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Editorial: Domestic Violence/Renew Protection Act Now

By Sheila Wellstone

“I have chosen to focus on domestic violence because I find it appalling that a woman’s home can be the most dangerous, the most violent and, in fact, the most deadly place for her. And if she is a mother, it is dangerous for her children.”

Next Sunday, the place where Paul and Sheila Wellstone’s lives came to an end almost three years ago will be officially transformed into a place of tribute and inspiration. Six wooded acres near Eveleth, gently carved with trails and studded with markers, will be dedicated as the Wellstone Memorial Site.

Meanwhile, a lobbying effort is being waged to continue a living memorial to Sheila Wellstone. In the last decade of her life, the senator’s wife focused heavily on her signature cause -- shielding women and children from violence at the hands of the men in their homes.

This month is crucial to the continuation of that effort. At the end of September, the 11-year-old federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) will expire. A Congress mightily distracted by hurricane relief and a Supreme Court confirmation needs reminding to keep the act’s renewal on its agenda.

The St. Paul-based Sheila Wellstone Institute is pulling out the stops to get the reminder sent. It is orchestrating dozens of meetings all over the country Tuesday night to raise public awareness of the continuing domestic violence problem, and the ways in which federal action, authorized by VAWA, is combatting it. Meeting participants will be armed with the information they need to ask their senators and representatives for the act’s reauthorization.

They will hear that VAWA has provided training that helps health care providers, first responders, and other witnesses to domestic violence and its aftermath know how to spot it and effectively respond. It funds transitional housing for abuse victims and their children, and a victims’ hot line to help. It stiffens legal penalties for sexual assault. The new version of the bill focuses on underserved communities, especially native Americans, and offers help to children and teens who witness violence in their homes.

Ten years on, VAWA has not led to a drop in reports of domestic abuse. To the contrary, reports of harm to women and children in their homes have increased, in some places dramatically.

Julianna Koob at the Sheila Wellstone Institute counts that as a sign of the act's success. What was once the nation's No. 1 unreported crime is now coming to light with much greater frequency. In the light, it can be seen, and stopped.

Federal action alone won't shield American women from violence. But VAWA signals to state and local governments, nongovernment organizations and watchful citizens that safeguarding women in their homes is a national priority. It says that in this country, hurting a woman or child is not a private family matter. It's the public's business, and intervention is a public responsibility. That message may be as important as the \$3.5 billion VAWA authorizes to be spent in the next five years.

When she spoke to Minnesota audiences about domestic violence, Sheila Wellstone often ended her remarks with these words: "*You have a chance to make a difference. Someone's safety depends on it.*" That's the message to send to Congress about VAWA.

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