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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE - RESPONDING TO A NATIONAL TRAGEDY

by Barbara A. Mikulski

On February 4, 1981, the Domestic Violence Prevention & Services Act was re-introduced in the 97th Congress by Congresswoman Barbara Mikulski, with George Miller and Lindy Boggs, as H.R. 1651. This legislation has been one of Ms. Mikulski's top priorities during the four and a half years she has been a member of Congress. She discusses this proposed legislation in the following article.

Before becoming a Member of Congress, I was a social worker, and dealt with many cases of child abuse. I witnessed examples of terrible cruelty within the American family—at all levels of society. Yet, there is virtually no public recognition of the problem. Spouse abuse is joked about in a trivializing, derogatory manner. The lack of recognition is reflected in our social service system, which has no thorough, consistent way to respond to a serious and widespread problem.

The statistics are horrifying:

— The FBI estimates that an American woman is abused every 18 seconds. This adds up to nearly 5,000 women abused each day.

— One in every six American couples will experience a violent episode this year. Serious physical harm occurs in nearly 10 percent of the couples in our nation.

— The National Institute of Mental Health has estimated that 1.8 million wives per year are severely assaulted; child abuse is estimated to occur in one-half of these families.

— Spouse abuse contributes to one-fourth of all divorces in this country.

— One-eighth of all murders in this country are between spouses.

— More police die in answering domestic violence calls than in any other part of their work. (The FBI estimates this to be 22.2% of the total.)

— Once it occurs, domestic violence tends to recur with increasing severity.

Due to my interest in this subject, many women have confidentially communicated their experiences to me - and their experiences are positively heartbreaking. I learned that battered wives can be found in every economic and social group. The boundaries of age, wealth, ethnicity, and geography just do not apply. In addition, recent evidence has shown that the beating and tormenting of elderly people is an overwhelming problem

just starting to emerge. *Domestic violence is a quiet epidemic and it is getting worse as our national economy deteriorates.*

Life in American society is increasingly difficult, complex, and scary. People are afraid they won't be able to afford enough gas to get to work; that they will lose their jobs because of economic conditions; or that they will be unable to pay their home heating bill. When they get to the grocery store, they find they can't even buy hamburger anymore! We should not be surprised that these tensions and frustrations are manifested in the home, at the expense of anyone weaker or dependent.

Once begun, violence in the home escalates dramatically. After a husband has hit his wife for the first time with no adverse reaction, it is easier to hit her a second and third time, until severe beatings become a way of life, reverberating throughout the family. Children, observing this violence, learn that hitting is an acceptable form of behavior, and tend to become batterers themselves.

This violence starting in the home has repercussions throughout society. A recent survey of juvenile offenders indicated that a large percentage had either been victims or witnesses of violence in their homes.

Many women are reluctant to take action to defend themselves. This is due to the pervasive female stereotypes and because most women are economically dependent upon their husbands. Therefore, a woman takes that big step to leave, only in desperation. Then, very often they have nowhere to go.

Police have been reluctant to get involved in domestic violence cases. Society treats domestic violence as an internal family matter. The justice system has made it difficult to press charges. Many of the same value judgments affecting rape cases apply here, and many prosecutors, who do not want to get involved, try to persuade the woman to drop her case.

Hospital emergency rooms ignore the real causes of injury accepting obviously false explanations that let everybody off the hook, because the domestic violence makes everyone uncomfortable. Traditional social service agencies have long been insensitive to the problems of battered women.

Women's groups have stepped in to fill the void. By setting up shelters for battered women, they meet the needs of these women in a sensitive, effective manner. Staffed almost entirely by volunteers (many of them former victims of abuse), shelters are a fine example of innovative, grass-roots organizing by concerned people to save the lives and health of others.

In addition to giving refuge to domestic violence victims, most shelters provide telephone information and advice and counseling for the abused spouse and her family, including the batterer. Shelters serve as impor-

tant resource centers. At a shelter, the woman is able to catch her breath - both physically and psychologically. She is given the information necessary to make determination about her future. The shelter is an intermediate solution; an essential one.

Shelters do not have the financial resources to meet the enormous demand for their services. Despite extensive fund-raising attempts and despite the fact that most staff members go without pay, shelters are not able to take in all the battered women and children that need refuge.

The House of Ruth in Baltimore, run by an outstanding group of selfless, dedicated people, is a typical example. Last summer, while they sheltered 60 women and their children, they had to turn away an additional 75 women, due to a lack of space and money. In just three months, they provided telephone counseling to 465 battered women—all of whom might need housing at some point. The problem is far worse at many other shelters. The battered woman who flees her home in the middle of the night in terror for her life should not get to a shelter with her children to find the doors bolted because there was no money to pay the rent.

In my first term in Congress, I introduced legislation to deal with this problem, but it was defeated. This disappointing setback provided an opportunity to develop one of the most diverse, effective coalitions I have ever seen organized around such an issue. In the last two years, over 90 organizations have endorsed the legislation. They include law enforcement and legal organizations - the International Association of Police Chiefs, the International Brotherhood of Police Officers, the National District Attorneys Association, and the American Bar Association; church groups - the National Conference of Catholic Charities, American Baptist Churches USA, the National Council of Jewish Women, and the National Council of Churches; labor unions - the AFL-CIO, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, and the National Football League Players Association; health organizations - the American Nurses Association, the American Public Health Association, and the American Psychiatric Association; and women's groups - the Women's Equity Action League, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and the American Association of University Women. The chief participant is the National Coalition Against Domestic Vi-

olence, made up entirely of the people who work in the shelters.

In the 96th Congress, George Miller (CA), Lindy Boggs (LA), and I introduced H.R. 2977, The Domestic Violence Prevention and Services Act of 1979.

To address the concerns of some Republican members of the Subcommittee, modifications were made. A federal direct grant was eliminated entirely, so all grant funds go through the states. A proposed national media campaign was eliminated, a matching formula was included in the bill.

A broad-based coalition of support developed within the House. Congressman Henry Hyde, author of the amendments banning use of federal funds for abortions, testified on behalf of the bill, as a consistent, active supporter. When the bill passed the House on December 12, 1979, by a vote of 292-106, all 16 members of the Congresswomen's Caucus and nearly half the Republicans present voted for passage.

This was a *fantastic* victory. The legislation emerged from the House intact with the exception of an amendment, explicitly stating that it expires at the end of three years. Then we took the issue to the Senate.

Senator Alan Cranston of California introduced a companion bill to H.R. 2977; similar, but not identical, and the full Senate passed this legislation by a vote of 46-41.

In late September, a House and the Senate Conference combined the two versions, retaining the best provisions of both bills, to provide desperately needed financial assistance to shelters in a fiscally responsible manner. The bill that emerged emphasizes local control of the specific needs of each community, with shelters to be provided with resources which will enable them to obtain permanent non-federal funding.

The conference report passed in the House of Representatives by a vote of 276 to 117, on October 1, 1980. After the election, a small group of right-wing senators decided to make this bill a test issue. They had gained control of the Senate and did not want to pass any legislation not of their own making. Rather than subject the bill to their threatened filibuster, Senator Cranston decided to withdraw it from the calendar of the lame duck session of the 96th Congress then underway.

Since its reintroduction in the 97th Congress, the bill has already acquired fifty-two co-sponsors. This is very encouraging since many of these are legislators who did not sponsor it before. When it passes it will represent the culmination of five years of hard work in Congress, with even longer efforts by thousands of concerned individuals throughout the country.

By mobilizing our broad-based coalition of support I am confident we will win, assisting shelters to serve their communities more effectively.

