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## Renewing Act a Priority for Indian Country

Congress has a lot of high-profile business on table in the next three months, from Supreme Court nominees to Hurricane Katrina relief, to estate-tax repeal.

An issue that should share high priority, if not a high level of public attention, is reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act, a 10-year-old law that is set to expire at the end of the month.

The law has helped establish shelters for victims, train law enforcement and social workers, set up offender registries and the National Domestic Violence Hotline, and much more. Most important, it is credited with bringing down domestic violence rates nationally.

Legislation renewing the law is especially important among Native Americans.

Why? Because Indian women are twice as likely to be raped as women nationwide — one in three will become a victim of rape at the present rate, and that's just based on reported cases.

That's a shocking statistic, and it needs to be battled on every front possible.

Domestic abuse also is more prevalent among Native Americans, especially on reservations where poverty lies at the root of many social problems.

“It seems like it's never a priority to help these victims,” Francis Onstad, a Blackfeet who helps run a domestic violence program in Browning. “They've lived with it for so long they don't see it as a problem.”

A bipartisan bill in the Senate would expand protections for Indian women, starting with creation of a deputy director in the Office on Violence Against Women. That official's job would be to coordinate tribal policies nationwide.

Legislation also would increase research on domestic abuse among Native Americans, make it easier for tribes to prosecute sex offenders and abusers, and better coordinate the efforts of tribal and federal authorities.

According to an article this past week by Tribune Washington Bureau reporter Diana Marrero, a key provision would set up an accessible, nationwide tribal registry of protection orders and sex offenders. That would help officials keep track of offenders who move among reservations.

The federal-tribal coordination aspect of the legislation is especially important in Montana — where there are seven Indian reservations — because of the sometimes-confusing mixture of jurisdiction in criminal matters on reservations.

Equally important are the grants contained in the legislation.

“If it wasn't for those federal programs,” Onstad said, “there would be nothing being done here. Everything we do needs to come from grants because the tribe doesn't have the money to fund it.”

Congress should move quickly to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act — it's too important to get lost in political stalemates over tax cuts, the Supreme Court and assessing blame after Katrina.

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