

**Dr. Jane A. Van Buren, Executive Director
Women Helping Battered Women, Inc.
Testimony prepared for the Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
The Violence Against Women Act: Building on Seventeen Years of Accomplishments
Wednesday, July 13, 2011**

Senator Leahy, Senator Grassley and distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Jane Van Buren and I am the Executive Director of Women Helping Battered Women in Burlington, Vermont. Thank you for the opportunity to talk about the importance of the Violence Against Women Act, in particular how my organization has used crucial VAWA funds to serve victims of domestic violence and their children successfully in Vermont.

In 1994 when VAWA was passed, WHBW served approximately 3,200 individuals and received roughly \$50,000 in federal grant money. Today we directly serve approximately 4,500 individuals and receive \$485,000 in federal grant dollars. What VAWA has allowed us to do is provide women, men and children with programming that is increasingly comprehensive and sustainable and which ultimately leads victims to independence and freedom from violence. This landmark legislation filled a void in federal law that had left too many victims of domestic and sexual violence without the help they needed to restore their lives.

Women Helping Battered Women was founded in 1974 to provide emergency shelter to women fleeing abuse. From 1974 to 1994 our advocacy consisted of sheltering women and children, responding to hotline calls and helping women secure relief from abuse orders. There was no money for paid staff but volunteers kept the shelter doors open and answered the hotline calls. We were a valuable, if underfunded resource in the community but our services did not go far enough. Victims with no money, no credit, no employment history and no confidence in their ability to be self-sufficient and to keep their children fed and housed all too often ended up returning to their batterer. They lacked the resources to do anything else. Their choice too often came down to a life of violence or a life living on the streets.

Furthermore, national and state policy did not recognize the seriousness of domestic and sexual violence and the impact that systemic abuse and violence against women has on civil society. That all began to change when Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act. Propelled in part by VAWA, our Nation has made remarkable progress in recognizing that domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and dating violence are crimes, and in providing legal remedies, social support and coordinated community responses. Since enactment of

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VAWA, the rates of domestic violence including domestic violence homicide have declined, more victims have felt confident to come forward to report these crimes and to seek help, and states have passed more than 600 laws to combat these crimes. Despite this progress, however, our country still has a long way to go. Millions of women, men, children, and families continue to be traumatized by abuse. We know that one in four American women and one in seven men are victims of domestic violence. One in six women and one in 33 men are victims of sexual assault, and 1.4 million individuals are stalked each year.

Over the past seventeen years, based on demonstrated need and with the support of VAWA, Women Helping Battered Women has built a strong response to domestic violence in Chittenden County, Vermont. We provide comprehensive services for those affected by domestic violence who are seeking immediate and long-term help to escape abusive situations and improve their lives. This includes support and counseling for children exposed to and affected by violence, transitional and short-term emergency housing, legal advocacy and collaboration with law enforcement, employment and job readiness training, credit counseling and repair, crisis intervention, safety planning and extensive public education and training.

VAWA programs are necessary in order for us to continue in our efforts to address these critical and on-going needs. Women Helping Battered Women receives money from The STOP (Services, Training, Officers, Prosecutors) Formula Grant program, which is one of the most comprehensive and effective means of reducing domestic and sexual violence. STOP grants provide resources to law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, the courts, and victim advocacy groups such as WHBW to improve victim safety and to hold offenders accountable for their crimes against women. We also receive funds through The Transitional Housing Assistance Grants program which has enabled us to develop an innovative housing program in Burlington in collaboration with the Burlington Housing Authority. The Transitional Housing Assistance Program is essential to our ability to provide safe havens and related services to victims fleeing domestic and dating violence, sexual assault and stalking. In the midst of a mortgage and housing crisis, transitional housing is especially important because long-term housing options are becoming increasingly scarce.

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Women Helping Battered Women, like so many other service providers across the country seeks to initiate social change and build healthy, violence-free communities by providing vital comprehensive support services to all victims and survivors of domestic violence, as well as their children. This becomes simultaneously more challenging and more important during difficult economic times. The safety net VAWA has provided survivors over the years is now a lifeline for many. The economic pressures of a lost job, home, or car can add stress to an already abusive relationship. The loss of these resources can make it harder for victims to escape a violent situation. And just as victims' needs are growing, state budget cuts are resulting in fewer available services, including emergency shelters, transitional housing, counseling, and childcare. A 2010 census by the National Network to End Domestic Violence found that in just one day, more than 70,600 adults and children were served by local domestic violence programs. Yet due to a lack of resources, more than 9,500 requests for services went unmet, including 19 in Vermont.

Despite this we see success and I would like to end with a story about Women Helping Battered Women's housing program and two survivors: Betsy and Rachel.

Domestic violence has long been recognized as a leading contributing factor for homelessness and Women Helping Battered Women has seen an enormous growth in the number of homeless victims of domestic violence seeking emergency shelter. Last year alone we saw a 17% increase, from 158 adults seeking shelter to 186. This increase follows a trend that has been occurring over several years. The past three years have seen a 39% increase in the number of adults seeking emergency shelter as a result of domestic violence.

As a result of the trauma that they have endured, the need for homeless reduction strategies is even more pronounced for survivors of domestic violence, especially given the economic abuse and resulting poverty that places victims of domestic violence alongside other "hard to house" populations. Given that the WHBW shelter and other shelters throughout the state are almost always operating at capacity, many in this hard to house population rely on emergency assistance from the State of Vermont to fund stays in hotel rooms, often utilizing the entirety of the benefit for which they are eligible.

