

Hearing for the Violence Against Women's Act: Building on Seventeen Years of Accomplishments

Oral Testimony by Dr. Phillip C. McGraw, Ph.D.

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Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Grassley and esteemed members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, good morning and thank you for inviting me to testify before you today about the Violence Against Women Act, which for seventeen years has been the centerpiece of the Federal Government's commitment to combating domestic violence and other violent crimes against women. I am very pleased to say that the decline in reported acts of violence against women make it clear that VAWA is working. Much has been accomplished. We now have coordinated efforts addressing domestic and sexual violence.

But, as we are all painfully aware, there is still much work to be done. 2,000,000 women a year are victimized meaning as we sit here today in the 1st hour of this hearing, 228 women are being beaten, terrorized and intimidated, all behind closed doors, all undoubtedly feeling very alone. Three of those women will be murdered today. I'm here today to be a voice for those who are disempowered and can not find that voice yet deserve to live in peace.

These numbers are alarming, but the reality is worse. Domestic violence is perhaps the most under-reported crime in American life. Tragically, untold numbers of victims never go to the police or hospitals, and many of them, riddled with fear or shame don't even tell members of their own families. There is so much more work to be done!

And sadly, victims are getting younger and younger. Domestic violence is now the most common cause of injury to women ages 15 to 44. That's right— fifteen. In fact, among teenage girls who are killed, nearly one-third is killed by a boyfriend or former boyfriend. Who will step forward to help us help our kids?

In too many situations violence against women, young and old, is almost treated as an "acceptable crime", and the ripple effects move through society like a tsunami. Intimate violence is a wicked problem for victims and treatment is less than perfect. More than **10 million children will witness** their mothers, aunts, or sisters being threatened, intimidated, and beaten by

intimate partners and family. Predictably children in these toxic situations are often traumatized and have a range of interpersonal problems. They have a higher incidence of emotional and behavioral problems, mental illness, alcohol and drug abuse, and poor academic achievement. Some become abusers themselves, and all of this puts a huge strain on currently underfunded and overly stretched resources. Victims are at risk for repeated and varied violence, a phenomenon called “polyvictimization”.

I long ago resolved to never speak unless I could add something to the silence. Last year, at the Dr.Phil show, we knew the time had come— to not just add to the silence but to end it by placing issue of domestic violence squarely in the center of our daily platform and thrust it into the national dialogue. We did so by launching the END THE SILENCE ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE campaign. We partnered with the National Network to End Domestic Violence and with our viewers who became “Silence Breakers” committed to bringing about change.

We brought in experts from every walk of life. In an unprecedented programming move we committed and will continue to commit countless hours of programming to educate millions of women across America about their rights, about what constitutes violence and abuse and how to SAFELY deal with it when happens. **We** gave them tools and pointed them to critically important resources. Courageous women came forward with cautionary tales.

For example, Audrey Hanne (**pic. 1**) suffered in silence through years of emotional abuse from her husband. When she decided to leave, her husband turned violent and, in a single crippling instant, he raped her, beat her in the head with a hammer and stabbed her. As she lay helpless, with nothing left to fight back--- he poured gasoline all over her body and set her on fire. (**pic. 2**). Only the external scars are visible. Audrey, with grace and courage inspired millions to acknowledge the reality of this silent epidemic.

Sandra Tarris (**pic. 1**), attacked twice by her boyfriend when she was six months pregnant, was left with a cracked skull and the permanent loss of her left eye (**pic. 2**). She tried to get away! He tracked her down and attacked her again. Due to the damage to her optic nerve, her doctors anticipate she will, in time, be completely blind. She and her son have moved and hidden seventeen times. Her question: “Dr. Phil, what can I do? Where do I turn?” **WHERE INDEED!**

This precious 3-year-old child (**pic.1**) was murdered by an abusive father during a custody battle. When he could no longer find a way to control his ex-wife, he took the life of her child leaving a helpless mother to live with the horror.

These are not statistics. They are our neighbors, lost in the dark, hoping someone will come for them and lead them to safety.

In today's economic times, needs are increasing but resources are drying up, shelters, transitional housing, counseling, and childcare. A 2010 census by NNEDV found in just one day, more than 70,600 adults and children were served by local domestic violence programs. Yet, more than 9,500 requests for services went unmet. Nine thousand 500 women, scared and alone, had to be told "There's no room at the inn"

I worry a lot about those 9,500 women because I know the danger they face. Nearly 70 percent of injuries and murders in domestic violence cases happen to women soon **after** they leave abusive relationships, a phenomenon known as "separation assault" With no safe haven to protect them when they make the decision to get out, their lives are in serious jeopardy. And, "there's no room at the inn".

Bottom line, we need more meaningful legislation like VAWA, providing critical programs and support. We need better-coordinated efforts between Family AND Criminal courts. We need to increase funding to NSF and NIMH to continue important behavioral research that informs legislation like VAWA. And above all we need to cut through the red tape when a woman is in crisis, because red tape in the system means red blood will be spilled in the home.

We must also focus on the power of prevention through education in schools and at home by creating and funding curriculums to educate and inoculate young women and men I am working with other professionals to develop evidence-based treatment programs geared toward middle and high school kids.

And we, as husbands and fathers, must model for and teach our children what a loving, respectful relationship looks like. No funding required for this one!

On a personal note, this issue deeply hits home for me. I recently became a grandfather to a beautiful little girl named Avery Elizabeth (pic. 1). When I came home one day after taping a show on domestic violence and held the new love of my life close to me, I knew I would do everything in my power to protect her and other little girls, too young to have a voice of their

own from the horrors experienced by lovely women like Audrey and Sandra. When little Avery reaches dating age, which if I have my way will occur sometime around her 40th birthday!!!! I pray she lives in a more civilized world, and one that has a zero tolerance for violence against women.

And so I pledge to you today our campaign to End the Silence on Domestic Violence is just beginning. With legislation like VAWA we can turn obstacles into stepping-stones. I will continue to use the Dr. Phil platform to raise awareness and educate the public. We will advocate for victims of violence and partner with others, from the roadhouse to the Whitehouse until we can at last, lay down our swords. Today, I call on my colleagues in the media to join in this effort.

We are honored to stand with you, ready and willing to do whatever it takes to contribute to a safer and more promising future for the women all across America. Our children and grandchildren deserve nothing less. Again, I thank you for inviting me to speak to you today, and I thank you for overseeing and advancing this important legislation.