

Testimony of

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

April 16, 2002

I've called this hearing to check in with the Violence Against Women Office to take stock of where we are and where we're going in our fight to end violence against women in this country.

I want to hear from the Violence Against Women Office's Director and the Administration about their vision and priorities for the Office.

I want to make sure that we are committed to the spirit and the letter of the Violence Against Women Act.

I want to hear from prosecutors and judges about the progress they've made, and what kind of help and leadership they've received from the Violence Against Women Office. Today we'll hear from the top law enforcement official in Georgia, the Attorney General, about his state's collaboration with the Violence Against Women Office.

And finally, I want to hear from those providing direct services - those day-to-day lifelines - to women victims.

What do they need from the Violence Against Women Office? How can the Violence Against Women Office best lead this fight?

Since we passed the Violence Against Women Act in 1994 and created the Violence Against Women Office, it has awarded over \$1 billion in grants to state and local entities to fight domestic violence and sexual assault.

When the Violence Against Women Act passed, domestic violence became a federal crime. Under the Act, the Immigration and Naturalization Act has approved applications from more than 12,000 battered immigrant women escaping abuse and establishing their own residency here.

Since its passage, there has been a 41 percent decrease in the rate of intimate partner victimization of women.

We see a similar drop in the rates of criminal rape and sexual assault during that time frame - almost a 43 percent decrease.

Federal dollars, federal leadership, federal commitment and federal/state collaboration are making a real difference.

This is not the time to scale back our efforts.

That is why I am concerned by reports that the Violence Against Women Office is reconfiguring and eliminating its public policy division.

When we drafted the Act, I envisioned a two-pronged attack - with new federal laws and policies on one side - and grant programs on the other. Both sides are necessary, each side inseparable from the other.

They work hand-in-hand. The Act's grant programs are just as valuable as the Act's public policy mandates.

I'm not aware of any other office at the Justice Department which requires the same broad, multi-disciplinary, coordinated response as that required by the Violence Against Women Office.

The grants to encourage arrests, for example, operate simultaneously with public policy efforts to ensure interstate enforcement of restraining orders.

Grants for civil legal assistance work hand-in-hand with public policy efforts to educate localities about the new legal rights for battered immigrant women.

I'm convinced that had the Office only handed out grants, and not served its critical roles of both "bully-pulpit" and policy coordinator, the success of the Violence Against Women Act would not have been anywhere near as dramatic as it has been.

Domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking are complicated issues, requiring many discrete areas of expertise. It is not for generalists or for grant administrators alone.

There are those that specialize in law enforcement and judicial training, or in the intersection of child services and domestic violence, or in the full faith and credit enforcement of protective orders.

We need diverse and deep expertise in a public policy division in the Violence Against Women Office. And I have doubts that we can ask grant program administrators to become general experts as well.

Don't misunderstand me, I support efforts to increase efficiency at the Violence Against Women Office to provide better support for grantees.

I agree with getting the most for our dollars. But I should add here that by all accounts the Violence Against Women Office is a bargain. Its FY2002 operating costs were \$5.6 million.

A recent report out of the University of North Carolina determined that the Act saved American taxpayers \$14.6 billion dollars in estimated costs associated with violence against women.

I support efforts by the Director to help her over-worked staff with innovative ideas. I am not here to have some academic debate about different business models. I'm here because I'm concerned that the efforts to diminish the profile and role of the Violence Against Women Office

may have negative and long-term effects on our government's ability to address violence against women. And the fact is, there is more work to be done.

Sadly, we have not solved our problem. A report released this summer found that 1 in 5 teenage girls in America becomes a victim of physical or sexual abuse in a dating relationship. We know that 1 out of 3 women killed each year is killed by an intimate partner.

A strong and independent Violence Against Women Office should lead the fight with a voice that has credibility, a high-profile, and the ear of the Attorney General himself - not just cut checks.

That's not what we need. It's not what we intended.

A Director who has been nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate has both the credibility and the bully pulpit to travel this country and get local people to the table.

As the former Director of the Violence Against Women Office, Bonnie Campbell, recently told House members:

"There is a world of difference between full participation in the highest levels of decision making and being buried in a satellite grant office in the Department."

To meet its mandate, to be effective, the Violence Against Women Office should not, must not, and cannot be buried within a grant making bureaucracy.

In my mind, The Violence Against Women ACT is a solemn promise that we made to the women of America. It is something that I take very seriously. The Violence Against Women OFFICE is charged with keeping that promise. I want to make absolutely certain that the Office is equipped to do that, with dedication to both grant-making AND public policy, with full funding for programs and with the profile and credibility it deserves.

So today let's talk about the Office's mission. How has it helped? What would it be without a dedicated public policy division? Why should it be independent?

I'll now turn to Senator Grassley for any opening comments he may have.