



Sisters of the Good Shepherd

The National  
Advocacy Center

Cc: Senate Judiciary Committee Members

The Honorable Arlen Specter  
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy  
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

July 28, 2005

Dear Chairman Specter and Ranking Member Leahy,

As the Judiciary Committee prepares to mark-up S. 1197, on behalf of the National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd to I would like to express our strong support for the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act. 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 LA 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 immigrant protections offered by VAWA have been of particular importance to the Good Shepherd shelters in Chicago and Los Angeles, allowing immigrant women to leave abusive situations without the threat of deportation and to file for legal status themselves so that they can begin to build a life of hope and stability for themselves and their children. The House of the Good Shepherd in Chicago highlights the story of Alicia who came to the shelter with two small children. She was afraid to speak English and lacked self-confidence. Slowly she began to speak a few words of English and started to do things for herself. She learned how to take the bus and get around Chicago. She learned how to follow through with appointments and responsibilities. But, what really helped her situation was applying for legal status through VAWA. Now, almost a year later, Alicia has received her work permit, has a great job, and is living in stable housing free from domestic violence. VAWA truly empowered Alicia to become a full and contributing member of our society. The Good Shepherd Shelter in Los Angeles shares similar stories of the importance of VAWA in helping women at the shelter get protective orders and legal documentation. Through VAWA, "Ana" was able to obtain legal documentation and has since gotten her driver's license, bought a van, and begun taking GED classes to get a better job to support her seven children.

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.

The National Advocacy Center is particularly supportive of the housing provisions included in Title VI of S. 1197, as the lack of access to safe, affordable housing remains a primary need mentioned by both Good Shepherd shelters. Families can seek out a domestic violence shelter, receive counseling and education and begin to heal from domestic violence, but there are few resources out there for them once they leave the shelter and housing costs are often prohibitive for women seeking to establish independence from their abusers. Domestic violence remains a leading cause of homelessness nationally and the lack of alternative housing often leads women to stay in or return to violent relationships. Increased funding for transitional housing, grants to help combat domestic and sexual violence in federal housing programs, additional protections for domestic violence victims in Public and Section 8 Housing, and new funding for collaborative efforts to create permanent housing options for victims included in S.1197 will help address this problem. We are also glad to see that S. 1197 reaffirms confidentiality protections for victims in the homeless services system by requiring that HUD instruct grantees not to enter personally identifying information into shared databases such as the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).

In addition, the National Advocacy Center praises the expansion of VAWA services to include children and youth and the creation of new programs targeted to prevention and early intervention. Experts estimate anywhere from 3.3 to 10 million children witness domestic violence each year and exposure to domestic violence is the strongest risk factor for passing violence onto the next

generation. Good Shepherd programs have long recognized the need for comprehensive, specialized, community-based services to address the unique needs of these young victims, offering intensive, supportive counseling services and residential care, innovative conflict resolution training, and gender-specific programming. Through the Services to Advocate for and Respond to Teens, Access to Justice Program, and other targeted grant programs, Title III of S. 1197 ensures that more children and youth will have access to these types of services and encourages further community collaboration. The National Advocacy Center also encourages the committee to adopt the Supporting Teen through Education and Protection Act, included in the House bill introduced by Representative Mark Green (R-WI), which would provide grants to encourage schools to develop policies to help students experiencing domestic, dating, and sexual violence.

Finally, the National Advocacy Center supports the efforts of S. 1197 to further ensure the safety of and support for non-citizen and trafficked victims of domestic violence. However, we recommend the inclusion of additional provisions outlined in H.R. 3188, the Immigrant Victims of Violence Protection Act of 2005, introduced by Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), particularly Sections 115 and 211 that would expedite the granting of work authorization to VAWA petitioners and remove the 5 year ban on access to public benefits for immigrant victims that qualify for VAWA relief. These provisions have been cited by Good Shepherd programs as vital to helping immigrant women and their families establish economic stability and independence.

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*