

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 28, 2013

Dear Colleague:

We hope you will join us as cosponsors of S. 47, the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, which we introduced this week. For almost 18 years, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) has been the centerpiece of the Federal Government's commitment to combat domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. It has been extraordinarily effective, and the annual incidence of domestic violence has fallen by more than 50 percent since this landmark law was first passed.

Although the law helps many victims and those at risk, there is still more that needs to be done. In the 112th Congress, we took steps to modernize and improve the law with legislation we initiated. While Congress did not complete work on this critical piece of legislation, the need remains and we are committed to finishing the job. According to the CDC's 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 1 in 4 women has been the victim of severe physical domestic violence, and 1 in 5 women has been raped in her lifetime. We must provide victims, service providers, and law enforcement with the tools they need to combat these horrific trends.

Programs supported by VAWA have provided victims with critical services such as transitional housing, legal assistance, and supervised visitation services. They address the unique barriers faced by rural victims, elderly victims, and those with disabilities. The Violence Against Women Act has also successfully encouraged communities to coordinate their responses to violence against women by bringing together victim advocates, law enforcement, the courts, health care professionals, and leaders within faith communities. This reauthorization legislation, which makes only minor changes to the bill that passed the Senate in the 112th Congress, improves on these programs and efforts.

This legislation renews successful programs that have helped law enforcement, prosecutors, and victim service providers keep victims safe and hold perpetrators accountable. It consolidates programs in order to reduce administrative costs and avoid duplication. The reauthorization is also mindful of our current fiscal state, and reduces authorizations by 17 percent from the 2005 reauthorization. New accountability measures have been included in the bill in order to ensure that VAWA funds are used wisely and efficiently.

The reauthorization bill provides tools and encourages best practices, which have been proven to be effective, to prevent domestic violence homicides by training law enforcement, victim service providers, and court personnel to identify high-risk victims and connect them to crisis intervention services. It also ensures that housing protections reach a broader group of victims by applying existing housing protections to nine additional federal housing programs.

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This bill includes measures to ensure an increased focus on sexual assault prevention, enforcement, and services. It creates new purpose areas in key programs to improve law enforcement and forensic responses to sexual assault and to address backlogs of untested rape kits. It incorporates a consensus version of the SAFER Act, which takes additional important steps to reduce rape kit backlogs. This version of the SAFER Act passed the Senate by unanimous consent late last year. It is essential that we improve our capacity to address these backlogs and better serve victims of rape.

This reauthorization builds on existing efforts to more effectively combat violence against all victims and aims to ensure that VAWA programs reach more communities whose members need services. It expands the definition of "underserved" to include religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity to encourage development of services for people who have had trouble getting help in the past based on those categories. It also includes new purpose areas to ensure that grant funds can be used to make services available for all victims regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. The bill includes important provisions to ensure that vulnerable immigrant victims of domestic and sexual violence receive the support and services they need.

This bill addresses the ongoing crisis of violence against Native women, who face rates of domestic violence and sexual assault much higher than those faced by the general population, by strengthening existing programs and by narrowly expanding concurrent tribal criminal jurisdiction over those who assault Indian spouses and dating partners in Indian country. This provision would ensure that no perpetrators of abuse are immune from accountability, but would do so in a way that protects rights and ensures fairness.

Violence against women remains a critical problem in our nation. We cannot let victims of domestic and sexual violence continue to suffer. Congress must act now. Many of you have already signed on as cosponsors, and we hope the rest will follow soon. Please join us in our effort to have the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 be immediately considered by the full Senate without further delay.

Sincerely,



PATRICK LEAHY
United States Senator



MIKE CRAPO
United States Senator