

Violence Against Women Act helps restore lives

By Mariska Hargitay, actress and founder, Joyful Heart Foundation – 04/26/12 09:22 AM ET

Our Senators must act now to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), the landmark achievement in the movement to end violence against women and girls. VAWA revolutionized the way violent crimes against women are prosecuted and prevented, reshaped the way victims receive services and transformed the way communities respond to survivors.

Authored by then-Senator Joseph Biden and signed into law in 1994, VAWA was the first federal legislation to acknowledge domestic violence and sexual assault as crimes. It created the first federal funding stream to support rape crisis centers across the country. VAWA provided federal resources to encourage coordinated community responses to combating violence, and it saved money while saving lives: nearly \$12.6 billion in averted social costs in its first six years alone.

Subsequent reauthorizations in 2000 and 2005 – widely supported in both chambers of Congress and by Democratic and Republican presidents alike – created a legal assistance program for victims, broadened the definition of violence against women to include dating violence and stalking, implemented culturally- and linguistically-specific services for communities, and broadened VAWA service provisions to include children and teenagers.

The Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act, S. 1925, introduced in 2011 by Senators Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont) and Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), is the result of more than two years of work by a coalition of over 300 advocacy groups. Contributing their voices, experience and expertise, over 2,000 advocates and survivors from across the country identified the most pressing needs of survivors of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking. Advocates, police, prosecutors and survivors support S. 1925 because it reflects their vision – and their commitment to ending violence.

Over the past several months, Senators from both parties have waged a dismaying battle over provisions in S. 1925 regarding protections for members of the LGBTQ, immigrant and Native American communities. Partisan maneuvering must not derail an opportunity to hold defendants accountable, to prevent future violence, and to keep members of these communities safe and, if they suffer horrible trauma, provide them with the life-saving and transformative services they deserve.

Restricting VAWA's protections only to certain members of our communities will defeat its very purpose – to end sexual and domestic violence and the suffering they bring. These restrictions also hamper the criminal justice system's ability to prosecute defendants and prevent future

crimes. We must not allow political arguments to erode the progress our country has made toward that goal in the seventeen years since VAWA became law.

VAWA has protected, improved and restored lives. Reauthorization sends the message that our communities, our families-and all people-must be safe; that survivors must have the tools to heal and reclaim their lives; that we must engage the next generation in this effort-and that breaking the cycle of violence is an unassailable national priority. To send any other message is unconscionable.

Hargitay is the Founder & President of the Joyful Heart Foundation and the Emmy Award-winning star of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit. You can watch a video of her discussing VAWA

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ru-Bqnlxe6Y