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Betsy has been living on a limited income since she lost the ability to work as a result of her advancing multiple sclerosis. After raising her son in rural Vermont Betsy chose to move to Burlington to access increased supportive services. After her move, Betsy developed a relationship with her neighbor, and eventually they moved in together. Everything was fine at first, but soon Betsy's partner started controlling her finances, taking advantage of her increasing immobility. He would leave for days on end, and threatened her that she was being watched and that if she left the house or contacted anyone he would find her. He also used Betsy's credit cards without her knowledge, charging huge sums that Betsy was then responsible for. He knew that Betsy would be concerned with maintaining her credit and would pay the high credit card debt, which would then force her into financial dependence on him for basic needs such as housing and food.

When WHBW first spoke with Betsy we let her know that she had some options for leaving her current situation and regaining independence. Our emergency shelter was full, which meant that we were able to access Vermont's Emergency Assistance Fund through the Department of Children and Families Economic Services Division and house Betsy in a local hotel. Betsy was eligible for 28 days in a hotel, at a cost of \$68 per night to the state, during which time she would be required by the state to conduct a housing and job search. Given Betsy's extremely limited income, physical limitations and current debt situation, coupled with the high rental rates and low vacancy in Chittenden County, Vermont, we knew it would be a challenge for Betsy to find safe and sustainable housing in 28 days. In addition to this, most landlords require credit checks, and apartments require security deposits and first month's rent. The total amount due up front would be close to \$1500 for even the smallest apartment, an amount Betsy couldn't even fathom coming up with.

Betsy was eligible for rental assistance from WHBW, as part of our VAWA Transitional Housing Program. We worked with Betsy to find an accessible apartment and worked with the landlord to clarify the details of her damaged credit score. Betsy is currently living independently in her new apartment, working to reduce her debt and repair her credit. Betsy has been

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independent and free from violence for the past 9 months and is well on her way to a safe and sustainable housing and a life free from violence.

A modest 2-bedroom apartment in Vermont now costs \$920 a month on average, which requires an hourly wage of \$17.70 or an annual income of \$36,800. At least 46% of Vermont's occupations have median wages below this threshold. Fortunately, transitional housing programs funded by VAWA offer a strong model in assisting domestic violence survivors in their move toward financial independence. As indicated, the major barriers to success for victims of domestic violence in Chittenden County are a lack of affordable housing, and a lack of flexible resources to meet emergency needs to prevent homelessness. Transitional housing program funds through VAWA help reduce these barriers and strengthen supportive services.

Rachel came to WHBW's emergency shelter in Vermont from another state, fleeing an abusive relationship with threats such as: "I will kill you if you leave" and "you will live to regret even thinking about leaving". When Rachel arrived her behavior was erratic and she let our staff know that her husband had been keeping her from taking her medication for her bi-polar disorder. Without her medication, Rachel had fallen into a prolonged depression and had stopped taking care of herself and the household and eventually her child. The State removed the child from the home. This chain of events spurred Rachel to flee, vowing to regain custody of her daughter even if it meant placing herself in extreme personal danger.

In order for her to regain custody Rachel needed to stabilize her mental health and her housing. Fortunately, a two-bedroom apartment had recently opened up at Sophie's Place, WHBW's transitional housing apartment complex. After the initial settling in period, Rachel worked with Sophie's Place staff to gain employment and work on her custody case while maintaining stable mental health. After 5 months of stable housing and stable mental health, Rachel secured an excellent job at a university, and was able to regain custody of her daughter. Today they are living safely and happily at Sophie's Place. Rachel plans to move out of Sophie's Place in six months, creating an open apartment for someone else in need.

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Although Sophie's Place has realized substantial success, it is limited to 11 units. In our first two years of operation, WHBW has had to turn away at least 80 applicants simply because of a lack of availability. Therefore, to increase the availability of transitional housing, WHBW has been able to access additional recovery act transitional housing program funds through VAWA and funds from the Vermont Agency of Human Services to support private rental assistance in the community for victims of abuse. Now, in addition to Sophie's Place, WHBW works closely with survivors in "scattered – site housing" to identify and address their financial goals and develop a positive rental history. Additionally, WHBW works to ensure that any barriers to receiving a Section 8 voucher (unpaid utility bills, unpaid debt to a housing authority etc.) are addressed. After a year of demonstrated rental success in the community, BHA will issue a tenant based Section 8 voucher to these survivors as well thereby ensuring sustainability, and substantially decrease the risk that the survivor will return to homelessness.

Stable housing makes it much easier for survivors of domestic abuse to successfully access WHBW's empowerment-based, survivor-centered case work and the economic justice advocacy services that are the hallmark of our work. Survivors in transitional housing have access to economic literacy training, credit counseling and repair, debt management, advanced housing advocacy including homeownership counseling, and employment and training opportunities. Survivors have the opportunity to develop individualized plans to help them maintain their housing or move from homelessness into permanent housing. Transitional housing program funds make all of this possible and by reauthorizing VAWA and maintaining the funding for transitional housing services and coordinated community response services through STOP, Congress has the unique opportunity to help victims secure housing, life-long financial independence and, thus, reduce their reliance on public programs.

Thank you.