Leahy: Domestic Violence Victims Deserve Action Now

WASHINGTON (Wednesday, August 1, 2012) – Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), the lead author of the bipartisan Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act, spoke on the Senate floor Wednesday about the importance of renewing the program’s charter.

While the Senate, in a strong bipartisan vote, approved the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act in April, the House Republican leadership has refused to take up a companion measure, despite a number of House Republicans urging its consideration. Instead, Speaker John Boehner earlier this week announced the designation of eight Congressmen to serve as conferees on the matter, each of whom supported the far more limited House bill. Leahy called on the House Republican majority to change course and take up the Senate bill, which would ensure critical protections for all victims of domestic and sexual violence.

“The House Speaker’s recent announcement naming as conferees only Republicans who supported that misguided and deeply partisan effort is hardly a step forward. Instead, I wish the Republican House leadership would do what it should have done four months ago – take up, debate, and vote on the bipartisan Senate-passed bill,” said Leahy. “I have no doubt we could reauthorize this life-saving bill in short order if they would just allow their members a straightforward vote on the merits.”

More than eight months ago, Senator Crapo and I, two Senators from very different parts of the country with very different political perspectives, joined together to introduce the Leahy-Crapo Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2011. We put aside our political differences, listened to the law enforcement and victim services professionals, and drafted a bill that put victims first.
It has been more than three months since an overwhelming bipartisan majority of the Senate joined us and passed that common sense legislation with 68 votes, including every woman Senator, Republican and Democratic. In doing so, the Senate sent a clear message – stopping domestic and sexual violence is a national priority, and we will stand together, as Republicans and Democrats, to protect all victims from these devastating crimes.

Unfortunately, the House Republican leadership chose to abandon the bipartisan approach that was so successful in the Senate. Instead of allowing a vote on the Senate-passed bipartisan bill that has the support of more than 1,000 national, state, and local victim service organizations, they insisted on crafting a new, partisan measure that intentionally stripped out protections for some of the most vulnerable victims and weakened existing protections for others. They refused to allow votes on amendments as we had done here in the Senate, choosing to stifle a full and honest debate about how to best meet the needs of victims.

This overtly political approach was too much even for some in their own party. Nearly two dozen House Republicans, including the chair of the crime victims’ caucus, stood up and voted against the inadequate and harmful House bill. That opposition was not surprising since a similar provision offered during the Senate debate was rejected by 61 Senators, including nine Republicans.

The House Speaker’s recent announcement naming as conferees only Republicans who supported that misguided and deeply partisan effort is hardly a step forward. Instead, I wish the Republican House leadership would do what it should have done four months ago – take up, debate, and vote on the bipartisan Senate-passed bill. I have no doubt we could reauthorize this life-saving bill in short order if they would just allow their members a straightforward vote on the merits.

Instead, Speaker Boehner continues to hide behind a procedural technicality, called a “blue slip”, as an excuse to avoid debating the bipartisan Senate bill. He acts as if he has no choice, but this is nonsense. The Speaker can waive the technicality and allow the House to vote on the Senate bill at any time. He is choosing to hold up this bill, and those efforts must stop.
Since the Senate bill passed, I have been consistently calling for House action on the legislation. Earlier this summer, Senator Murkowski and I wrote a bipartisan letter to Speaker Boehner, urging him to allow an up-or-down vote. Two weeks ago, five House Republicans followed suit, calling on Speaker Boehner and Majority Leader Cantor to take up the Senate-passed bill to resolve the “blue slip” problem. And yesterday Republican Representatives Biggert and Dold again urged the House to work with the Senate to get this vital legislation signed into law.

But if the Speaker of the House insists on ignoring the voices of the professionals in the field and those in his own party, and continues to delay this crucial legislation on a technicality, the Senate should once again lead by example. We can solve this problem tonight if the Senate Republican leadership wants to get VAWA done.

We can take up a House revenue bill, substitute the bipartisan Senate VAWA bill and send it to the House immediately. Majority Leader Reid proposed this path forward nearly two months ago but was blocked by Republicans. There is no good reason for their objection. Just this year, Republican Senators unanimously agreed to a similar procedure in order to overcome blue slip issues with both the transportation bill and the FAA reauthorization bill. Let’s be clear about this – with just a little cooperation from Senate Republicans, we can move VAWA now.

We have only a precious few days left in this Congress to get this bill passed. The procedural excuses must stop. The partisan politicking must end. Just as Senator Crapo and I did when we started this process so many months ago, it is time to focus on the victims and make good on our promise to stop domestic and sexual violence in all its forms and against all victims. Helping these victims – no matter who they are – must be our goal. Their lives depend on it, and they are waiting on us.

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