

New Hampshire Union Leader

July 7, 2005

Another View: We Need the Violence Against Women Act

By Grace Mattern

GUEST COMMENTARY

Last month, Congress reintroduced the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which is set to expire on Sept. 30 if not reauthorized.

New Hampshire's U.S. Rep. Charlie Bass co-sponsored the legislation in 2000 and has signed on as a co-sponsor again in 2005, and Sen. Judd Gregg voted for its passage in 2000. Both legislators understand the importance of VAWA for New Hampshire women and their families, and both men are also in tune with their communities' concerns about violence against women.

Not surprisingly, study after study shows that Americans are deeply concerned about violence against women. A February poll commissioned by Lifetime Television, of 600 women and men ages 16 to 24, found that 77 percent of young women and 64 percent of young men know or have known someone in an abusive relationship. About six in 10 respondents said they know someone who has been sexually assaulted.

A national study of more than 3,300 women by the Center for the Advancement of Women found that 92 percent of those surveyed ranked reducing domestic violence and sexual assault as their top priority.

Reauthorizing VAWA is one of the solutions to the problems of domestic and sexual violence. First passed in 1994, VAWA was a giant step forward for our nation. Its passage meant that we finally acknowledged that domestic and sexual violence cause tremendous harm, and put real resources into helping victims. Millions of women, children and families are better off as a result. In 2000, Congress reauthorized VAWA, continuing this essential work and adding important services for immigrant, rural, disabled and older women.

VAWA created the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE), funded training sessions for police, prosecutors and court officials and established new federal crimes of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking to fill in jurisdictional gaps in prosecuting these crimes. It recognized the authority of Indian nations to respond to violence against Indian women. It provided federal guarantees for full faith and credit (enforcement and recognition of

protection orders across state and jurisdictional lines). It enhanced protection for battered immigrants and focused the nation on trafficking of people.

Here in New Hampshire, the Violence Against Women Act funds approximately 10 percent of the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence annual budget. Member agencies of the coalition served 8,297 domestic violence victims in 2004, including 484 male victims. Sexual assault services were provided for 1,588 people (including 182 males) and 541 stalking victims came to coalition agencies for assistance, including 71 men.

VAWA funds rural grants to support improved coordination between New Hampshire crisis centers and DCYF district offices in working with families with a co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse and neglect. A VAWA grant also supports coordination of the statewide Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) program, which trains registered nurses to conduct sexual assault forensic exams.

Reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act will maintain important federal programs that support victims' services and encourage collaboration among various social systems that victims interact with. We need the Violence Against Women Act of 2005 to build on past efforts, to target resources to children and youth who have been exposed to violence, and to engage men as allies in this work. We need it to put more resources into helping some of our society's most marginalized citizens, who experience high rates of domestic and sexual violence. We need it to provide innovative ways to provide safe housing, public benefits, legal assistance and safe workplaces for victims of violence.

We ask our state's lawmakers to join Rep. Bass in supporting the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, which is a valuable investment in the programs that strengthen families and communities throughout New Hampshire and our nation.

Grace Mattern is executive director of the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence.