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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT CANNOT BE A VICTIM TO POLITICS
A vote for amendments and substitutes that undermine S. 1925 is a vote against VAWA

S. 1925 is a bipartisan bill with 61 co-sponsors, including 8 Republican Senators, which was carefully crafted with new provisions and refinements based on interviews with more than 2,000 law enforcement, court, prosecution, legal services, and victim services professionals from across the country. The message from victims’ advocates was clear: we can’t afford to turn anyone away from protections from domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking.

Over the past 17 years, VAWA has created highly successful programs and laws that have changed the landscape for victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking. Since VAWA was passed in 1994, Reporting of domestic violence has increased as much as 51% and the number of individuals killed by an intimate partner has decreased by 34% for women and 57% for men. VAWA saved $12.6 billion in its first six years alone. S. 1925 carries on the tradition of these protections for victims of violence. However, there are substitutes and amendments that would gut the very provisions that 2,000 advocates said are critical to VAWA. “Politicians who obstruct passage of VAWA for political reasons will pay a price at the polls in November,” said Terry O’Neill, President, National Organization for Women, “S. 1925 is a bipartisan bill with 61 sponsors, and senators in both parties need to continue making their best efforts to get this bill passed so that lives can be saved and communities across the nation will be safe for girls and women, boys and men. NOW members and supporters in every state stand with all senators who support VAWA without harmful or punitive amendments.”

The substitute to S. 1925 offered by Senators Grassley and Hutchinson was drafted without input or consultation from the thousands of professionals engaged in this work every day. The substitute includes damaging and unworkable provisions that will harm victims, increase costs, and create unnecessary inefficiencies. It includes:

- harsh mandatory minimum sentences on a number of crimes that would have a chilling effect on victim reporting and would not help to hold perpetrators accountable;
- gender-neutral” language that ignores, rather than addresses, issues of LGBT victims;
- audit requirements that are excessive, burdensome and costly when VAWA already has important reporting and oversight provisions both for grantees and for the Department of Justice;
- amendments to the immigration provisions that create obstacles for victims seeking to report crimes, increase danger for immigrant victims by eliminating important confidentiality protections, undermine effective anti-fraud protections, and roll back years of progress to protect immigrant victims;
- amendments that also undermine the ability of tribal courts to hold violent offenders accountable and burdens tribal victims by forcing them to seek protective orders in federal court.

Advocates believe the Grassley-Hutchinson substitute will harm victims of violence. “Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people experience violence at the same rate as any other community but
have far fewer resources and avenues of support,” said Sharon Stapel, Executive Director at the New York City Anti-Violence Project which runs the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs. “S. 1925 is critical to protecting vulnerable LGBT people from violence and to creating culturally competent, accessible services for all survivors.” The Department of Justice has reported that “VAWA grant management and grantee recordkeeping are generally sound,” and that when auditing problems arise, they are “not about waste, fraud or abuse, but rather about inadequate accounting and insufficient documentation.” Nancy K. Kaufman, CEO of the National Council of Jewish Women, says “Since its enactment, VAWA has included important and effective reporting and oversight provisions both for grantees and for the Department of Justice. The substantial resources required to implement this unnecessary new audit requirement would be better spent on technical assistance and financial training for the hundreds of small police departments, courts, and non-profits who are OVW grantees.”

“Immigration remedies in VAWA have always received broad bipartisan support. We cannot support amendments that endanger victims by allowing the abusers to use the immigration process as a weapon to continue to abuse their victims,” said Grace Huang, Policy Director of the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence. According to Juana Majel Dixon, 1st Vice President of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) and Co-Chair of NCAI’s Task Force on Violence Against Women, “S.1925 is the only real solution to the jurisdictional barriers tribal governments face, and Native victims cannot afford for it to fail.”

Other amendments also fall short of protecting all victims. Senator Cornyn’s amendment attempts to address serious issues but lacks input from victim advocates. Similar to the Grassley-Hutchison substitute it includes harsh and harmful mandatory minimum sentences. Long mandatory minimum sentences can keep victims who were assaulted by someone they know from reporting the crime, sex offenders are likely to plead to non-sex offense crimes and courts, not Congress, should determine an individual’s sentence. Supporting this amendment would be harmful to victims.

A bipartisan bill is both necessary to protect victims of violence, and evidence of the Senate having reached a consensus. Bipartisan work is necessary to protect victims of violence. Legal Momentum President, Elizabeth Grayer said, ““We’re thrilled to see the Senate taking up S. 1925. Legal Momentum’s work on, and commitment to, eradicating violence against women started with then-senator Biden nearly two decades ago. We’re grateful that Senators Leahy and Crapo have taken up the mantle and worked together to forge a strong bi-partisan bill. Following Senate passage of the Leahy-Crapo bill, we look forward to working with everyone in the House to pass a strong bi-partisan VAWA that addresses the needs of all survivors of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking.” More than 1,000 state, local and national organizations have signed a letter in support of S. 1925. S. 1925 must pass as a bipartisan effort so that victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking can get the support they need.

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The National Task Force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women is a coalition of national organizations that work together on federal policies and legislation to end violence and ensure services for victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking.