

Testimony of
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Testifying in regards to the importance of the Violence Against Women Act

Introduction

Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Sessions, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the success of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and the importance of reauthorizing in 2011. The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence is a statewide coalition of domestic and sexual violence programs. Our 15 member programs are located throughout the state and provide lifesaving services to victims and their families. VAWA funded programs are a critical part of our work in Vermont, and across the country. I am here today to discuss the success of VAWA programs, and the need to sustain and strengthen VAWA with its upcoming reauthorization in 2011.

In response to the terrible crimes of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence and stalking, through the leadership of the Judiciary Committee, Congress authorized the Violence Against Women Act in 1994 and reauthorized it in 2000 and 2005. The Committee has provided needed leadership in strengthening services and protections for victims of domestic and sexual violence, and with each reauthorization has worked to enhance the grant programs to reach all victims and their families. These programs, administered by the Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services, have changed federal, tribal, state and local responses to domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence and stalking.

Incidence, Prevalence and Severity of Domestic and Sexual Violence

The crime of domestic violence is pervasive and life-threatening. In total, one in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime. One in six women and one in 33 men have experienced an attempted or completed rape. In 2007 in Vermont there were over 1,200 victims of sexual violence. Of course the most heinous of these crimes is murder. In 2005 alone, 1,181 women were murdered by an intimate partner in the United States and approximately 1/3 of all female murder victims are killed by an intimate partner. In just one week in 2007 in Vermont there were 7 domestic violence related homicides and an additional three domestic violence related suicides.

Additionally, the cycle of intergenerational violence is perpetuated as children witness violence. Approximately 15.5 million children are exposed to domestic violence every year. In Vermont alone in 2008 there were 8,184 children and youth exposed to domestic violence in their homes. We know that children who are exposed to domestic violence are more likely to exhibit

behavioral and physical health problems including depression, anxiety, and violence towards peers. They are also more likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, run away from home, engage in teenage prostitution, and perpetrate sexual assault. One study found that men exposed to physical abuse, sexual abuse and adult domestic violence as children were almost 4 times more likely than other men to have perpetrated domestic violence as adults.

In addition to the terrible cost domestic and sexual violence have on the lives of individual victims and their families, these crimes cost taxpayers and communities. In fact, the cost of intimate partner violence exceeds \$5.8 billion each year, \$4.1 billion of which is for direct medical and mental health care services.

Despite this grim reality, we know that when a coordinated response to victims is developed, and immediate, essential services are available, victims can escape from life-threatening violence and begin to rebuild their shattered lives. VAWA creates and supports comprehensive, cost-effective responses to these insidious crimes. In addition to saving and rebuilding lives, VAWA saved taxpayers \$14.8 billion in net averted social costs in its first six years alone. VAWA was not only the right thing to do; it was also fiscally sound legislation.

Successes of VAWA funded programs

VAWA has unquestionably improved the national response to domestic violence. Since VAWA passed in 1994, states have passed more than 660 laws to combat domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking. More victims report domestic violence to the police: there has been a 27% increase in reporting rates by women and a 37% increase in reporting rates by men nationwide. The rate of non-fatal intimate partner violence against women has decreased by 63%. Remarkably, the number of individuals killed by an intimate partner has decreased by 24% for women and 48% for men.

Prior to VAWA, most police officers were not adequately trained to handle incidents of domestic and sexual violence and would routinely fail to make arrests or collect appropriate evidence. Through the STOP Grants program, VAWA has helped to change this unfortunate reality. STOP (Services, Training, Officers, Prosecutors) grants are intended to assist state, local, and tribal governments "to develop and strengthen effective law enforcement and prosecution strategies to combat violent crimes against women, and to develop and strengthen victim services in cases involving violent crimes against women." According to a study performed by The Urban Institute, STOP Grants have ensured that "victims are safer, better supported by their communities, and treated more uniformly and sensitively by first-response workers."

Housing

In addition to shelter and advocacy, victims of domestic violence need transitional housing in order to ensure a safe and stable future for themselves and their children. Many of these programs are funded by VAWA's Transitional Housing Grants. The need is great. In just one day in 2008, over 10,000 adults and children were housed in domestic violence transitional housing programs across the country, over half of whom were children. On that same day, over 1,500 requests for transitional housing nationwide were denied due to lack of capacity. In 2007, Vermont programs experienced a 27% increase in bednights at shelters, safehomes and hotels/motels, even as the number of survivors served remained constant. This astounding increase is a direct result of longer waiting lists for subsidized housing and limited affordable housing supply.

