

# Countercurrents.org

March 8, 2006

## The Urgent Need to Fully Fund VAWA

By Lucinda Marshall

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was unanimously reauthorized by Congress late last year. Funding for the act's various programs, however, is far from assured. For the fifth year in a row, President Bush's budget request did not provide full funding for existing VAWA programs and because it was passed after the budget proposal for 2007 had already been drafted, no funding was requested for the new VAWA programs that were also approved by Congress. Of the \$1 billion authorized by Congress, the President's budget requested only \$546.2 million.

"The reason that VAWA is so important is that it provides resources and tools that communities need to not only address but also end violence against women. VAWA 2005 expands upon current programs and provides the first federal funding stream that supports sexual assault programs," explained Cheryl O'Donnell, Communications Director of the National Network to End Domestic Violence ([www.nnedv.org](http://www.nnedv.org)).

However the sexual assault programs, along with other new programming including services for children who witness abuse, sexual assault services, privacy protections for victims of violence, programs for communities of color and Indian women, and prevention programs that encourage men and boys to take a role in ending violence against women are not included in the President's budget proposal. In addition, the budget that Congress is considering does not include the full funding that had already been approved for existing VAWA programs such as the National Domestic Violence Hotline, the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act, shelter services, rape prevention and education programs, services for older and disabled victims of violence, legal assistance for victims of violence and transitional housing programs.

According to Irene Weiser, Executive Director of Stop Family Violence ([www.stopfamilyviolence.org](http://www.stopfamilyviolence.org)), "Full VAWA funding is needed because violence against women and girls ruins lives, ruins futures, ruins society. People have no idea how pervasive violence against women is, nor how damaging its effects."

Every year an estimated two million women and one million children are severely assaulted in the U.S. According to Weiser, "The effects of all these forms of violence are devastating and can last a lifetime."

A history of abuse is highly correlated with many social problems including problems in school, mental and physical health disorders, substance abuse, homelessness, prostitution, teen and out of wedlock pregnancy, adult criminality and becoming victims or perpetrators of abuse as adults. Adult victims of abuse, most of whom are women, suffer long term emotional, physical and

social consequences from the abuse and are at higher risk for depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide and a variety of health problems.

The cost to society for the direct physical and mental health consequences of abuse alone are roughly \$4 billion per year. Domestic violence is a frequent cause of job problems as well, costing employers an estimated \$10 billion annually. Victims of domestic violence are at high risk of poverty,  $\frac{2}{3}$  of welfare recipients are victims of domestic or sexual violence and  $\frac{1}{3}$  of welfare recipients are currently being abused and rely on welfare and other forms of public assistance to escape the abuse and rebuild their lives. Over 90% of homeless women have experienced domestic or sexual violence, 40% of domestic violence victims will be homeless at some point in their lives and a majority of women in prison have been victims of severe abuse.

Clearly, the human and social cost of violence against women is staggering and that is precisely why full funding for VAWA is so critical. According to Stop Family Violence, research has found that VAWA has saved nearly \$14.8 billion dollars in net averted social costs in its first 6 years. Even more importantly, studies show that rates of domestic violence and sexual assault have declined since VAWA was begun.

Personal violence is no less terrifying than political violence. Given the demonstrable benefits of VAWA, by comparison to the hundreds of billions spent on the War on Terror, \$1 billion dollars would be money well spent.

*Lucinda Marshall is a feminist artist, writer and activist. She is the Founder of the Feminist Peace Network, [www.feministpeacenet.org](http://www.feministpeacenet.org). Her work has been published in numerous publications in the U.S. and abroad.*