The Leahy Violence Against Women Act Passes Senate

Senator Leahy hailed Senate passage Tuesday of his Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act (VAWA), which will renew and strengthen VAWA’s proven efforts to prevent and remedy domestic and sexual violence and help victims. The bipartisan Leahy-Crapo bill (Senator Mike Crapo of Idaho is his lead Republican cosponsor of the Leahy bill) passed in a strong vote of 78 to 22. The bill now goes to the House for consideration, and Senator Leahy is urging House leaders to move promptly to the bill. Senator Leahy, who now has an additional leadership role as Senate President Pro Tem, had pressed to make VAWA a top priority for early Senate action, and the Senate vote came early on in the new 113th Congress, just weeks after the session began.

“There is strong, bipartisan support for VAWA reauthorization, and together we can finally finish what we started last year,” he said. “We are deeply indebted to the women and men around the country who have been working with us and have been steadfast in their commitment to the victims and to our efforts to combat domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and sexual assault.”

The bill reauthorizes the landmark Violence Against Women Act and strengthens, consolidates and improves existing programs that assist victims and survivors of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking. The bill closely mirrors the Leahy VAWA bill approved by the Senate last year. The Senate further improved the legislation by adding the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, an amendment offered by Leahy. The Senate approved the Leahy-Crapo bill in April 2012, but Congress did not complete action on the measure.

Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,
On Final Passage of the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, S.47
February 11, 2013

As the Senate now votes on the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act, I hope we will join together in a strong bipartisan majority to pass this important legislation. Enactment of our bill to help all victims of domestic and sexual violence is overdue. Together we can finally
finish what we started last year. We are deeply indebted to the women and men around the country who have been working with us and have been steadfast in their commitment to the victims and to our efforts to combat domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and sexual assault.

The Violence Against Women Act has been effective at preventing crimes and protecting victims. But there is so much more to be done. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s recent survey found that one in four women has been the victim of severe physical domestic violence, and one in five women has been raped in her lifetime. More than half of the homicides in my state of Vermont are related to domestic violence. This is simply unacceptable. We can and we must do better.

The Senate overwhelmingly passed the Leahy-Crapo bill last April. In the nearly 10 months since then, thousands of women around the country have been victimized. We have heard of too many cases, yet the vast majority of these crimes are never reported at all. I cannot help but feel that some of those crimes could have been prevented. Some of those victims could have gotten more assistance. Congress should not delay any longer.

Our bill offers support for those techniques already proven in the field that help identify high-risk cases and prevent domestic violence homicides. It will increase VAWA’s focus on rape victims and push colleges to strengthen their efforts to protect students from domestic and sexual violence. This reauthorization will allow us to make real progress in addressing the horrifying epidemic of domestic violence in tribal communities. This bipartisan bill will allow services to get to those in the LGBT community who have had trouble accessing services in the past. The bill also includes key improvements for immigrant victims of domestic and sexual violence.

All of these provisions were included because victims and the people who work with them every day told us they were needed to prevent crimes and provide better assistance to victims. We are trying to help victims and prevent crime. We have been working to get this bill through the Senate and to the House so we can quickly get a good bill to the President for his signature. We cannot afford further delay while more victims suffer unnecessarily.

I, again, thank the Majority Leader for making violence against women a priority for the Senate. We have been debating this measure since last Monday. We have considered a number of amendments. In the legislative process we have been able to make additional progress by adopting the bipartisan Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, as well.

I noted at the outset of this debate that by providing new tools and resources to communities all around the country, we have helped bring the crimes of rape and domestic violence out of the shadows. The Federal Government is standing with the women of this country and sent the message that we would no longer tolerate their treatment as second class citizens. Our bill renews and reinforces that commitment.

Ending violence against women is not an easy problem to solve, but there are simple and significant steps we can take right now, without delay, by passing this legislation. We have worked hard to make this bill bipartisan and I am proud that it has more than 60 Senate
cosponsors. It also has the support of more than 1400 local, state and national organizations from around the country that work with victims every day and know just how critical this law has been. I included their most recent letter of support with my remarks last Monday. I, again, thank them for their tireless efforts.

