FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
February 28, 2013

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Congress Passes Bipartisan Protection for Native Women—VAWA Reauthorization Heads to President for Signature

(Helena, Mont.) – Native women advocates in the United States are praising lawmakers for passage of an inclusive, bipartisan Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act that would afford protection to all women and victims of violence. The bipartisan bill, S. 47, passed by the Senate in February 2013 and now by the House, 286 to 138, includes critical provisions to restore and strengthen tribal authority to protect Native women from violence in Indian country. The hard-fought passage comes over 500 days after VAWA expired and the legislation stalled during the 112th Session of Congress.

“This bill is a major stride forward in fixing longstanding jurisdictional gaps in United States law that threaten the safety and lives of Native women, violate their human rights daily, and allow perpetrators of crimes on tribal lands to evade prosecution” said Jana Walker, senior attorney and director of the Indian Law Resource Center’s Safe Women, Strong Nations project. “We hope that today’s vote will help end the epidemic levels of violence against Native women in Indian country and lead to justice for all victims, including Native women who are among the most vulnerable in this country.”

Once signed into law, the bill will restore concurrent criminal jurisdiction to tribal governments over non-Indians having ties to the tribe and who commit domestic violence and dating violence against Native women in Indian country or violate protection orders. Non-Indian offenders commit vast majority of the violent crimes against Native women. “In many cases, these non-Indian perpetrators make a deliberate choice to live on our reservations, whether in connection with marriage to a tribal member or to avoid accountability for violent crimes
committed against Native women,” said Terri Henry, Tribal Council Representative–Painttown Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and Co-Chair, National Congress of American Indians’ Task Force on Violence Against Native Women. Current United States law has stripped criminal jurisdiction over non-Indians from tribal governments, and the federal and state officials that have authority to prosecute these crimes are failing to do so at alarmingly high rates. “This bill would strengthen the ability of tribal governments to protect Native women locally from domestic violence and dating violence, and in cases of violations of orders of protection by non-Indians” Henry added.

The long overdue reauthorization of VAWA comes at a critical time. “One in three Native women will be raped in her lifetime, and six in ten will be physically assaulted, said Lucy Simpson, Executive Director of the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center, Inc. Simpson added that, “even worse, on some reservations, the murder rate for Native women is ten times the national average.”

“Native women have endured violence since colonization, and their blood continues to be shed due to the unjust and unacceptable jurisdictional loopholes in United States law,” said Juana Majel, 1st Vice President of the National Congress of American Indians and Co-Chair of its Task Force on Violence Against Native Women. “We are pleased that Congress has finally stepped up to address the unchecked violence against Native women by freeing the hands of Indian nations--the most appropriate entities--to protect Native women in their own communities from rapists and batters,” Majel added.

The Indian Law Resource Center, the National Congress for American Indians’ Task Force on Violence Against Women, Clan Star, Inc., and the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center have been working diligently both domestically and in the international arena to restore safety to Native women and to protect their most basic human right, the right to be free of violence.

S. 47, the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act, now heads to President Obama to be signed into law.

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Partner Organizations

*About the Indian Law Resource Center*
Contact: Jana L. Walker
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The Indian Law Resource Center is a non-profit law and advocacy organization established and directed by American Indians. The Center is based in Helena, Montana and also has an office in Washington, DC. The Center provides legal assistance to Indian and Alaska Native nations who are working to protect their lands, resources, human rights, environment, and cultural heritage. The Center’s principal goal is the preservation and well-being of Indian and other Native nations and tribes, and its Safe Women, Strong Nations project works to end violence against American Indian and Alaska Native women. For more information, visit [www.indianlaw.org](http://www.indianlaw.org).

*About the National Congress of American Indians*
The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) is the oldest and largest national organization of American Indian and Alaska Native tribal governments. As the collective voice of tribal governments in the United States, NCAI is dedicated to ending the epidemic of violence against American Indian and Alaska Native women. In 2003, NCAI created the NCAI Task Force on Violence Against Women to address and coordinate an organized response to national policy issues regarding violence against Indian women. The NCAI Task Force represents a national alliance of Indian nations and tribal organizations dedicated to the mission of enhancing the safety of American Indian and Alaska Native women.

About Clan Star, Inc.
Contact: Terri Henry
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Clan Star, Inc. is a not-for-profit organization incorporated under the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in 2001, devoted to improving justice to strengthen the sovereignty of Indigenous women through legal, legislative, and policy initiatives, and, education and awareness. Clan Star provides technical assistance, training, and consultation throughout the United States to Indian tribes and tribal organizations in the development of public policy strategies addressing violence against women. For more information, visit www.clanstar.org.

About the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center
Contact: Lucy Simpson, Executive Director
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The National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center (NIWRC) is a nonprofit organization that provides technical assistance, policy development, training, materials, and resource information for Indian and Alaska Native women, Native Hawaiians, and Native non-profit organizations addressing safety for Native women. The NIWRC’s primary mission is to restore safety and sovereignty for Native women. For more information, visit www.niwrc.org.