

Women's eNews

August 18, 2005

Congress Considering New Abuse Prevention Funds

By Allison Stevens, WeNews correspondent

WASHINGTON (WOMENSENEWS) – A coalition of anti-violence lobbyists is waging a massive grassroots campaign this month to turn up the heat on members of Congress who may be reluctant to pay for new programs to aid victims of domestic and sexual abuse.

“We need to make sure that the Violence Against Women Act gets to the floor for a vote . . . and that it’s complete and thorough,” said Juley Fulcher, director of Break the Cycle, a legal services group in Washington, D.C.

The legislation, initially passed in 1994 and reauthorized in 2000, expires Sept. 30. Potentially on the chopping block are proposed programs involving health care, housing, and rape prevention and education, as well as new provisions relating to economic security and immigrant protections. Most of the programs tied to criminal justice, on the other hand, are considered safe.

Getting the reauthorization passed by October could be tough. The Senate Judiciary Committee, with jurisdiction over the measure, will be consumed during much of September with hearings on John G. Roberts Jr., the Appeals Court judge nominated to fill the first vacancy on the Supreme Court in more than a decade.

“During August we’re just trying to activate everybody and get a lot of buzz about it in a manner that convinces Congress that . . . there’s some other business they need to take care of in September,” Fulcher said.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chair Arlen Specter, a Republican from Pennsylvania, has not yet scheduled a committee vote on the bill. A Senate aide, speaking on the condition of anonymity to Women’s eNews, said the committee probably will not take up the measure until the second half of September but noted that there is a “general consensus” among senators to pass the reauthorization before it expires.

The question is what exactly will win passage.

The House Judiciary Committee reauthorized a portion of the bill as part of the Justice Department spending package at the end of July. But the panel left out several proposed

programs and did not provide as much money for some other programs as field experts wanted – giving rise to concern that lobbyists will not get all they hoped for this year.

In 2000, lawmakers authorized \$3.2 billion for domestic violence programs over five years, about double the \$1.6 billion approved in 1994. (The figure does not include money authorized for domestic violence programs in subsequent legislation). This year, lobbyists are hoping for a grand total of \$3.95 billion – a 22 percent increase over funds authorized in 2000.

Concerned that in the current tight-purse-strings atmosphere they might not get the entire increase, lobbyists have turned their hopes to the Senate, which tends to be more generous. The hope is the Senate will approve a better-funded and more comprehensive version of the House bill, and that the Senate version will prevail in a House-Senate conference committee later this year.

Lobbying Campaign Underway

To try to make that happen, a broad coalition of activists has launched a campaign to build pressure on lawmakers to grant all their items on their wish list.

The effort involves letter writing campaigns, lobbying visits in lawmakers' district offices and at town hall meetings, and articles and commentaries in local newspapers.

A major focus of the push is a health care provision that was left out of the House bill. It would provide \$105 million over the next five years to train and educate health professionals about sexual and domestic violence, foster public health responses to domestic violence and study effective interventions in the health care setting, according to the Denver-based National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Also left out of the House bill is funding for a number of new programs, including \$400 million over five years to fund rape prevention and education programs; \$330 million to help victims of abuse find safe and longer-term housing; \$50 million to help state and local law enforcement officers identify, protect, prosecute and prevent abuse and at least \$50 million to enhance services for women with disabilities, according to the coalition.

The House committee also left out language that would update federal stalking laws; permit states to use government dollars to provide short-term emergency benefits during work leaves; stiffen protections for Native American women; create a separate felony offense of domestic violence against a family member; and allow victims to take unpaid leave from their jobs to get medical or psychological attention, obtain emergency housing, and seek legal or law enforcement assistance, the coalition reports.

Lobbyists expect that many of these provisions and programs will ultimately win approval, Fulcher said, but she added that some of the items will take “some convincing” for them to be included in the final version of the law.

Supporters Haven't Lost Hope

Supporters of these new programs and protections haven't lost hope, however.

House Republicans added some of the domestic violence programs to the Justice Department spending bill as a sweetener to enhance its chances of passing the Senate, a House aide said on the condition of anonymity. House lawmakers did not include funding for some other programs because they were not germane to the pending Justice Department bill, added Debbie Lee, managing director of the San Francisco-based Family Violence Prevention Fund.

“The House bills are oftentimes just smaller bills,” Lee said. “There is a culture or a trend within the House to try and keep it lower.”

House proponents intend to attempt to restore at least some of the proposed programs left out of the bill that passed the Judiciary Committee with amendments or separate legislation during floor debate.

“My dream world would be to have a standalone reauthorization that would be expansive and inclusive,” said Rep. Lois Capps, a California Democrat and former nurse who said she will push legislation to ensure funding for the health care programs. “But that’s the ideal world that none of us is living in, at least on my side of the aisle.”

If that strategy fails, all eyes will turn to the Senate, and then conference committee. “Absolutely we want these provisions included,” the House aide said. But we’re working “with the realization that conference is where it’s going to be hammered out.”

Allison Stevens is Washington Bureau Chief at Women's eNews.

For more information:

National Task Force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women – Violence Against Women Act Reauthorization: <http://www.vawa2005.org/>

Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr. – Domestic Violence: <http://biden.senate.gov/issues/domesticviolence.cfm>

Copyright © 2005 Women's eNews.