

CONGRESS PASSES AND PRESIDENT SIGNS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT; REAUTHORIZATION INCLUDES NEW HOUSING PROTECTIONS AND PROGRAMS, SAYS NATIONAL LAW CENTER ON HOMELESSNESS & POVERTY

Washington, D.C., January 6, 2006 – The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 2005, signed by the President yesterday and passed by Congress in late December, contains landmark housing provisions for domestic violence survivors and their families, says a national legal advocacy organization working against homelessness. According to the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP), the legislation expands housing protections and programs for domestic violence survivors and their families.

Signed into law yesterday by the President, the new law is effective immediately. NLCHP praised Congress for its dedication in improving access to housing for survivors. NLCHP acknowledged Senators Joseph Biden (D-DE), Arlen Specter (R-PA), and Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and Representatives James Sensenbrenner (R-WI), John Conyers (D-MI), Mark Green (R-WI), Ginny Brown-Waite (R-FL), and Deborah Pryce (R-OH) for championing the bill. In addition, NLCHP credited Representatives Michael Oxley (R-OH), Barney Frank (D-MA), and Robert Ney (R-OH) for their strong leadership on the housing initiatives, and Senators Richard Shelby (R-AL), Paul Sarbanes (D-MD), and Jack Reed (D-RI) for their additional support on the housing initiatives.

VAWA 2005 improves safety for domestic violence survivors and their families in housing and shelter by providing badly needed resources, collaborations, and protections to help prevent and end homelessness and domestic and sexual violence. The new law does the following:

- Protects individuals from eviction because of their status as victims of domestic violence or stalking.
- Improves the ability of major federal housing programs to meet the housing and safety needs of survivors.
- Authorizes a grant program to help public and Indian housing authorities and subsidized housing providers respond appropriately to domestic and sexual violence.
- Funds collaborative efforts to create long-term housing options for survivors.
- Expands transitional housing options for survivors.
- Protects the safety and confidentiality of survivors within the homeless services system.

VAWA 2005 acknowledges that all survivors – including those who are homeless, low-income, or inadequately housed – deserve to benefit from the law’s protections. “The new law goes a long way toward recognizing and remedying major housing barriers that domestic violence survivors and their families face in the U.S., while moving in the right direction toward ensuring adequate housing rights for this marginalized population,” explains Maria Foscarinis, founder and executive director of NLCHP.

Domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness nationally. In 2005, 50% of U.S. cities surveyed reported that domestic violence was a primary cause of local homelessness, and 32% of requests for shelter by homeless families in these cities went unmet because of the lack of available emergency shelter beds. Additionally, ninety-two percent of homeless women have experienced severe physical or sexual abuse at some point in their lives. Exacerbating this crisis is the severe shortage of affordable housing for low-income individuals and families in the U.S. For an individual who is in a violent relationship and already living in poverty, this harsh reality often means that she must choose between life with her abuser or life on the streets.

“VAWA 2005 takes major strides toward improving women’s housing rights in the U.S. These new housing programs and protections represent groundbreaking inroads for inadequately housed survivors of violence against women,” said Naomi Stern, staff attorney with NLCHP’s Domestic Violence Program. NLCHP was a leading architect of the housing provisions in the new law.

In addition to improving access to housing and shelter for survivors, the bill: enhances longstanding criminal and civil justice responses to violence against women; increases civil legal assistance for victims; removes employment barriers for survivors by establishing a national clearinghouse on workplace responses; funds agencies serving victims of rape or sexual assault; clarifies protections for battered and trafficked immigrants and their families; closes gaps in the delivery of health care to survivors; develops prevention strategies; broadens services to include children and youth; and enhances programs and services for victims with disabilities.