

Testimony of
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Testifying on the increased importance of the Violence Against Women Act in a time of economic crisis

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Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Sessions, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the tremendous importance of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) - especially in these harsh economic times. My name is Auburn Watersong. I am the Economic Justice Specialist at the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. In this capacity, I am responsible for providing the Network and its Member Programs with technical assistance and training in areas that relate to economic abuse and empowerment, entitlement programs and significant economic issues such as housing, transportation, credit status and financial literacy. I also advocate for public policies that recognize the unique needs of survivors seeking financial assistance and economic support and I seek and manage funding that increases the capacity of local programs to meet the growing need for economic advocacy work.

The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence is a statewide coalition of domestic and sexual violence programs. Our 15 member programs are located throughout the state and provide lifesaving services to victims and their families. VAWA funded programs are an essential part of our work in Vermont, and across the country. The programs are all the more critical in light of the current economic crisis. I am here today to discuss the importance of VAWA programs that provide support for victims and to share some recent Vermont innovations which are providing economic resources to victims. Most importantly, I am here to address this opportunity to expand VAWA in the upcoming reauthorization to focus on providing long-term, sustainable safety for victims and their families.

In response to the terrible crimes of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence and stalking Congress authorized the Violence Against Women Act in 1994 through the leadership of the Judiciary Committee and reauthorized it in 2000 and 2005. VAWA created lifesaving legal protections and a broad array of programs to hold perpetrators accountable and keep victims safe. These programs traditionally focused on responding to the immediate needs of victims and strengthening the criminal justice system's response to domestic and sexual violence, dating violence and stalking. VAWA provides funding for emergency response to victims as well as resources and training for law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, judges, and advocates.

More recent reauthorizations have extended VAWA to focus on the broader needs of victims beyond immediate safety and the criminal justice response. Expanded VAWA grant programs have focused on the particular needs of rural populations, victims with disabilities, older victims, victims in tribal communities, and the need for culturally specific services, as well as the impact of violence on children. Additionally the newer programs have emphasized the impact of violence on children, the need for housing and housing protections for victims, for improved workplace responses to victims, for an improved healthcare response, for comprehensive prevention programs, and the need to engage men and boys in preventing violence. These and other critically important programs have created a more comprehensive approach to the way our nation prevents and responds to domestic and sexual violence. This broader, more holistic focus takes a proactive approach to providing more sustainable safety for victims of domestic and sexual violence, dating violence and stalking.

Many VAWA programs contribute to the overall economic stability of victims and play a crucial part in victims' long-term safety and self-sufficiency. These programs should be maintained, improved and given sufficient resources to respond to victims' needs. The VAWA reauthorization process also presents an opportunity to build upon the best practices in the field and provide support and economic protections for victims to address their complex economic needs. By reducing the barriers to survivors' economic independence, we provide survivors and their children real opportunities to escape the violence and heal. Our nation should ensure that victims of violence have the support they need to remain economically independent, which ultimately benefits not just survivors and their children, but the economy and the nation as a whole.

The Economic Impacts of Domestic and Sexual Violence

Domestic and sexual violence impact victims from all socio-economic backgrounds, yet there are links between economic factors and domestic and sexual violence. We know that "access to independent economic resources. . . is central to abused women's decision-making and safety planning."

Two-thirds of people know someone who is or has been a victim of economic abuse. Economic abuse is a central part of domestic violence - from controlling the finances to actively working against survivors' efforts to become financially independent. This abuse is not only part of the immediate control over a victim's life but a massive barrier to a victim's ability to flee and eventually develop economic self-sufficiency. If victims do not have the economic ability to flee and rebuild their lives, they are more likely to stay. A lack of financial education, limited access to consumer protections, and no economic opportunities are deterrents for victims hoping to escape abusive relationships or to heal from the trauma of sexual violence.

A quote from an advocate in Idaho demonstrates the complex needs survivors have for both safety and financial security.

