

Testimony of
William Sexton

President
National Sheriff's Association
July 19, 2005

The Testimony of Sheriff Ted Sexton
President of the National Sheriffs' Association
Before the
Committee on the Judiciary
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REAUTHORIZATION OF THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, my name is Ted Sexton, and I am the Sheriff of Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, and currently serve as the President of the National Sheriffs' Association. Thank you for your kind invitation to appear before you today to testify about the Violence Against Women Act. I am pleased to be in such distinguished company on this panel and offer the views of our Nation's 3086 sheriffs.

As you know, NSA strongly supports the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act for the simple reason that the problem of domestic violence continues to be of concern to the law enforcement community. I am proud to say that just one month ago, we sent a letter to Senator Joseph Biden expressing our strong support of his legislation to renew VAWA. In that letter we not only indicated our support for VAWA, but also stated that, sheriffs were particularly pleased to see the authorized amounts for the Services and Training for Officers and Prosecutors (STOP) and the Grants to Encourage Arrest and Enforcement of Protection Order Improvements increased. It is my hope that the Committee will move quickly on this measure as VAWA sunsets at the end of September. Since the initial passage of the Violence Against Women Act, law enforcement agencies across the country have made much progress, but there is still so much more that we can do. As this committee knows so well, NSA members play a key role in VAWA's mandated coordinated community response to prevent, investigate, and prosecute crimes of violence against women.

With help from organizations such as the NSA, law enforcement have created valuable training courses to teach the front line officers how to deal more effectively with the crime as they encounter it. NSA's program in particular focuses on rural domestic violence. These rural areas present difficult issues and the support structures needed to help victims may not be as robust as those found in major urban areas. Additionally, we have recently expanded this training to include dispatchers who are required to assess situations before officers can arrive on the scene. Often, a law enforcement dispatcher is a victim's first contact with someone who can help. It is essential that they be highly trained and prepared to help, reassure, and comfort that scared and lonely voice on the other end of the telephone line.

We have been the cornerstone of efforts to bring awareness, as well as resources, to confronting the crime. As a result of proactive law enforcement addressing this type of crime, we have instilled confidence in the women who are victims. The confidence that the criminal justice system will compassionately address their concerns has encouraged more women call for needed help to break the circle of violence. Mr. Chairman, my own community of Tuscaloosa County has a population of about 180,000 people, and we have seen the number of domestic violence cases rise from about 3800 cases in 1997 to almost 5600 cases last year. That increase is not the result of abusers looking for a haven in Alabama, but rather a direct result of the support systems that VAWA provides to victims through community groups, law enforcement, prosecutors and victim advocates. It is the result of a system that empowers the victim with the support and confidence they need to report the crime and take action to protect themselves from further abuse. In other words, VAWA works.

As first responders, law enforcement officers need the tools to effectively assess and diffuse domestic violence situations. The responding officers are also often the ones who have to initiate contact with victim service agencies, and many times with medical services. It is the uniformed officer who arrives on the scene that must set the tone of the subsequent interaction between the victims of violence, the criminal justice and victim service agencies. The victims who have had their self esteem damaged by the crime of violence lean on the uniformed officer to help them in the often intimidating first steps of finding a way out of the situation. In addition, and perhaps more frustrating to the front line officers, he is the individual who is called upon to repeatedly to answer the calls of domestic violence. The first officer on the scene is with the victim as she negotiates the criminal justice system.

Like many areas of government, law enforcement is called upon to provide more services with fewer resources. Domestic violence is an area where our communities cannot afford for us to lose our vigilance. According to DOJ statistics, intimate partner violence made up 20% of all non-fatal violence against females in 2001. Among women who report having been raped, physically assaulted, or stalked since they were 18 years old, 60% were victimized by a husband, co-habiting partner, boyfriend, or date. The FBI has documented that between 1976 and 2002 one-third of all female murder victims were killed by an intimate partner. In my county almost half of the murders committed last year were related to domestic violence. That is unacceptable and why we need the continuing support of VAWA.

NSA recognizes that violence against children is a growing problem as well. Again, speaking from the experience of my agency, we have responded to horrific crimes. One that I will never forget is a case where a man who shot three infant children in the head, and then turned the gun on their mother before killing himself. Another that I will never get over is a case where the boyfriend of a young mother fired shots at her, before barricading himself in the house and shooting her teenage daughter as she hid in a closet. These are scenes that no law enforcement officer who responded will ever forget. And they are scenes that are, unfortunately, being played out every day throughout this country.

One continuing frustration that NSA has been attempting to address is the interoperability of information sources. A fully functioning system will allow deputies to access information regarding restraining orders or orders for protection from abuse issued in other states. This so-called data interoperability will also allow deputies to better assess whether children passing through the state in the custody of an adult are in danger. With so many missing children reports and Amber Alerts, any tool that can help law enforcement is most welcome.

Most areas of the country are now faced with a multicultural and usually multi-lingual community. This raises a new issue for law enforcement: how to deal with violence against women among an immigrant population unfamiliar with our legal system, unsure of local law enforcement, and completely unprepared to leave their spouse or partner for fear that they will have no assistance whatsoever. Reaching this growing number of women is the challenge that faces us in the coming years. Training programs that address this particular issue are needed to help us prepare to meet the challenge.

The work, and the training, of these law enforcement first responders requires a financial commitment. The reauthorization of VAWA means that needed funds will be appropriated to assist law enforcement and others deal effectively with this terrible crime of violence.