colostomy bag for almost two years following the shooting. Today, Ms. Cruz is a passionate advocate in Rhode Island’s domestic violence community, but her scars serve as a constant reminder that, as a survivor, she is one of the lucky ones.

American women are eleven times more likely to be killed with guns than women in any other industrialized country.

Put another way, women in the United States account for eighty-four percent of all female firearm victims in the developed world. Of all the women murdered in this country, more than half are killed by family members or intimate partners.

In fact, when a gun is present in a domestic violence situation, it increases the risk of homicide for women by five hundred percent.

Protecting women from gun violence by domestic abusers should not be, and has not been, a partisan issue. In the late 1990s, Congress passed important laws prohibiting the possession or purchase of firearms by individuals convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence or subject to domestic violence protective orders. These laws, which were part of the Violence against Women Act and an amendment authored by the late-Senator Frank Lautenberg, complemented the prohibitions on convicted felons and passed Congress with broad bipartisan support.

These laws have saved lives—in states with rigorous background check laws, thirty-eight percent fewer women are shot to death by intimate partners—but they're not enough.

Current law prohibits domestic abusers from possessing guns only if they are—or were – married to the victim, if they have lived with the victim, or if they have a child in common with the victim. Dating partners who have been convicted of domestic violence offenses are not covered, even though the most recent data shows that more domestic abuse is committed by dating partners than spouses. Closing the dating partner loophole would save lives, plain and simple.

There are other steps we can take as well. These include requiring universal background checks

and helping states collect and share the data necessary to ensure that those who *should* be prohibited under existing law are *in fact* prohibited when they try to purchase firearms. Along these lines, I am willing to work with anyone who wants to strengthen the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, or "NICS," to ensure that it operates as Congress intended it to.

Nobody on this Committee has been working as hard as Senators Blumenthal and Klobuchar to shine a light on the role of guns in domestic violence and to address the loopholes that allow abusers to use guns to kill, injure, and threaten their victims. I know we will hear more about your initiatives, and I want to thank you both at the outset for your commitment and efforts.

I would also like to thank Chairman Leahy for his leadership in reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act last year, and for his longstanding recognition of the role of guns in domestic violence.

Finally, it bears mentioning that this is not a hearing about the Second Amendment or the right of law-abiding Americans to own firearms. Nobody on this Committee wants to deprive individuals—women or men—from legally owning guns, and none of the solutions we're here to discuss involve doing that. What we are here to consider is how guns in domestic violence situations threaten American women, and how best to ensure that those who should not possess guns do not possess them.

I understand that there are a number of domestic violence survivors and advocates here with us today. I would be honored to recognize them if they wouldn't mind standing up. I also would like to submit the statements of Christy Salters Martin, Bonnie Campbell, Laura Ponce, Katie Ray Jones, and Everytown for Gun Safety into the record. Thank you all for being here, and for your courage.

I would like to welcome all our witnesses and thank them for their participation in this hearing. I look forward to your testimony.

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