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Safety Activists See Rare Ally in Biden Campaign

Biden talks about domestic violence more than any presidential candidate in either party, but even for him it's not a top priority. Strategists see the issue as too middle-of-the-road for candidates looking to set themselves apart in a packed field.

By Allison Stevens, Washington Bureau Chief

WASHINGTON (WOMENSENEWS) – Democratic presidential candidate Joseph Biden responded to a question about immigration in last week's radio debate on National Public Radio by raising the problem of domestic violence.

“It is relevant, believe it or not,” said Biden, the 34-year veteran senator from Delaware who chairs the Foreign Relations Committee.

Immigrant women get “the living crap beat out of them” but are “afraid to acknowledge they're being brutalized because they'll be deported,” he said. Current law now protects battered immigrant women from immediate deportation “so you can put the S.O.B. who's beating her in jail.”



Sen. Joseph Biden meets a voter.
Credit: Rick Friedman / WPN

Biden, in other words, continued to act as the Democrats' point person on domestic violence.

The Delaware senator is the only candidate to give premium campaign space to the issue. He highlights domestic violence on the home page of his campaign Web site with a clip of a filmed speech about domestic violence and links to newspaper articles about his efforts to address the issue in the Senate.

He also talks up his record on the trail. Since 1994, he has sought to increase federal funding for domestic violence programs and to expand the scope of the federal response to domestic violence with a measure to create an electronic network of 100,000 lawyers willing to volunteer work on behalf of victims.

Pushing International Scope

He has also introduced a bill that would combat violence against women at an international level. I-VAWA, for International Violence Against Women Act, commits the United States to ending violence against women around the globe and awaits committee attention. Last week, Biden introduced a resolution designating Feb. 4-8 as National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Week.

Most other Democratic candidates raise the issue on their campaign Web sites but to a lesser extent than Biden; no Republican candidates make obvious mention of it on their campaign sites.

“We’re very thankful to have someone who’s been a champion of this issue bringing it to presidential election,” said Jill Morris, public policy director at the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, an advocacy organization based in Denver.

Biden took special interest in the issue in the early 1990s, when he served as chair of the Judiciary Committee. At the time, reports of domestic violence surged, even as crime was in an overall decline. Biden saw a legislative answer to help battered women, and began writing the Violence Against Women Act. Passed in 1994, it established federal programs to combat domestic violence.

Widespread Problem

Any politician has a good reason to work on the issue.

One in 4 women experiences domestic violence over the course of their lifetimes, 1 in 6 suffers an attempted or completed rape, and 1 in 12 is stalked, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, an advocacy organization based in Denver. The vast majority of victims are female, although more than a quarter – 27 percent – of victims of family violence are male. Men are 16 percent of the victims of spousal abuse and 14 percent of abuse by boyfriends, according to the coalition.

But Biden, who claimed only 4 percent of Democratic voter support nationwide in a CNN survey conducted earlier this month, pushes the issue only so far.

Like the other candidates he sticks mainly to issues that top the list of voters’ surveyed concerns: the war in Iraq, the economy, health care, terrorism, immigration, education and the environment. As chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he pays special attention to international issues such as the threat of war with Iran.

Biden would have little to gain politically if he did make domestic violence his highest priority, said Carol Hardy-Fanta, director of the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Candidates neglect domestic violence because legislative solutions to counter the problem enjoy wide bipartisan support, leaving candidates no room to draw differences with their opponents.

“The issues that sort of get momentum for a candidate are ones where a person can distinguish themselves and change the direction of the debate,” she said. Domestic violence, she said, is not likely to serve as the kind of pivotal wedge issue that candidates rally around.

Constituency in Waiting

But Morris thinks candidates could still benefit from giving the issue more attention. Simply taking a public stand could appeal to groups representing constituents who range from law enforcement, the judiciary, women’s rights, anti-violence and children’s welfare, Morris said. “I think it’s an easy win.”

In a 2006 Lifetime Television poll, nearly 8 of 10 women and men said preventing violence against women was a top election concern, more so than or on par with issues that get much more attention like jobs and the economy, health care, education, national security, the war in Iraq and the environment.

Yet few candidates spoke out on the issue, said Cheryl O’Donnell, a spokesperson for the National Network to End Domestic Violence in Washington, D.C. She thinks candidates could appeal to millions of victims by addressing the issue.

“Over the last two years, we’ve really been trying to make the issue of domestic violence a higher profile issue during campaigns,” O’Donnell said, adding that she hopes Biden’s example will encourage the other candidates to talk about it more.

Democrat Karen Hartley-Nagle, a former battered mother from Delaware who is running for Congress, prioritizes issues like the Iraq war, health care, jobs and the economy, but counts herself and Biden among the few politicians willing to talk about domestic violence publicly.

“By us talking about it, it lets other politicians know that this is not a taboo subject. It’s not a subject you need to stay away from to get elected.”

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For more information:

Women’s eNews Spotlight on 2008 Presidential Election:
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3410/>

“Biden Wants Legal Brigade for Domestic Safety”:
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3029/context/archive>

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: <http://www.ncadv.org>

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