"A survivor and her daughters spent last night at a local motel after her abuser beat her. She asked me, 'What is worse: a beating every week or not having a roof over my children's head and food in their bellies?' How do I answer that question?"

We need responses and services that meet both safety and economic needs simultaneously, as without economic security, survivors cannot obtain long-term safety.

Economic Status, Abuse and Violence

While victims at all income levels experience domestic violence, poor victims experience it at higher rates than women with higher household incomes. Poorer victims experience violence at higher rates, in part because they have fewer resources to rely upon to escape. Domestic violence is more than three times as likely to occur when couples are experiencing high levels of financial strain as when they are experiencing low levels of financial strain. Victims with household incomes of less than \$7,500 are 7 times as likely as victims with household incomes over \$75,000 to experience domestic violence. Women whose male partners experienced two or more periods of unemployment over a 5-year study were almost three times as likely to be victims of intimate violence as were women whose partners were in stable jobs. Poverty and unemployment are also risk factors for the perpetration of sexual violence. Poverty can increase the risk for sexual victimization and compound the barriers victims experience when coming forward to get help.

Employment

Gainful employment is the most significant way that individuals can become economically self-sufficient. Yet almost 50% of sexual assault survivors either lose their jobs or are forced to quit in the aftermath of the crime and between one-quarter and one-half of domestic violence victims report that they have lost a job due, at least in part, to domestic violence. In her expansive literature review, Eleanor Lyon's points out that domestic violence perpetrators use a number of tactics to jeopardize their victims' ability to obtain or maintain employment, including threatening or harassing the victim at work, interfering with efforts to get to work or school including violent attacks, keeping victims awake all night, and refusing to provide childcare or transportation. Perpetrators also often forbid victims from securing employment. The combination of these active sabotaging tactics, and the poor work performance and absenteeism that result from the crisis and trauma of abuse make it difficult for victims to obtain and maintain employment.

Abuser' tactics, however, are not the only barriers survivors face in maintaining employment. Victims of domestic and sexual violence often face employment discrimination. One domestic violence victim in Vermont reached out for help after being fired from her job. She had been battered to the point that she required hospitalization; she returned to work after three days in the hospital and then needed to take one more day off for a court appearance. Upon returning to her job, she learned that she had been fired for her absence.

The following few examples from Legal Momentum hint at the pervasiveness of employment discrimination against victims of domestic and sexual violence.

Angela was a waitress and bartender at a local bar/café in a small town in Wisconsin. Angela applied for and obtained a temporary domestic abuse injunction against an ex-boyfriend who made threats against her while she was six months pregnant with their child. When Angela informed her employer that she would be seeking a permanent injunction, her employer told her to "drop" the matter or she would be fired, because the injunction would allegedly be detrimental to business. Her ex-boyfriend was a friend of the employer and said he and his friends would stop coming to the bar if Angela kept working there. Angela nevertheless obtained the permanent injunction. Two days later, Angela was fired for obtaining the injunction.

Antoinette, a dishwasher at a restaurant in a small town in Iowa, was dating and living with Donald, a busboy at the same restaurant. One evening during an argument at home, Donald kicked Antoinette. Antoinette called the police, who arrested Donald, and Antoinette was issued a protective order against Donald in short order, which included a stay away provision encompassing the workplace. When Antoinette went to her employer to discuss the protective order, she asked if she and Donald could be scheduled on different shifts. The employer said he would think about it. Two days later, Antoinette was fired. When pressed for an explanation, the employer stated that because of the protective order, he could only keep either Antoinette or Donald, and that he decided to keep Donald because he was the "better" employee.

A survivor "Mary" worked for a California company for fourteen years before being terminated in April 2003. During the last two years of her employment, Mary repeatedly asked her supervisor for thirty days off from work to address her injuries and to make arrangements to leave her husband safely. Even though California law requires that employers permit their employees to take time off to address domestic violence, Mary's requests were denied. Instead, she was put on probation for missing too much work. In March 2003, she was finally granted a ten-day leave. One month later, she was fired. When she asked why, she was told it was because she had been a few days late with completing an internal memorandum and that "if she really cared about her job, she would not have asked for time off."

