

Family Violence Prevention Fund

An Agenda for Action to End Violence Against Women and Children: Recommendations for a New Administration

The physical and sexual abuse of women and children remains a public health problem of epidemic proportions in the United States. Between one in three and one in four women will be abused at some point in their lives, and more than 15 million children witness this abuse every year. Sexual violence remains shrouded in silence, and few people realize that the majority of victims are children. About 1,200 women are murdered each year by current or former partners, and almost 500 women and girls are raped or sexually assaulted each day in the United States. Despite the enormous progress that has been made over the last 30 years, domestic and sexual violence remain an urgent crisis in our midst.

While we tend to focus on the dramatic cases of children abducted from schools or playgrounds, often it is family members and intimate partners who perpetrate the most extreme and horrific acts of violence on those closest to them, often in their own homes. It is this “original sin” that often begins a young person’s desperate journey down a path of school failure, involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, substance abuse and early parenthood. New research documents the strong correlation between experience with violence and abuse and chronic health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.

We also know that violence against women and girls occurs with horrifying frequency across the globe, affecting our foreign policy and diminishing the effectiveness of our foreign assistance. Investment in women is critical if we are to prevent failed states, improve global health including reducing HIV/AIDS, create economic opportunity, preserve human rights, and maximize the efficacy of our foreign aid. Violence is both cause and consequence of women’s unequal status in much of the world and addressing it must be a central strategy if we are to meet our security and development goals.

It is because we value the rights and dignity of women and children, because we recognize the health and social costs of violence, and because we recognize that healthy communities begin with and depend on healthy families, that we respectfully offer the following recommendations to a new Administration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Focus on Primary Prevention that Engages Men and Boys

Violence against women will never end unless we change the social norms that make violence acceptable and encourage boys to see physical aggression and sexual prowess as integral parts of manhood. We must teach them early that violence against women does not equal strength and provide social supports throughout their lives to reinforce those messages.

Actions:

- Use Father's Day as a National Day of Reflection on fatherhood and raising boys into men. Building on the President-elect's Father's Day speech, convene a day-long meeting or report on successful programs and efforts to teach boys about healthy relationships. Highlight successful responsible fatherhood programs that empower men, support them in their roles as nonviolent parents and partners, and continue recognizing the often heroic efforts of single mothers.
- Fully fund the Engaging Men and Boys program within the *Violence Against Women Act*. Though included in the law's 2005-2006 reauthorization, this new program has yet to be fully funded and no funds have actually gone out to the field.
- Ensure that any federally-funded marriage and fatherhood programs include domestic violence protections, but don't automatically refuse services to couples or individuals where there has been violence.
- Redirect marriage promotion funding to support broader family strengthening programs, including collaborations between domestic violence and fatherhood programs that improve safety and well-being for women, men and their children.

Increase Early Interventions for Children Exposed to Violence that Support the Health and Care-giving Ability of all Family Members

Research has helped us identify those most at risk of becoming both perpetrators and victims of violence. While we would never argue that a child's exposure to violence means he or she will go on to perpetrate or experience violence, children who witness and experience physical and sexual violence are at much greater risk for future victimization and perpetration, as well as delinquency, school failure, substance abuse, illness and early mortality. Effective early intervention can only occur if we identify children in need and make services available to them. It is critical that we teach those who interact with children and youth - such as pediatricians, child care providers, Head Start workers, and others - to understand how family violence affects children's lives, and also that we make services available to both children and their parents or caregivers.

Actions:

- Convene a White House Conference on Successful Strategies to Help Children Exposed to Violence.

- Reinvigorate the Safe Start Program within the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, focusing on creating coordinated community responses to children exposed to violence. Use the White House Conference to identify lessons learned and promising practices from the last decade of this work.
- Fully fund the *Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act* and support the addition of strong language on the need for child protection systems to safely address domestic violence as a critical strategy in promoting children's safety, permanence and well-being.
- Support passage of and fund the *Education Begins At Home Act*, to expand home visitation programs focusing on young and at-risk families.
- Fully fund the youth and prevention programs within the *Violence Against Women Act* to support direct services for children exposed to violence and help build linkages between children and family-serving organizations and domestic and sexual violence services.
- Fund and implement the domestic violence and child welfare collaborations created in the 2005 *Violence Against Women Act*.