Legal Assistance

Another crucial VAWA program is Civil Legal Assistance for Victims (LAV). Research indicates that the practical nature of legal services gives victims long-term alternatives to their abusive relationships. Most victims need civil legal remedies such as civil protection orders, child custody, and child support assistance. To obtain these remedies, victims of domestic violence need knowledgeable legal assistance to help them navigate the civil legal system. The hourly fees required to hire private legal representation are beyond the means of most victims, and as a result nearly 70% of victims are without legal representation. After receiving VAWA funds, Vermont Legal Aid (VLA) saw a 231% increase in victims served from 1996 to 2003. VLA now serves close to 100% of women who are unrepresented in protection order cases where the offender is represented by counsel.

Another important program is VAWA's Grants to Encourage Arrest and Enforce Protection Orders, which offers jurisdictions the funding needed to establish programs and policies that favor arrest and prosecution of domestic violence. Training for law enforcement officers about the dynamics of domestic violence cases improves officers' interactions with victims and enhances victims' participation with justice system efforts to address violence against women. Of grant recipients, 82% funded domestic violence training--most related to training of law enforcement officers, and approximately two-thirds created or enhanced either specialized law enforcement or prosecution units. The data shows that these grants are working. One example of the success of this program comes from Queens, New York, where the Office of the Borough President uses grant money to fund a unit comprised of additional prosecutors and support staff to prosecute misdemeanor domestic violence cases, and victims' advocates to provide services to victims. They have seen an increase in domestic violence convictions of 100%, and provide counseling to approximately 1000 victims.

Rural Communities

VAWA Rural Grants allow jurisdictions to develop and implement programs that address the specific barriers faced by victims in rural areas, including gaps in 911 emergency systems and underfunded law enforcement programs, a lack of public transportation, child care, and social and legal services. Large geographic areas and difficult weather conditions increase the challenges victims face in accessing services, especially when in many areas of the country the nearest emergency shelter or crisis center can be more than 100 miles away. During each 6-month period between January 2004 and June 2005, Rural program grantees nationwide served more than 20,000 domestic violence victims and 7,000 child victims. Women Helping Battered Women in Burlington, Vermont, used rural funding to increase the number of women served 138% from 1993 to 2003. They also saw a 222% increase in the number of women represented.

Sexual Assault

For the first time in FY '08, the Sexual Assault Victim Services Program (SASP) was funded and will begin to meet the extreme need of victims of sexual assault. This formula grant will allow states, tribes and territories to provide much needed direct services to victims and training and technical assistance to various organizations including law enforcement, courts and social services. Rape crisis centers supported by SASP funding provide medical, legal, and psychological support to victims of rape and sexual assault, but often lack the resources needed to fully meet victims' needs.

The Future of VAWA

Due to the overwhelming success of VAWA funded programs, more and more victims are coming forward for help each year. For example, VAWA-trained police now give out domestic violence hotline numbers, which in turn encourages more victims to look for services. This rising demand for services, without a concurrent increase in funding, means that many desperate victims are turned away from life-saving services. In just one day nearly 9,000 requests for services went unmet across the country due to a lack of resources. Services for sexual assault victims are even more scarce and underfunded: with only 1,315 rape crisis centers nationwide, women, children and men are on waiting lists to receive treatment and therapy after a sexual assault.

With the upcoming VAWA reauthorization in 2011, Congress has an opportunity to strengthen the current successful grant programs and include programs to better ensure that victims and their families are safe. The need for transitional housing remains dire, and these programs need to be expanded to provide stable housing for victims in need. An additional focus for the VAWA 2011 reauthorization should be focusing on broader economic justice issues, including economic literacy programs and job training programs for survivors striving to rebuild their lives.

Conclusion

The Violence Against Women Act is working. Service providers, law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, and others in the continuum of services are coordinating their efforts to ensure that victims and their families are independent and safe. But the job is not done. In order to continue the progress that we've accomplished over the past ten years, we must strengthen VAWA so that it can work for all victims of domestic violence, whether they live in rural or urban areas, whether they are children or elderly victims, whether they speak English or another language--every victim deserves the chance to escape from violence. Congress has a unique opportunity to make a difference in the lives of so many by reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act with key and strategic improvements.

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