Another victim of domestic violence, Vasiliki, was fired from her job after she missed two days of work to seek medical attention and meet with a prosecutor after she was attacked by her boyfriend. She was brutally attacked by her boyfriend just days after beginning a new job in New York City. She quickly told her employers what happened, and informed them that that she would need to miss work to obtain medical attention, and to meet with a prosecutor about the case against her boyfriend. While Vasiliki was meeting with the prosecutor two days later, her employer called to tell her she was being fired. He didn't change his mind, even after the prosecutor told him it was illegal to fire a crime victim for missing work to meet with a prosecutor. New York City is one of only a handful of places in the country that prohibit employment discrimination against victims of domestic violence and require an employer to provide a victim with "reasonable accommodations" to help the victim do her job and stay safe.

There are countless stories like this across the nation. Victims of domestic and sexual violence desperately need federal workplace protections. They should never be forced to make the untenable choice between a paycheck and safety for themselves and their children.

Credit and an economic history

Abusers use other controlling tactics that leave victims with limited economic options. Survivors report that abusers accrue large debts, limit victim's access to cash and bank accounts, leave unpaid utility and housing bills and default on shared loans, which can devastate a victim's credit score. In situations where the abuser has the sole control of the finances, victims are susceptible to bankruptcy. It can take years to fix these very real financial problems. Negative credit or lack of credit can greatly impact future opportunities to obtain loans, secure rental housing or even obtain steady employment. Additionally, because many survivors are denied access to family financial matters and bank accounts, they may lack the economic literacy skills to make financial

plans and save for the future. These tactics make it very difficult for survivors to accumulate the resources necessary to flee and remain secure.

The impossible escape and the downward spiral

When victims of domestic violence gather the means to flee and victims of sexual violence begin to rebuild their lives after traumatic abuse, they may face significant obstacles in finding sustainable safety. Sexual and domestic violence can create a downward spiral for many victims, resulting in loss of housing, employment, education, and childcare. When sexual or domestic violence occur within a context of economic insecurity, getting help and moving forward with life often competes with very real basic life needs such as putting gas in the car, paying bills, or keeping a roof overhead. Often, victims of violence are faced with the gut-wrenching choice of remaining in a life-threatening situation or becoming homeless or impoverished. Victims of domestic and sexual violence are at great risk for homelessness when they flee from unsafe homes and environments. In fact, 92 percent of homeless mothers reported physical or sexual abuse during their lives and 43 percent reported child sexual abuse. Widespread housing discrimination against victims of domestic and sexual violence compound victim's housing instability. Domestic violence victims frequently are evicted and denied housing because of violence committed against them. This discrimination was well-documented in a comprehensive national survey. While lifesaving housing protections were included in VAWA 2005, much work remains to ensure that all victims can remain housed while also accessing the protections of the criminal justice system.

The consequences on victims, their children, society and our economy

Economic security is tied to many other aspects of victims' lives. Use of the criminal justice system, for instance, is a more viable option for victims who have economic security. Domestic violence victims who are dependent upon their abusers for financial stability may be reluctant to engage with the criminal justice system because a custodial sentence for the perpetrator leaves the victim without resources. If victims, however, are able to find economic security and reduce their dependence on batterers, they are more likely to cooperate with prosecution and seek criminal justice remedies. Additionally, if victims are able to flee the perpetrator and have the economic means to remain away from the perpetrator, they are less likely to experience repeat victimization.

The consequences of the economic impacts of domestic and sexual violence are severe. If victims cannot leave life-threatening situations because they face poverty or homelessness, they will continue to face violence and even death. Their children will continue to be exposed to this violence and the cycle of violence will continue. The costs to society and the economy are tremendous as well: domestic violence costs U.S. employers and estimated \$3 to \$13 billion annually. Annual victim costs for rape are estimated at \$127 billion. Sexual and domestic violence also causes extreme economic impact on employers - through health care claims, lost productivity, and workforce turnover. In order to break the cycle of violence and to free individual victims from abuse, economic advocacy is essential.