Target Resources to Youth and Teens

As young people begin dating, their risk for violence increases as does their receptivity to messages around relationships. We must target this age group with messages that violence and abuse are unacceptable, and give them the information and skills to build healthy relationships. Focusing on this age group allows us to identify those young people who are already experiencing - or have already experienced - physical and sexual abuse, and interrupt the trajectory that puts them at risk for a host of dangerous and harmful outcomes. Young people who are victims of violence, particularly those who are sexually active or have been sexually abused, are at much greater risk for teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, running away, being injured or killed, as well as poor health outcomes that can last a lifetime. By targeting resources at young people who have experienced violence, we can break the cycle that often begins when victimized children enter abusive adolescent relationships and have their own children young, with little support.

Actions:

- Fund the *Violence Against Women Act* teen dating violence and prevention programs.
- Shift funding from abstinence-only sex education programs to healthy teen relationship education programs that include both honest, evidence-based information to help prevent teen pregnancy, as well as information and skills-building on how to value and develop healthy relationships and prevent dating violence.

- Redirect funding from the *Adolescent and Family Life Program (AFLA)* in the Department of Health & Human Services budget to instead support pregnant and parenting teens who have experienced family violence or are at risk of experiencing or perpetrating family violence.
- Ensure that youth in group homes and those aging out of foster care receive services and information to address past violence and abuse and prevent early parenthood and family violence.

Fully Fund Services for Victims of Violence, Particularly as Economic Conditions Increase Need

Even as we recommend more resources dedicated to prevention and early intervention, we must ensure that services for victims remain strong. This becomes even more important as the recession puts many more people out of work, low-wage women in particular, and leaves them with fewer resources to keep themselves and their children safe from violent partners. The economic downturn is also straining the budgets of states and community-based services at precisely the time the need for these services is increasing.

Actions:

- Fully Fund the *Family Violence Prevention and Services Act*, the only dedicated federal funding stream to support services for victims of domestic violence.
- Fully fund the Sexual Assault Services Program (DOJ), the only specific funding stream to support services for rape victims.
- Increase the cap on the *Victims of Crime Act* fund to allow disbursement of existing funds to victims of crime and victim-serving organizations. These funds are fines paid by those convicted of federal crimes or settlements and are not tax dollars.

Address Family Violence Experienced by Military Personnel/Veterans and their Families

Military personnel and their families make tremendous sacrifices each day, and their struggles and needs often escalate when a service member returns from duty. Caring for a seriously injured family member as well as coping with the trauma of war is leading to increased rates of suicide, family violence and homicide among military families. In addition, experts do not yet fully understand how past histories of violence and abuse among service members can be drivers of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), suicidal ideation, violence and homicide perpetration. It is critical that the military follow through on recommendations included in recent reports on domestic violence and sexual assault in the military and the recent RAND report on PTSD and suicide.

Actions:

- Dramatically increase and specifically target funding for Family Advocacy Programs to better address the needs of families experiencing domestic violence and child abuse and help families prevent physical and sexual abuse.
- Expand the research base on prevalence of and successful interventions to address physical and sexual abuse perpetrated and experienced by active duty personnel and returning veterans; and include questions regarding histories of domestic and sexual violence in the current National Institute of Mental Health study looking at suicide risk, PTSD and other mental health issues faced by returning veterans.
- Dramatically improve access to and availability of mental health services for all active-duty family members. Include marriage and couples counseling only if both parties seek it and if it is domestic violence-informed.
- Create within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) standards for programs that provide family and couples counseling for veterans receiving VA mental health treatment that are domestic violence-informed and make services available to partners regardless of marital status.
- Ensure that partners of active-duty personnel and veterans have access to domestic violence and sexual assault services within the civilian community, and share information on civilian resources on military bases and through military information networks.