There remain some special interest lobbies and some Senators who do not appreciate the role of the Federal Government in helping improve the lives of Americans. It is disappointed that Heritage Action and the Family Research Council are urging opposition to our bipartisan bill. I hope that Senators will listen, instead, to the victims and to law enforcement and to the more than 1400 national, state, and local organizations that strongly support our Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act.

If anyone needs a reminder of how important government help can be, just think about the way that Federal and local law enforcement worked together last week to rescue Ethan, a 5-year-old kidnapped boy, from an underground bunker in Alabama, where he had been held hostage for almost a week. Ask the family and local law enforcement if they appreciated the help of the FBI, the Defense Department and so many who contributed to the safe return of that innocent victim.

Every day across this nation we are reminded of the importance of programs like the Violence Against Women Act. Our bipartisan bill does more than protect victims of domestic violence. It also contains provisions to protect victims of stalking. This morning the Washington Post reported that a “man stalking one of his victims shot and killed two women waiting to pass through metal detectors at a courthouse . . . Two male police officers also were struck by bullets . . . but were saved by their bullet-proof vests”. This episode should remind us all that after working to reauthorize and reinvigorate the Violence Against Women Act, we must also reauthorize the Bullet Proof Vest program so that more of our law enforcement officials can be protected.

I spent years in local law enforcement and have great respect for the men and women who protect us every day. When I hear Senators say that we should not provide Federal assistance, we should not help officers get the protection they need with bulletproof vests, or that we should not help the families of fallen public safety officers, I strongly disagree. In our Federal system, we can help and when we can, we should help. And that is exactly the opportunity that is before us today. We have the power to help improve the lives of millions of people in this country by renewing and expanding our commitment to end domestic and sexual violence and strengthen our commitment against human trafficking. A recent study from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) found that more than 24 people per minute are the victims of rape, domestic violence and stalking in this country. We can take action to change that and we must.
I am proud that our bill seeks to support all victims, regardless of their immigration status, their sexual orientation or their membership in an Indian tribe. As I have said countless times on the floor of this chamber, “a victim is a victim is a victim.” The Violence Against Women Act is an example of how the Federal Government can help solve problems in cooperation with state and local communities. The fact is that women are safer today because of this law and there is no excuse not to improve upon it and reauthorize it without delay.

We are working to protect victims – all victims – of domestic and sexual violence. I urge all Senators to look past the narrow, ideological opposition of some and join with us. That is what the former senior Senator from Texas, Senator Hutchison, did last year when her Republican substitute was rejected by the Senate.

I hope that despite 14 Republican Senators not voting to proceed to consider the bill and 35 Republican Senators supporting what was a poor substitute offered and rejected early in this debate, we will have a strong bipartisan vote for final passage. I urge those who previously opposed our efforts to improve the Violence Against Women Act to join with us and help the Senate send our strong bill to the House of Representatives so that we can get it enacted.

Despite the predictions by some that the Republican House of Representatives will refuse to consider the Senate bill, as it did last year, I see reason for hope. Just yesterday 17 Republican members of the House wrote to their own leadership urging immediate reauthorization of VAWA.

I thank the many Senators who have helped shape this bill and have spoken is such strong support of it, including Senator Crapo, Senator Mikulski, Senator Murkowski, Senator Murray, Senator Klobuchar, Senator Coons, Senator Collins, Senator Shaheen, Senator Franken, Senator Hagan, Senator Casey, and so many others. I also thank their staffs and my own, including Kristine Lucius, Noah Bookbinder, Anya McMurray, Chris Leopold, Bryan Seeley, and Clark Flynt, for their countless hours of work away from their own families as we try to make all families safer and more secure.

**The Leahy Trafficking Victims Protection Act Sails Through the Senate**

The Senate on Tuesday overwhelmingly adopted a Leahy human trafficking amendment to the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act prior to voting on final passage of the bill. Leahy’s amendment, adopted with the support of 93 senators from both parties, would reauthorize the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPRA). The reauthorization provides law enforcement agencies with the tools they need to investigate human trafficking crimes domestically and supports efforts to address the issue of trafficking abroad.

“Today is February 12, the day on which Abraham Lincoln was born. It was one hundred and fifty years ago that he delivered the Emancipation Proclamation, and it would be fitting that the Senate pass the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act on his birthday,” Leahy said. “Although the 13th amendment to our Constitution was ratified long ago making slavery illegal, we continue to fight human trafficking, which can amount to modern day slavery.”