How the Current Economic Crisis Exacerbates the Economic Impact of Violence

Domestic and sexual violence can have a tremendous economic impact on victims regardless of the state of the global economy. In the current economic crisis, however, the impact

is even more dramatic. Although an economic downturn itself does not cause sexual or domestic violence, it can exacerbate the factors that contribute to violence and reduce victims' ability to achieve safety, healing and long-term stability.

Unfortunately, for victims of domestic violence, in these difficult economies times, barriers to escaping abusive relationships increase and opportunities to attain economic stability and independence decrease. Victims of sexual violence also struggle against steep economic odds as they work to rebuild their lives.

The harsh economic climate has widened the unconscionable gap between desperate need and available resources. In a 2009 survey, domestic violence service providers reported letting go or not replacing almost 2,000 positions because of a lack of funding and cited "not enough funding" as the number one reason they were unable to serve victims on the survey day. In a recent survey, out of 27 states reporting, 13 states indicated that state domestic violence services funding had been cut. According to the National Center for Victims of Crime, 92% of victim service providers have seen an increased demand in the last year, but 84% reported that cutbacks in funding were directly affecting their work. A 2009 survey of rape crisis centers reported that approximately 25% of rape crisis centers had a waiting list for services. Another survey found that nationwide 3 out of 4 domestic violence shelters have reported an increase in victims seeking assistance from abuse since September 2008. According to the National Domestic Violence Counts 2009 report by the National Network to End Domestic Violence, in just one day in 2009, over 65,000 victims were served by domestic violence programs. On the same day, however, over 9,000 requests for services went unmet because programs lacked the resources to meet the requests. A recent survey of rape crisis centers found that 72% of programs experienced funding losses in the past year, including state, local and federal funding and almost 60% of rape crisis centers have been forced to reduce staff in the past year.

The scarce resources have a real impact on the lives of victims. As one Kansas program noted, "Budget cuts to our programs are not just numbers on a spreadsheet, they impact the daily lives of the people we serve. Decreased funding means families are at great risk."

Victim advocates in Vermont, like many nationwide, are experiencing a change in their work. Rather than assisting victims in accessing resources that will eventually be available, advocates are now working to help victims do without. Sadly, they are starting to consider not when the help will come for victim and survivors, but whether it will come at all. The next VAWA reauthorization can help remedy this dire situation.

Empowering Survivors with Economic Tools: The Vermont Response

Victims of domestic and sexual violence and stalking in Vermont face the same economic hurdles as victims across the country. With cuts to our state budget, rising prices, increased unemployment and dwindling benefits, domestic and sexual violence advocates are working harder to provide assistance to victims in greater need with fewer resources. With unemployment rates that peaked above 20 percent in one rural town last quarter, our state unemployment offices, like so many nationwide, are seeking federal funding to fill in the gaps. Homelessness in Vermont has increased by 25 percent in the past two years. The lack of safe, affordable housing

across much of our state exacerbates the challenges faced by so many victims seeking safety. While such challenges weigh heavily on us when children are involved, our domestic and sexual violence shelters also now report an increase in the number of single adults seeking shelter. Public benefit systems for single adults are also struggling with limited resources after state budget cuts. Given the rural nature of our state, lack of transportation and geographic isolation present huge obstacles for many survivors, especially for those who may live hours away from lifesaving services or law enforcement. In today's economy, the cost of gasoline and general car maintenance is also prohibitive for many victims and survivors.

