

Testimony of
Michael Shaw

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Hearing On

The Violence Against Women Act:

Building on Seventeen Years of Accomplishments

Michael Shaw

Co-Director, Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Services

Waypoint Services for Women, Children and Families

Cedar Rapids, Iowa

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The Violence Against Women Act: Building on Seventeen Years of Accomplishments

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I've worked as an advocate or volunteer supporting survivors of sexual violence since 1993. Before the passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, there were gaping holes in our country's response to sexual violence. Reports such as "Rape in America: A Report to the Nation" in 1992 and "The Response to Rape: Detours on the Road to Equal Justice" in 1993, showed our governmental systems had essentially left survivors of rape to fend for themselves. VAWA, co-sponsored by then Senator, Joe Biden and Sen. Orrin Hatch, began to remedy these issues by strengthening systems of victim support and criminal accountability. I'll briefly talk about the impact of VAWA for sexual assault survivors and reflect on what VAWA means to me personally.

1. VAWA saves lives.

The first time I answered a rape crisis line in 1999 the caller said "I'm going to kill myself." That was a scary first call - but I had excellent training to help me support her. I listened for close to an hour as she talked about wanting the pain of her rape to go away.

For more than 17 years, VAWA has supported the training of thousands of victim advocates, police officers, and medical professionals on the best ways to support rape survivors.

2. VAWA provides supportive services to help victims of sexual assault and their children stay safe and rebuild their lives.

Last year, we received a call on our crisis line from a mother, I'll call her Janet, who had just found out her daughters had been sexually abused. What I will share about this story will sound like a life falling apart, but if you listen carefully you will hear how she is laying the foundation to rebuild her life and the lives of her children.

On the first call, Janet didn't know what to do. Her 9 year old daughter had just told her that a

man they trusted was touching her private area. The advocate listened and responded with compassion.

A couple of days later Janet called back and said her 14 year old daughter had just confirmed that the same person had sexually abused her. Once again an advocate listened and offered support.

A couple days later Janet called back and disclosed that she had been a victim of sexual abuse. I took that call. Not only was she devastated by what her children were telling her, but now she was dealing with the trauma she had experienced. Janet had never told anyone about her own abuse.

While this may seem like a life falling apart, please note that Janet kept calling back. She had someone to talk to when she needed it most. We offered Janet a sounding board so that she could then give her children calm, reliable, non-judgmental support, which experience and research has shown is essential to healing for children, and we supported Janet as she talked about her own trauma.

The VAWA supported services helped a woman lay the foundation to heal from her own child sexual abuse, and helped her support her children to do the same.

3. VAWA saves money.

In its first six years alone, VAWA saved taxpayers at least \$14 Billion in net averted social cost. These social costs include medical and mental health care needs, missed hours of work, increased substance abuse, and difficulty achieving educational goals.

Rape is the most costly of all crimes to its victims, with total estimated costs at \$127 billion a year.

Skilled advocates provide victims with emotional support and help them figure out their next steps. The VAWA supported services are an investment in the lives of sexual assault victims.

4. Each subsequent reauthorization of VAWA has improved the scope of comprehensive services for victims.

VAWA 2000 strengthened community protections for immigrant victims of sexual assault by funding training to improve law enforcement's response to immigrant victims.

VAWA 2005 included the first federal funding stream to support sexual assault survivors regardless of their involvement with other systems with the Sexual Assault Services Program. Rape Crisis Programs across the State of Iowa have used these dollars to improve and enhance services to sexual abuse survivors.

Finally, the Violence Against Women Act is more than just a law to me. VAWA is part of a collection of resources that indicates our country is progressing toward a goal of a society free of sexual violence. Believing that a violence free world is possible is part of what sustains me as an

advocate.

Frequently, when I tell people what I do, they respond "Wow, that must be depressing work." or they try to avoid eye contact because no one really wants to talk about rape. Some days it is hard, but listening to survivors keeps me going. Long ago I made a commitment to listen to survivors as long as there were survivors needing support. Survivors' voices inform my administrative work and my prevention efforts. Victim's voices inform every decision I make as a Co-Director and most importantly they remind me to feel the work, to care about the work. They remind me that I am part of a movement.

In 2000, I heard Cassandra Thomas, then Vice President at the Houston Area Women's Center, speak. She eloquently and passionately expressed what I was feeling as an Advocate and the father of three children. She challenged us by saying:

"Some of you all are doing field work. I joined a movement, and the canvases look real different depending on whether you are Movement People or Field People"

"So now, will your canvas be a Movement Canvas - a canvas about social change, a canvas about destroying patriarchy that has set up a system of sexual violence, or are you just going to do counseling groups? What is your canvas going to look like? Now don't get me wrong. I want more money for counselors. I want to have some groups. But, I'm not just doing social service. If that is what you're doing, let me just tell you something, your canvas is going to look way different, because I'm about making sure my 5 year old child never sits in a group, that my 5 year old child never goes to a hospital for a rape kit. That's what I'm about, and social service won't do that for me. I need movement, folks. A Field just lays there.

Senators I believe you, I, and VAWA are all part of a movement and we must do everything in our power to support survivors, hold perpetrators accountable, and move inexorably towards a world that is free of sexual violence for our children and their children. I strongly encourage you to continue building on the accomplishments of the last 17 years by swiftly reauthorizing an improved VAWA.

Thank you.