

AlterNet

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Domestic Violence Not a Problem?

By Judith Kahan, AlterNet

The Violence Against Women Act is set to expire in September – and unless Congress can ensure that domestic abuse ends by then, our lawmakers have a responsibility to renew and expand the bill.

Apparently, hundreds of our elected representatives believe domestic violence is no longer a problem – or at least not the *government's* problem. They're wrong on both counts.

In New York City, if you added up all the reported robberies, burglaries, and murders in 2003 and multiplied that number by two, it still would not equal the number of calls received by the City's domestic violence hotline.

Across the country, more than three women are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends every day. One in every three women will be physically assaulted by a partner. Every year, 10 million children experience domestic violence in their homes.

Domestic violence is a huge problem – and since 1994, the Violence Against Women Act has given law enforcement and social services agencies a tremendous tool to fight it. But the Violence Against Women Act is set to expire at the end of September. Unless Congress can ensure that domestic violence will *also* end by then, our lawmakers have a responsibility to renew and expand it. It should be an easy decision. So why isn't it?

The Act created the National Domestic Violence Hotline; 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 also provided federal guarantees that allow protection orders to be enforced across state lines, and enhanced protection for immigrants who are battered, focusing attention on human trafficking. That is money well spent. But it is far from enough.

The Center Against Domestic Violence – one of the first recipients in New York State of funding from the Act – operates three shelters serving 650 women and children annually. As the center's CEO, I have witnessed first-hand the need for the continued protection afforded by the Violence Against Women Act.

One African woman came to our shelter after police found her chained to her radiator. Back in her country, her brothers had sold her to her American “husband” who brought her to this country illegally, raped her repeatedly, infected her with syphilis and got her pregnant against her will. The Violence Against Women Act helped this victim of domestic violence to stay in the United States where she could avail herself of the counseling that helped her overcome her horrendous ordeal.

The bill to renew the Violence Against Women Act would also expand the law, by supporting programs that teach teens and young adults to recognize and prevent relationship, domestic and dating violence, sexual assault and stalking. The Relationship Abuse Prevention Program (RAPP), operated by New York City’s Human Resources Administration, teaches more than 50,000 high school students every year the warning signs of domestic violence and how they can help friends in abusive relationships.

When it was reauthorized five years ago, the Violence Against Women Act had 239 co-sponsors in the House of Representatives and 74 in the Senate. This year, the bill has only 55 cosponsors in the House and 32 in the Senate – and some conservative organizations are questioning whether federal money should be spent to fight domestic abuse at all.

On average, enforcing the act has cost American taxpayers less than \$1.30 each, per year – about ten cents a month. Renewing and expanding the Violence Against Women Act is one of the smartest investments we can make in fighting and preventing one of the most rampant forms of crime in this country.

Judith Kahan has served as CEO of Brooklyn’s Center Against Domestic Violence since 1992. Those seeking help can call the Center’s 24-hour hotline at 718-439-1000.

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