Over the past sixteen years, funding and technical assistance through VAWA has helped Vermont to improve systems' response and create a web of support for victims and survivors. Programs that provide transitional housing, legal help, and specific aid to rural communities have done much to alleviate some of the pressures that victims face. Since VAWA was first enacted, we have been able to build an effective coordinated community response, which began with addressing the most pressing immediate needs facing victims. Over time, our response has evolved to include our current work that addresses the breadth of economic needs survivors have to achieve long-term safety. However, despite our successes in triage and intervention, there remains a tremendous need for the knowledge, skills and resources that help victims of domestic and sexual violence achieve economic self-sufficiency. Shelter and support are critical, yet so much more remains to be done.

Last week, a pregnant woman with a 3 year old child found safety in a Vermont shelter. She arrived after being assaulted, with only the clothes on her back and two outfits for her child. Economic advocates immediately connected her with financial assistance programs and assisted her with applying for food stamps and TANF benefits. While waiting for her TANF benefits to be approved, and after having been six weeks without income, she was able to secure only \$47 in emergency cash assistance for two weeks while in shelter. With these meager resources she will need to cover the cost of diapers, food, clothing and personal necessities.

The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (VNADSV) has worked in recent years to develop innovative collaborations in an effort to support victims and survivors of domestic and sexual violence to rebuild their lives despite these circumstances. With the assistance of private funding from The Allstate Foundation in collaboration with the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV), VNADSV addresses the needs of victims that have been historically neglected by federal funding programs. Having received training and technical assistance from the National Network to End Domestic Violence, the Vermont Network has been able to provide program advocates with the supports and resources they need to empower victims toward economic independence. This past year we forged a creative partnership with Opportunities Credit Union, a community development-focused credit union, the Office of Economic Opportunity, and the Economic Development program at a local Community Action Agency in order to develop a matched savings program for domestic violence survivors. This program promotes habitual money management skills development, provides financial literacy training, credit counseling and ultimately a 3 to 1 financial match for participants to use toward expenses such as unpaid medical debt, utility bills, automobile maintenance and repair, and rent. This is just one example of how we have been able to bridge some of the gaps on the way toward sustainable safety for survivors. Although this matched

savings program is in its infancy, the broad supports funded by Allstate's Economic Empowerment Grant program in Vermont have proved incredibly promising. Included in this grant funding is on-call technical assistance and training provided by the Network and our partners in order to assist advocates in their vital work. This private funding has allowed us to provide advocates with training in basic economic advocacy skills, and pre-employment supports for victims including job readiness skills, resume writing and goal setting. All of Vermont's domestic and sexual violence programs have also received training or technical assistance in utilizing the financial literacy curriculum called "Moving Ahead Through Financial Management" created by Allstate and NNEDV specifically for survivors of economic abuse. Participants enrolled in the matched saving program commit to four sessions of financial literacy training using this curriculum. In the past year alone, 62 victims have received education through one or more components of this curriculum. One Vermont shelter includes portions of the financial curriculum in its regular community support groups and shelter groups. The most relevant and requested information at these groups centers is about economic abuse, how to recognize it, how to recover from it, and how to attempt to avoid it in future relationships.

Through the help of The Allstate Foundation, an innovative collaboration facilitated by funded Economic Advocates has provided numerous Vermont survivors with credit counseling services and used car buying instruction from a local economic development program. In the past 6 months, one Vermont domestic and sexual violence program has seen 4 victims purchase affordable, quality used vehicles based upon this work.

The collaborative relationships formed through this private funding have been so successful that our partners have offered our domestic and sexual violence programs even broader supports. In addition to the matched savings program, the community action agency and the credit union also offer their own educational time, skills and resources to all Vermont victims in our 15 member programs, regardless of enrollment in the matched savings program. According to our most recent mid-year report from our Allstate funded Economic Advocates in our domestic and sexual violence programs, of the 490 victims already served by this private funding this year, 76% have increased their long term economic security by improving financial literacy, gaining employment, repairing credit, or establishing a savings plan. This successful statewide collaboration, funded by dedicated partners such as Allstate and NNEDV, is just one example of how we have been able to bridge some of the gaps on the way toward sustainable safety for survivors. Many of the survivor success stories in Vermont stem from the knowledge, skills and resources provided by advocates focused specifically on the economic needs of victims. Once again, such sustained safety would not be possible without private funding sources to support knowledgeable and skilled economic advocacy.