Page 4 of 6
Leahy was the lead author of this important reauthorization last year, which was cosponsored by Senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla.). Despite having broad bipartisan support, and the support of every Democratic Senator, the Senate failed to pass this reauthorization last year. Leahy said the Senate’s convincing action on the floor today is a positive step forward for victims of trafficking worldwide and further strengthens the VAWA reauthorization currently pending on the floor.

“The United States remains a beacon of hope for so many who face human rights abuses. We know that young women and girls – often just 11, 12, or 13 years old – are being bought and sold. We know that workers are being held and forced into labor against their will,” Leahy said. “People in this country and millions around the world are counting on us.”

Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,
On Amendment 21 to S. 47, the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act
February 12, 2013

Today, after more than a week of consideration, the Senate will finally vote on the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act. This is a good bill that makes needed changes recommended by victims and those who work with them every day. I urge all those Senators who have opposed reauthorizing VAWA to end their opposition and join with us. Despite the predictions by some that the Republican House of Representatives will refuse to consider the Senate bill, as it did last year, I see reason for hope.

Just yesterday 17 Republican members of the House wrote to their own leadership urging immediate reauthorization of VAWA. They rejected the ideological opposition of Heritage and the Family Research Council. They recognize that VAWA is effective, efficient and successful “in curbing domestic violence and supporting victims,” and that “VAWA programs save lives.” They also note, as I have said repeatedly on this floor: “VAWA must reach all victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking in every community in the country.” I ask that a copy of the Republican members’ letter to Speaker Boehner be included in the record at this point.

The Senate has rejected the Republican substitute and defeated the Coburn amendment to strip the tribal jurisdiction provisions that have been included in the Senate bill for the past two years. Those amendments would have greatly narrowed VAWA’s ability to prevent crime and help victims and would have undercut our commitment to all victims of rape and domestic violence. I hope Senators will continue to vote against amendments that weaken this important legislation.

This morning the Senate has the opportunity to vote for an amendment that goes in the opposite direction from the Coburn amendments by allowing us to help more victims of serious crime in the United States and around the world. This morning the Senate is to vote on the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. That is another bipartisan bill that was written with the input of victims and service providers to make critical improvements to existing law. Last year,
this legislation had 57 cosponsors – including 15 Republicans. In particular, I thank Senator Rubio who has been a strong cosponsor of this important measure.

Today is February 12, the day on which Abraham Lincoln was born. It was one hundred and fifty years ago that he delivered the Emancipation Proclamation and it would be fitting that the Senate pass the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act on his birthday. Although the 13th amendment to our Constitution was ratified long ago making slavery illegal, we continue to fight human trafficking, which can amount to modern day slavery. This terrible crime still occurs throughout the world – including in the United States of America. The Polaris Project estimates that there are more than 27 million victims of human trafficking worldwide today.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act will help us continue to make real progress on this issue. It is a parallel effort to our reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act. Our effort is to stop human trafficking at its roots by supporting both domestic and international efforts to fight against trafficking and to punish its perpetrators. We provide critical resources to help support victims as they rebuild their lives.

This measure strengthens criminal anti-trafficking statutes to ensure that law enforcement agencies have the tools they need to effectively combat all forms of trafficking. It ensures better coordination among federal agencies, between law enforcement and victim service providers, and with foreign countries to work on every facet of this complicated problem. It includes measures to encourage victims to come forward and report this terrible crime, which leads to more prosecutions and help for more victims.

We have included accountability measures to ensure that Federal funds are used for their intended purposes, and we have streamlined programs to focus scarce resources on the approaches that have been the most successful. A Senator asserted yesterday that trafficking programs have been wasteful and duplicative. In fact, the programs supported by this amendment have been carefully tracked and shown to be effective. Nonetheless, the amendment reduces authorization levels by almost a third from the levels in the last reauthorization because we are determined to ensure efficiency and respond to concerns. We have made similar efforts to streamline VAWA.

The United States remains a beacon of hope for so many who face human rights abuses. We know that young women and girls – often just 11, 12, or 13 years old – are being bought and sold. We know that workers are being held and forced into labor against their will. I urge all Senators to join in passing the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. People in this country and millions around the world are counting on us.

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