Ensure that Health Care Reform includes Training, Education and Research to Address the Health Effects of Violence and Abuse and Funding to Implement Best Practices

In addition to the social costs, violence can harm the health of victims and their families for a lifetime. Where we once saw the impact only as bruises and broken bones, we now understand that exposure to violence is directly related to some of the leading causes of death and chronic diseases. Women who have experienced partner violence are at significantly greater risk for heart disease, obesity, stroke, asthma, arthritis, heavy drinking, and risky sex, than women who have not experienced partner violence. Violence and abuse also are related to teen and unintended pregnancy and HIV/AIDS. We must train health providers to identify and help victims of violence and promote a public health response on par with that addressing tobacco and HIV/AIDS if we are to comprehensively respond to and prevent generations of family violence.

Actions:

- Fully fund the health programs in the *Violence Against Women Act*.

- Decrease chronic disease and mental health problems and promote safe pregnancy by supporting education, assessment and interventions to address violence and abuse in Medicaid, Maternal Child Health and community health center programs (FQHCs).
- Decrease unintended pregnancy through violence prevention by supporting education, assessment and interventions in Title X family planning programs.

Recognize and Address the Particular Challenges Faced by Immigrant and Refugee Victims of Intimate Partner Violence

While immigrant and refugee women don't necessarily experience greater levels of intimate partner violence than the general population, they do face unique and culturally-specific barriers to accessing help and ending the abuse. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with systems and legal rights, social and economic isolation, lack of cultural competence by service providers and anti-immigrant zealotry all contribute to a situation where many immigrant victims and their children are forced to stay in abusive relationships and immigrant perpetrators are not held accountable for their behavior. The *Violence Against Women Act* includes many vital protections for immigrant victims of violence and trafficking, however services remain inadequate to address the complex needs of these victims.

Actions:

- Domestic violence programs funded through the *Family Violence Prevention and Services Act* should receive targeted funding for serving cultural and linguistic minorities, and culturally-specific, community-based organizations should be able to receive funding.
- The Public Education campaign(s) targeting culturally-specific communities authorized in the *Violence Against Women Act* should be funded.
- Voluntary resettlement agencies that serve refugees should receive training and technical assistance on domestic violence and how to serve families in ways that address safety for all family members.

Make Ending Violence Against Women and Girls a Foreign Policy Priority

One out of every three women worldwide will be physically, sexually or otherwise abused during her lifetime, with rates reaching 70 percent in some countries. This type of violence and abuse ranges from rape and domestic violence to acid burnings, dowry deaths and so-called "honor killings." Violence against women and girls is a human rights violation, a public health epidemic and a barrier to solving global challenges such as extreme poverty, HIV/AIDS and conflict. It also serves as both a proxy for and barrier to addressing gender inequality, which the World Health Organization, World Bank and United Nations have all identified as the most effective means of improving the effectiveness of foreign aid, reducing poverty and crises, and solving our greatest public health challenges.

In 2007, Vice President–elect Joe Biden, along with his Senate colleague Richard Lugar, introduced the bipartisan *International Violence Against Women Act*. This legislation, which was introduced in the House of Representatives by Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman, includes the critical elements necessary to reduce violence against women and help meet the Millennium Development Goals.

Actions:

- Create an Office of Global Women’s Initiatives within the Office of the Secretary of State to coordinate all efforts to combat violence against women.
- Create a new and restructured Women in Development Office at USAID that has the power and resources to integrate violence prevention and gender-responsive programming across U.S. foreign assistance.
- With the leaders of these two new offices, create a national strategy to reduce violence against women and girls in 10-20 countries with high rates of violence against women, and provide enough funding and coordination for programming that supports local women’s non-governmental organizations in those countries. This strategy must include rigorous evaluation so promising practices may be used in other countries and regions, and transparency and reporting that identifies who receives the funding and how the money is used.
- Prioritize within our foreign assistance projects that include intra-U.S. government coordination and strong gender analyses, and focus on holistic approaches to ending violence against women and increasing women’s social status. This should include legal reform, economic empowerment, girls’ education, health care work training, social norms change and humanitarian and security force training.

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