Vermont has numerous examples of the effects of this important work:

A survivor who fled her abusive partner in another state sought safety for herself and her two children in Vermont. Having no local supports, this family was sheltered for nearly 3 months while she worked with economic advocates to gain her safety and independence. The combination of her strength and perseverance coupled with the skills, resources and creative partnerships available through advocates in the shelter enabled her to locate and secure

permanent housing, gain access to financial assistance for housing and food, and enroll her older child in school.

A male victim of sexual assault perpetrated by his male partner sought care from a Vermont shelter. Advocates were able to access economic resources to help this victim with first month's rent and deposits for utilities and furniture.

Another survivor was unemployed when she sought safety at a shelter in Vermont. Despite her Master's degree, this survivor required the skills, knowledge and empowering support of the economic advocates at the domestic violence shelter and community collaborators to assist her in reaching her economic goals. She has developed a business plan, established a base of references for potential clients and formed promising business contacts.

A domestic violence survivor with 5 children sought shelter in Vermont. Unfortunately, at the time shelter was needed, this particular domestic violence shelter was at full capacity. With the assistance of the economic advocate, she and her children were able to find safety in a motel - but the resources provided were only sufficient for a short stay. Unfortunately, due to the lack of affordable housing that could accommodate a family of this size, she returned home to an abusive partner. Despite her return, this survivor maintained her connection with the shelter advocates who were then able to work with her on housing applications, credit repair, and budgeting skills. It is through this continued and sustained support that she was able to locate and secure housing. She moved in two weeks ago. While she has found safe housing, she continues to suffer the effects of economic abuse and is working with the shelter advocates, a local credit union and a neighboring community action agency to improve her credit score and gain financial independence.

Successes like these are seen all over the United States:

In Minnesota, for instance, a survivor who had received economic literacy education remarked that she felt so empowered and excited that she could make a long-term financial plan. Instead of feeling overwhelmed and "drowning", she now felt she had tools to "start today" with small steps that will lead to big leaps.

In Delaware, a woman who suffered domestic violence was assisted by her economic advocates. They helped her open bank account and she was able to save a reasonable amount of money to aid in her gaining independence from the batterer. Today she has a job and a car that she was able to buy with the matched savings plan. She is now thriving with the assistance she received from the program.

Domestic violence programs in every state are using the curriculum and the economic empowerment tools to educate their staff and working to transform victims' lives.

These successes are the result of the strength of victims supported and empowered by creative partnerships, and a handful of dedicated economic advocates who have the breadth of programming, resources and knowledge to support them on their journey.

But these successes are too dependent on private resources in precarious economic times.

Through the support of VAWA funding and important financial commitments of partners like The Allstate Foundation and NNEDV, Vermont has been able to build creative relationships which

support survivors' development of habitual money management skills, financial literacy, economic independence and ultimately the empowerment that leads to these success stories. Our model of economic advocacy is successful and could be replicated around the country with adequate resources. Economic advocacy for victims must be well supported by stable and long-term funding in order for creative and committed advocates to foster the open, innovative, and survivor-driven programming that ultimately leads to the goal of sustainable safety.

VAWA 2011 Reauthorization Recommendations

With this VAWA reauthorization, we have the unique opportunity to further broaden the scope of VAWA programs and protections by providing greater economic supports to victims and survivors. First, we must increase resources for core, foundational services that both help victims find safety and help victims to create economic stability. Secondly, we must dedicate resources to address specific economic advocacy to ensure that this vital component to long-term safety is addressed. Finally, we must provide legal employment protections for victims to ensure that victims can obtain and keep employment - a vital part of economic stability for victims.

