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New Violence Bill to Give Programs More Funds

By Allison Stevens, WeNews correspondent

Lawmakers are rewriting the nation's domestic violence laws, channeling more money to programs that help victims find assistance, recover from abuse and keep their jobs.

WASHINGTON (WOMENSENEWS) – When it first approved the landmark Violence Against Women Act more than a decade ago, Congress was criticized by some for paying too much attention to law enforcement and prosecution programs and not enough to services for victims of abuse.

It appears Congress has gotten the message.

In rewriting the nation's anti-domestic violence laws, lawmakers are retaining their support for law enforcement and prosecution programs but are also channeling a larger share than ever to programs that help victims seek and find assistance, recover from physical, sexual and psychological abuse, find safe housing and keep their jobs.

A Senate bill to reauthorize the landmark Violence Against Women Act of 1994 would authorize \$2.7 billion over the next five years for new and existing programs to aid victims and prevent domestic and sexual violence, according to figures compiled by the National Network to End Domestic Violence in Washington, D.C.

That amount represents more than half of the bill's \$4 billion total price tag and is a considerably higher percentage than was authorized for similar programs in 1994 and 2000. (The figures do not reflect money from separate laws that have allotted other federal funds to domestic violence programs.)

The bill awaits action in the Judiciary Committee. Similar legislation has been introduced in the House of Representatives.

If approved, the bill would provide a large chunk of new money – for the first time ever – to programs that provide direct services to victims of sexual assault. It would also pay for new programs to assist battered women find transitional housing, provide them with better health care services and help them keep their jobs by allowing employment leave for going to court or moving their belongings to a shelter.

The measure would also create or enhance programs catering to underserved communities, including teens and young adults, the elderly, the disabled, immigrants, Native Americans, and residents of rural

areas. And it would also establish programs to educate young people about family violence and engage men and boys in the campaign to end domestic and sexual violence.

“It’s amazing what we’re able to get in the bill this year,” said Jill Morris, public policy director at the Denver-based National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, which lobbied for funds. “The field has been really satisfied and amazed for the outpouring of support for these new provisions.”

Won’t Cover all Communities

The legislation wouldn’t cover all underserved communities, however. One group in this category that has been left out is people in same-sex relationships.

Despite studies that show that lesbians and gay men are at roughly the same risk of experiencing domestic violence as heterosexuals, the legislation makes no mention of this community, Morris said. That does not come as a surprise in the current political climate, in which lawmakers on both sides of the aisle are more focused on circumscribing gay rights rather than expanding them, say critics.

“We would just be asking for trouble” if programs for lesbians and gays were written into the law, said Lisalyn Jacobs, vice president for government affairs at Legal Momentum, an advocacy group based in New York that chairs the National Task Force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women, which helped craft the legislation.

Some other high-risk populations have been left out of the legislation, such as those with substance abuse or mental health problems, Morris said. But that is due more to silence from the communities than to the political sensitivity of the constituencies, she added.

“Congress is very homophobic,” Morris said. “They refuse to put in any language that talks about services for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender population.”

The consequences are “tragic” for the community, said Susan Holt, a program manager at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center. Abused members of this group have fewer resources to draw upon than heterosexual victims, she said. Those who seek services from mainstream providers often encounter staffers who are untrained in the nuances of same-sex domestic abuse.

As a result, myths persist that men are not victims of physical abuse, that lesbians do not suffer serious injury from their partners and that lesbians and gay men cannot physically dominate their partners as easily as a man can dominate a woman, Holt said.

More Than Satisfied

Despite what some see as holes in the legislation, proponents are more than satisfied with the measure as it is currently written and are optimistic about its chances for passage this year. The current authorization expires at the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30.

The new legislation would approve an increase in overall spending over the current authorization, but by a much smaller margin than was approved in 2000. And whether all of those funds are actually

spent will be up to individual congressional appropriators responsible for doling out money on an annual basis. Indeed, Congress has not fully funded many domestic and sexual violence programs in recent years.

Experts attribute the bill's broadened emphasis to a natural evolution from intervention, enforcement and prosecution to victim outreach, assistance and prevention. The initial bill, they say, had a heavy focus on crime in part because it was included in the 1994 omnibus crime bill.

Lawmakers have since turned more attention to victim services and prevention but retained support for enforcement and prosecution programs. That helped maintain support from fiscal conservatives, who tend to be more inclined to back legislation that reduces crime rather than creates new programs.

"No one would ever say you don't need the emergency room," Kiersten Stewart, director of public policy at the Washington-based Family Violence Prevention Fund, said, referring to the enforcement provisions. "But we also know that that can't be the only solution."

She and others are optimistic that the legislation will win approval this year, perhaps before the current bill's September expiration date. Strong support from members from both sides of the political spectrum – Sens. Joseph Biden, a liberal Democrat from Delaware, and Orrin Hatch, a conservative Republican from Utah, are among the bill's fiercest supporters – will no doubt help it advance through the legislative process.

"We have been pleasantly surprised" by strong congressional backing for the bill, Stewart said. "There is really bipartisan support for ending violence against women."

Allison Stevens is Washington Bureau Chief at Women's eNews.

For more information:

National Task force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women: <http://www.vawa2005.org/>

National Network to End Domestic Violence: <http://www.nnedv.org>

U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/vawo/>

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