



Happy Birthday, VAWA!

This week, we celebrate the 18th anniversary of the Violence Against Women Act being signed into law. Many who worked to make VAWA a reality in 1994 will remember the ceremony on a warm September day in the White House Rose Garden and the sense of relief that followed: we finally had the tools to address the epidemic of domestic violence.

Since that day, VAWA has expanded its protections to victims of dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. Since that day, VAWA has saved thousands of lives and brought safety to thousands of homes. VAWA's programs have trained law enforcement, prosecution and court personnel to better understand the dynamics that make these four crimes such a burden on U.S. communities. Over the years, VAWA has created historic protections for immigrant victims and victims on tribal lands. VAWA has raised awareness about and improved responses to sexual assault and stalking. VAWA programs have disseminated prevention programs in middle schools and high schools. The homicide rates for victims of these crimes has dropped significantly.

Yet any child born on that bright day in September 1994, now turning 18 years old, still faces the specter of victimization, because there are so many areas VAWA did not cover in the 18 years since its passage. So in 2012 the Senate developed a new improved version of VAWA, a reauthorization that fills in so many of those gaps that pose dangers to youth who have never lived in a world without VAWA. Without the new version of VAWA, an 18 year old victim of sexual assault will not be able to secure safe housing. Without the new version of VAWA, an 18 year old victim of dating violence will find it difficult to obtain justice on campus. Without the new version of VAWA, many underserved communities, including the LGBT community, immigrant victims, and Native women, will have no place to go for help.

VAWA has done a stellar job of helping millions of victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking over 18 years. Let's celebrate VAWA's birthday by making sure all victims of violence can access help and justice. Congress can best say "Happy Birthday, VAWA!" by completing an inclusive bill and getting it to the President to be signed, as it once was on a bright September day.