Reauthorizing current VAWA programs with additional resources

Services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence must be able to meet both their immediate safety and crisis needs and contribute to their sustainable safety and security. A recent multi-state study of survivors in domestic violence shelters reveals that after safety, economic-related services and help were some of the most sought after services by victims.

- o Safety for myself (86 percent)
- o Finding affordable housing (84 percent)
- o Job or job training (57 percent)
- o Budgeting or handling money (54 percent)
- o Education/school for themselves (48 percent)

Current VAWA programs, including Transitional Housing, Civil Legal Assistance for Victims (LAV), the STOP, Sexual Assault Services Program (SASP) and the Rural Grant program provide a foundation for victims of domestic and sexual violence and are an essential component to longer-term safety and self-sufficiency.

The Sexual Assault Services Program (SASP), the Services, Training, Officers, and Prosecutors (STOP) program, and the VAWA Rural Grant program provide victim services funding that helps sustain programs that provide an array of services to victims of domestic and sexual violence. These core, foundational funding streams are vital to helping programs employ knowledgeable staff and provide key services to victims in crisis. By helping victims find safety, these programs lay the foundation for much other VAWA work.

All of these lifesaving and transformative VAWA programs should be maintained in the VAWA reauthorization process and should be given increased funding to meet the increasing demand. We also recommend changes to the STOP Formula Grant Program to direct more funding to victim services in order to provide critically important supports for survivors.

The VAWA Transitional housing program provides an essential continuum between emergency shelter and independent living. The majority of victims in transitional housing programs state that without these programs, they would have returned to their abusers. In just one day in 2009, 4,602 adults and 6,910 children were housed in domestic violence transitional housing programs. On that same day, 1,715 requests for transitional housing were denied due to lack of capacity. The average stay at an emergency homeless shelter is 60 days, while the average length of time it takes a homeless family to secure housing is 6-10 months. Due to a lack of interim housing, victims who leave their abusers frequently lack adequate shelter options or must leave a shelter with nowhere to go.

Transitional housing helps meet the ongoing need victims have for safe and affordable housing after they leave emergency shelter and work towards safety, self-sufficiency and finding permanent housing. Clients in transitional housing programs learn or relearn how to manage a household budget and to plan for the future. This is an absolutely crucial step in gaining long-term, sustainable safety.

One Vermont VAWA funded Transitional Housing Program advocate has paired with the Allstate funded economic empowerment partners to provide credit counseling services and used car buying instruction to more than 50 percent of their service users. This beneficial counseling and instruction resulted in one survivor being able to keep her car from repossession. She needed to keep her car in order to drive to work and was counseled in financial negotiation. Since then, she has been able to purchase a newer used car and remain at her place of employment.

ASHA Family Services in Milwaukee, WI is a VAWA-funded transitional housing program with a micro-enterprise component that is transforming the lives of its residents. They lease a fully equipped café, thrift shop and nail/hair salon that the clients in the transitional housing program call their own. These sites are job and career training grounds that provide structured on-the-job training. This innovative program allows survivors to build positive work histories and gain job experience which many of the clients lack.

VAWA 2005 also includes vital protections for victims in public and assisted housing that prohibit discriminatory evictions or housing denials based on an individual's status as a victim. These protections help victims and their children remained housed and allow them to access the criminal justice system without fear of losing their housing. These protections must be strengthened and expanded in the next reauthorization of VAWA to ensure that victims do not face discrimination and can remain housed.

The Civil Legal Assistance to Victims Program (LAV) helps victims obtain vital civil legal remedies including civil protection orders, child support, child custody, and housing and public benefits assistance. LAV is the only federal funding program designed to meet all of these needs. Despite the great need, almost 70% of victims of domestic violence and sexual assault too are without legal representation. The retainers or hourly fees needed to hire private legal representation are beyond the means of most victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. To obtain these remedies, victims of domestic violence and sexual assault need knowledgeable legal assistance that helps them navigate the civil legal system. Civil legal assistance helps victims with practical matters such as protective orders, custody, and child support and presents victims with real, long-term alternatives to their relationships. The demand for these services is high, and

it is one of the most requested grant programs. The Office on Violence Against Women is only able to fund one-third of the almost 300 applications that it receives per year.

