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Continued Funding Needed to Protect Women

Guest Commentary By Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr.

There is no one more vulnerable than the woman who cannot feel safe in her own home.

Over ten years ago, I began writing what would become the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), the first step in what is now a well-established partnership between local, state, and federal authorities to assist victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault. Since passage of the Act, Delaware alone has received more than \$10 million in federal assistance for counseling, legal services, and safe housing for victims and their children to start anew. I repeatedly call the Act my proudest legislative accomplishment in 35 years in the Senate.

Yet despite all the successes we've seen locally and nationally, President Bush's budget proposal last week called for a \$100 million cut to VAWA programs, as well as a radical plan to collapse over 20 separate VAWA programs into one "consolidated competitive grant program."

Domestic violence impacts one in every four women, yet the Administration proposes cutting spending by almost a third – a dramatic deviation from historic spending on family violence programs. If this budget is followed, the number of abused victims and their children turned away from critical services will only increase.

We cannot afford to turn our backs on these Americans in need of protection; we have made too much progress since 1994 to cut off the flow of funding now.

National figures since the Act's passage in 1994 show real progress: domestic violence has dropped by almost 50%, incidents of rape are down by 60%, and the number of women killed by an abusive husband or boyfriend is down by 22%. Today, more than half of all rape victims are stepping forward to report the crime, acts of bravery that often need the protection and encouragement that VAWA's funding provides.

And since we passed the Act in 1994, over a million women have found justice in our courtrooms and obtained domestic violence protective orders.

Here in Delaware, dedicated local organizations, police and judges have led the fight to eradicate domestic violence, using federal assistance to reduce domestic violence incidents by over 1,000 since 2001.

For example, our police are better trained and equipped to respond to domestic violence calls than they were even ten years ago. In 2006, our Family Court processed more than 3,000 protection petitions, the most ever. Several studies have shown that victims who obtain orders are overwhelmingly less likely to be assaulted during the year after they were abused.

The Violence Against Women Act's funding has opened and maintained shelters all over the country. Nearly 250 Delawareans sought shelter downstate in 2006 alone; 133 of them were children.

In these times of challenging budgets, it's important that we spend government resources wisely – and we know from the past that this funding is effective. A study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that the Violence Against Women Act's funding saved nearly \$14.8 billion dollars in averted social costs in its first six years.

The Act's spending is not just a moral investment in our future generations, it's a prudent one that moves us closer to ending a costly cycle of violence in the home. I'm confident that Congress will craft a budget that adequately provides for these proven, life-saving services for families in crisis.

Editor's note: U.S. Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr., D-Del, is a member of the Judiciary and Foreign Relations committees. He resides in Wilmington.