

# Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy

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# VAWA Reauthorization: Its Relevance to Fatherhood Organizations

Among fatherhood groups, there is a growing level of attention being paid to the threat of domestic violence within many families. An exclusive focus on services to fathers can lead to an oversight of the urgency and complexity of domestic violence. It therefore behooves those interested in fatherhood issues to develop a base of understanding on domestic violence and the legislation currently addressing it.

As organizations dedicated to the family, developing an awareness and understanding of domestic violence issues can give us a more complete picture of the many complex factors affecting the interaction between fathers, mothers, and their children, thus making us more effective in our work with fathers. Put into more specific terms, we, as policy workers and human service professionals, should be informed about how legislation and related prosecution affect these men's lives. Additionally, domestic violence is an issue that affects the safety and well-being of children. Even if not abused themselves, children who observe violence against their mothers have been shown to suffer detrimental effects. In the cases where the fathers we work with are not the batterers, we must not ignore other domestic violence that may arise in the lives of non-custodial parents' children.

Among the many important bills facing Congress this session on the issues of the family, the reauthorization and expansion of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) merits particular attention. Because VAWA has the potential to provide additional services to assist the low-income families that we serve, it is important to understand the background of the bill.

In 1994 Congress passed VAWA as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. VAWA '94 was the first comprehensive federal law to address violence against women as a national concern. Prior to the passage of this law, domestic violence was often treated as a matter confined within the boundaries of private life. In the early 1990's, there was a growing concern that police departments and courts were not treating domestic violence as seriously as other forms of violence.

VAWA not only served as a public condemnation of gender-based violence at the national level, but also provided the financial resources to combat domestic violence, sexual assault, rape, and stalking at the

local level. Accordingly, \$1.6 billion was made available for research, training of community professionals, prosecution, and victim assistance to better understand and address the factors that put women at risk to be abused. Through VAWA '94's STOP grants (Services Training Officers Prosecutors Against Violence Against Women Formula Grants), states could attempt an update of their criminal justice systems to address the need for victim safety and offender accountability at the local level. The bill also provided additional funding for victim services with financial support for shelters and for the creation of the first national domestic violence hotline. VAWA '94 was the first attempt to provide a system-wide approach to domestic violence that went beyond victim advocates to include police, prosecutors, judges, healthcare professionals, and any other points of contact a battered woman might have in her community.

The programs authorized under VAWA extend only until October 1, 2000, unless reauthorized by both houses for inclusion in the budget for fiscal year 2001. To ensure that law enforcement and court programs, shelters, and other services to women provided by VAWA continue, VAWA '99 was introduced in Congress by Representatives Conyers (D-MI), Morella (R-MD), and Roybal-Allard (D-CA) on January 19, 1999, as H.R. 357.

As more women came forward to use the programs created under VAWA '94, the need for services greatly increased. Professionals working with these women quickly recognized the need to continue, improve, and expand the programs covered under VAWA. These advocates and attorneys serving victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, along with members of the women's advocacy community responded to this need with the first draft of VAWA '99. The product of their collaboration provides not only for the reauthorization of existing programs, but also reflects an expanded scope of the original provisions with a more comprehensive approach to violence against women. Among the programs to be supported by the \$3.9 billion funding level proposed by VAWA '99 are a continuation of present services including STOP grants, the hotline, battered women's shelters, and rape crisis centers, plus improvements to the original VAWA through increased attention to currently under-served communities of women such as disabled women, older women, and immigrants. \$1.6 billion of the funding under VAWA '99 is designated for the new programs that have been proposed to more comprehensively address violence against women and its effects. First of these programs is an increase of funding focused on prevention in the areas of sexual assault and domestic violence. Major provisions include the establishment of a National Resource Center on Sexual Assault, training for health professionals who deal with assault victims, and financial assistance to women in their efforts to find permanent housing safe from their batterers.

VAWA '99 also pays more attention to the economic concerns of the many women who face violence in the workplace. To address these concerns, the bill includes victims' employment rights (i.e. ensures that an employer cannot terminate a woman as a result of her being a victim of abuse), creates tax credits for businesses implementing workplace safety programs to combat violence against women, and extends eligibility for unemployment compensation to women who are forced to leave their jobs because of abuse.

Additionally, VAWA '99 focuses on children as another important group affected by violence against women. It includes grants to establish and operate supervised visitation centers, and calls for reforms of state laws on domestic violence and custody. In addition, it asks states to provide an educational component on domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking in the public schools in an effort to stop the cycle of abuse in the next generation.

Finally, VAWA '99 looks to the future development of an increased understanding of violence against women with a commitment to further research on intervention, prevention, and education to be conducted by a multiagency task force.

Since its introduction in Congress, the number of cosponsors of VAWA '99 has grown from the original 85 to 181. The bill is endorsed by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the National

Organization for Women, the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Family Violence Prevention Fund, and other women's advocacy organizations.

As an omnibus bill, VAWA '99 has provoked spin-off legislation covering various VAWA provisions in freestanding bills. Title I of VAWA '99 has been introduced in the House by Representatives Morella (R-MD) and Johnson (R-CT) as the VAWA Reauthorization Bill (H.R. 1248), which would solely reauthorize funding for existing VAWA '94 programs for five more years. In addition, the Senate has presented its own violence against women legislation. Senators Biden (D-DE) and Specter (R-PA) introduced VAWA II in the Senate on January 19, 1999. Presently in the process of being reworked, legislation would reauthorize funding under VAWA. Inextricably tied to the issues surrounding these bills are crimes motivated by gender, sexual orientation, and disability. With efforts to include these crimes under an expanded definition of hate crimes, members of the House and Senate hope to soon afford distinct legal prosecution of these crimes under the Hate Crimes Prevention Act.

The Violence Against Women Act targets violence against women in schools, workplaces, and surrounding communities with efforts by educators, employers, and legal and medical professionals. In the last ten years, its development and implementation have placed this nationwide problem in the public's awareness. As groups that are committed to the family and to serving fathers, it is important that we recognize and understand the issues that have been raised in the debate to pass VAWA '99 and its accompanying bills in the House and Senate. Domestic violence, as a form of violence against women and especially in its intersection with other factors in economically stressed communities, is an issue about which policy organizations and community groups need to be aware.

With its goal of eradicating violence from the home domain, VAWA serves as one essential thread in the family protection fabric of which fatherhood groups are a part. Through its variety of programs, VAWA provides funding to community based organizations whose efforts may overlap with the work of fatherhood groups. These organizations provide resources that we can use in our efforts to educate ourselves on the issues of gender-based violence that may arise in our own efforts to assist families. By assisting some of the same community members that we serve, VAWA is an important element in expanding the range of options available to us as we work to address the challenges facing all families.

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