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## Some Help With Heart: New Violence Against Women Act is Smart

Congress must breed optimists. The Violence Against Women Act, first passed in 1994, expires every five years. Tuesday, the Senate Judiciary Committee will initiate hearings on a bill to reauthorize it.

Previous legislation has not ended violence against women, but data suggest that it has made a significant dent. The FBI's national survey of crime trends shows that, excluding homicides, domestic violence against women has decreased by nearly half since the law was enacted. Part of that is probably attributable to an overall drop in crime, but the numbers also show that focused, sustained efforts by police, prosecutors and social agencies are making women safer.

Another study, by researchers at the University of North Carolina, found that every dollar spent to curtail violence against women saves \$8 in the costs of law enforcement, medical and mental health care, and lost productivity, among other things.

Perhaps that's why the House version of the Violence Against Women Act has 115 sponsors, including Dallas Democratic Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, and the Senate version has 40, including such prominent Republicans as Texas' Kay Bailey Hutchison, Pennsylvania's Arlen Specter and Utah's Orrin Hatch.

One thing this bill does that earlier versions didn't is recognize the importance of economic independence in stemming violence against women. Although women of all social classes experience violence, the problem is much worse among those with fewer economic resources.

For a woman who has a job, her paycheck may be her lifeline, the one thing that allows her to leave an abusive relationship. Yet often that lifeline is taken away. Research shows that at least 25 percent of female victims of violence lose a job as a consequence.

The law under consideration in Congress would allow victims up to 10 days a year of unpaid leave to take steps to better their situations, such as seeking medical and legal help or moving. Given that employers want workers who aren't injured or distracted – and whose attackers won't show up on the company's doorstep – the proposed law is eminently sensible as well as compassionate.

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