In addition to the general legal services that victims need when they begin to rebuild their lives, many victims have complex economic-focused legal issues. LAV-funded lawyers and advocates can attend to these needs. In relation to housing needs, for instance, LAV-funded programs can represent survivors who have been wrongfully evicted under the VAWA and Fair Housing Act eviction defense provisions, advocate for Public Housing Authorities to implement VAWA protections and other housing protections for survivors residing in public and private housing and advocate for survivors who seek Section 8 and public housing. These programs can assist survivors with credit reporting and credit repair issues and can represent survivors in bankruptcy cases. Finally, they can advocate for survivors who have lost their jobs to access unemployment benefits--both by representing survivors in unemployment compensation hearings and by appealing negative outcomes.

Providing Targeted Resources to Address Victims Economic Needs

The Vermont economic justice program uses its general VAWA funding to leverage private and financial supports. It is a highly effective program that should be replicated and made available to communities across the country. In these harsh economic times, it is more important than ever to ensure that victims receive targeted economic advocacy to help them attain self-sufficiency - through financial literacy education, job training, and targeted savings programs. VAWA funding should also support specific economic advocates at programs to help victims navigate their economic options while they rebuild their lives.

Employment Protections for Victims of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking

There is a need for a set of comprehensive workplace protections to support workers and their families who are confronted by sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence and stalking. Language included in the pending Security and Financial Empowerment Act (S. 1740), provides a strong blueprint for protections that should be included in this VAWA reauthorization.

Financial assistance, specifically unemployment insurance, for those victims unable to keep their jobs due to violence is a necessity. Unemployment insurance is specifically necessary if the nature of the violence requires that the survivor relocate. Even in Vermont, where we have an unemployment fund created by statute which is available to victims who voluntarily leave employment due to the effects of domestic and sexual violence and stalking, survivors are still vulnerable to unfair termination of employment due to the violence they have experienced. All victims, nationwide, deserve support and protection from discrimination.

Additionally, victims need the protection of an anti-discrimination law so that they are not fired (or not hired) merely because they are victims, because they take leave, or because the employer makes a choice between them and an abusive employee, as when the abuser and the victim work in the same place.

The needs of victims and their families do not vary across state lines, but their access to these significant protections does - as some states have robust protections and others do not. A strong

federal law prohibiting discrimination and allowing access to unemployment insurance is necessary to ensure consistent treatment of victims across our nation.

Conclusion

Over the past sixteen years, VAWA has provided lifesaving services and supports to many thousands of victims of domestic and sexual violence, dating violence and stalking, whether they live in rural or urban areas, whether they are youth or elderly victims, whether they speak English or another language - every victim deserves the chance to escape from violence and to find long-term, sustainable safety. These resources are incredibly important, but are not currently meeting the needs of survivors. Lives quite literally hang in the balance: 52% of all Vermont homicides during the past fourteen years were domestic violence related.

In order to prevent future tragedies and continue the progress that we have made over the past sixteen years, we must strengthen VAWA so that it can work for all victims of domestic and sexual violence and specifically meet their economic needs. Congress has a unique opportunity to make a difference in the lives of so many by reauthorizing VAWA with key and strategic improvements, with a focus on economic resources. This should include financial and housing assistance for victims, including those who lose their jobs due to violence; workplace protections; and changes to the STOP Formula Grant to provide more services directly to victims; as well as full funding for existing VAWA programs that provide lifesaving services and seek to prevent survivors from losing employment, becoming homeless, or suffering the lifelong effects of trauma and its attendant costs. These adjustments will do so much to support victims of domestic and sexual violence and stalking in seeking sustainable, lifelong safety.