



Sisters of the Good Shepherd

The National  
Advocacy Center

September 7, 2005

Dear Senator,

On behalf of the National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, I am writing to express our strong support for the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act and to urge you to work to pass VAWA before the program expires at the end of the month. Over the past ten years VAWA has been a critical tool in raising awareness about domestic and sexual violence, improving law enforcement, criminal justice and community-based responses to this violence, and providing life-saving services to women and children. A strong and swift reauthorization is essential to reaffirm support for VAWA and to further strengthen our nation's response to domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking.

Throughout the congregation's history, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd have dedicated themselves to reconciliation, reaching out to people, especially women and girls, who have experienced violence, injustice, oppression and alienation due to life circumstances or unjust social structures. In the United States this commitment is manifested through a variety of ministries and programs, including domestic violence shelters, residential and counseling programs for youth and families, and mental health services. In Los Angeles in 1977, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd opened one of the first shelters for victims of domestic violence in the United States. The Good Shepherd Shelter in Los Angeles currently provides holistic, long-term treatment, education and healing for 12 families at a time. In Chicago, the House of the Good Shepherd, also a longer-term domestic violence shelter providing comprehensive services, has served over 1100 families since opening in 1980. In Maryland, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and New York, Good Shepherd residential programs respond to the needs of youth in crisis, especially girls, many of whom have either witnessed or been victims of some form of violence. All of these programs and the ministries of individual sisters emphasize holistic care grounded in respect for the dignity of every person and a belief in empowering individuals to seek positive change and growth.

As these and other programs provide direct care and support to women, children and youth affected by domestic and sexual violence, the National Advocacy Center seeks to complement this work by advocating for improvements in the systems (criminal justice/legal, social service, healthcare, etc.) that impact families in their quest to live lives free of violence. Support for the Violence Against Women Act is an important component of this advocacy because of the progress the legislation has helped foster. The accomplishments of VAWA have been well-documented – STOP grants have enhanced victim services, increased awareness and responsiveness to domestic and sexual violence through training, and brought about greater collaboration among court officials, law enforcement, victim advocates, and other community groups; the National Domestic Hotline has responded to over 1.2 million calls and is now able to provide referrals in 150 languages; stronger laws and protections for victims have encouraged more to step forward and seek help; and, grants to shelters and for legal assistance have ensured that more help is available.

The National Advocacy Center is pleased to see that S. 1197 builds on these successes by expanding and improving core VAWA programs, by responding to additional needs that have been identified, and by encouraging a more holistic approach to the problems of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking. Additional funding for STOP grants, legal assistance, the National Domestic Violence Hotline, and outreach to rural and underserved communities will ensure that more victims are able to access critical services. New provisions and programs will provide additional housing support and employment protection to help victims become self-sufficient, help

improve the health system's response to domestic and sexual violence, provide much needed funding to assist sexual assault victims, further ensure the safety of non-citizen and trafficked victims of domestic violence, and engage additional community partners to respond to the unique needs of children and youth affected by violence.

In *Confronting A Culture of Violence*, the U.S. Catholic Bishops write, "Above all, we must come to understand that violence is unacceptable ... Society cannot tolerate an ethic that uses violence to make a point, settle grievances, or help us get what we want. But the path to a more peaceful future is found in a rediscovery of personal responsibility, respect for life and human dignity, and a recommitment to social justice ... Our society needs both more personal responsibility and broader social responsibility to over come the plague of violence in our land and the lack of peace in our hearts." As much as VAWA has accomplished over the past 10 years, the continuing prevalence of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking remind us of the need to recommit ourselves, our communities, and our resources to ending the cycle of violence. VAWA 2005 is a vital part of this commitment and the National Advocacy Center applauds your leadership in moving this comprehensive legislation forward. We look forward to working with you to ensure the speedy passage of S. 1197 to make our communities safer and stronger and to continue to foster a culture that says "No!" to all forms of violence.

Sincerely,

Alison L. Prevost, *Lobbyist*