

Statement of
The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
June 10, 2009

Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.)
Chairman, Senate Committee On The Judiciary,
"The Continued Importance Of The Violence Against Women Act"
June 10, 2009

Since 1994, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) has been the centerpiece of the Federal Government's commitment to combating domestic violence and other violent crimes against women. Its passage and reauthorization were a signal achievement in support of the rights of women in America. This landmark law filled a void in Federal law that had left too many victims of domestic and sexual violence without the help they needed. I have been proud to work with then-Senator Biden and Senator Hatch in achieving this progress.

I look forward to working with members of this Committee, the Obama-Biden administration, and experts in the field to ensure that this law remains a vital resource for prosecutors, law enforcement agencies, victim service providers, and, most importantly, the women and families who are threatened with violence and abuse.

Today we welcome an extraordinary panel of witnesses from around the country who bring important perspectives and personal experience on these subjects. With us is Catherine Pierce, Acting Director of the Office on Violence Against Women at the Justice Department. I also want to welcome Karen Tronsgard-Scott, whom I have known for many years, and who is a leader for ending domestic and sexual violence in Vermont. Three witnesses will be sharing their personal stories with the Committee, demonstrating the how victims of violence and their families can recover from these crimes with the right support and services. One has gone on to become a successful actor, one has helped pass a Rhode Island state law requiring teen-dating violence education in public schools, and one has become a passionate advocate for victims in California.

I saw the devastating effects of domestic and sexual violence early in my career as the Vermont State's Attorney for Chittenden County. Violence and abuse reach into the homes of people from all walks of life every day, regardless of gender, race, culture, age, class or sexuality. Domestic violence is a crime, and it is always wrong, whether the abuser is a family member, a current or past spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend, an acquaintance or a stranger.

Since I was a prosecutor, our Nation has made remarkable progress in recognizing that domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and dating violence are crimes, and in providing legal remedies, social support and coordinated community responses. Since enactment of VAWA, the rates of non-fatal and fatal domestic violence have declined, more victims have felt confident to

come forward to report these crimes and to seek help, and states have passed more than 600 laws to combat these crimes. Despite this progress, however, our country still has a long way to go. Millions of women, men, children, and families continue to be traumatized by abuse. We know that one in four American women and one in seven men are victims of domestic violence. One in six women and one in 33 men are victims of sexual assault, and 1.4 million individuals are stalked each year.

Programs to assist victims of domestic and sexual violence, and to prevent these crimes, are particularly important during difficult economic times when these types of crime often increase and funding sources for these essential programs dry up. Crisis centers and hotlines are reporting an alarming increase in victimization nationwide. A 2008 census by the National Network to End Domestic Violence found that in just one day, more than 60,500 adults and children were served by local domestic violence programs. Yet due to a lack of resources, almost 9000 requests for services went unmet.

Numbers like these are why I advocated for increased funding in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act for important VAWA programs, which are necessary to address the rise in crime and which will have an immediate economic impact. The STOP (Services, Training, Officers, Prosecutors) Formula Grant program is one of the most comprehensive and effective means of reducing domestic and sexual violence. The inclusion of \$175 million for STOP grants in the Recovery Act will provide resources to law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, the courts, and victim advocacy groups to improve victim safety and to hold offenders accountable for their crimes against women. The economic recovery plan also included \$50 million for the Transitional Housing Assistance Grants program, which I authored to provide safe havens and related services to victims fleeing from domestic and dating violence, sexual assault and stalking. I proposed this program in 2003 to enable victims to bridge the gap between leaving violence in their homes and becoming self sufficient. In the midst of a mortgage and housing crisis, transitional housing is especially important because long-term housing options are becoming increasingly scarce.

In addition to working for more adequate funding, I am committed to continuing to work to improve the Act and bolster its effectiveness. Earlier this year, working with those who are most familiar with these matters, I introduced the Improving Assistance to Domestic and Sexual Violence Victims Act of 2009, S.327, to make needed improvements to the Violence Against Women Act. The bill makes corrections and improvements so that this law, a law that has helped so many, can continue to serve as a powerful tool to combat violence perpetrated against women and families. We were able to pass this bill through this Committee in early May, and I am working to try to get the Senate to consider and pass it without further delay. It will bolster privacy protections for victims of domestic violence and offer greater help in rural and tribal areas. I hope those who are holding up this legislation will reconsider their objections and join with us to move this legislation through the Congress and to the President for his signature.

#####