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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMS' HOUSING ACT
by Caroline Edwards

On March 25, 1999, Representative Janice D. Schakowsky introduced a bill to provide housing assistance to domestic violence victims. The bill has been referred to the Committee on Banking and Financial Services and is cited as the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Victims' Housing Act.

The proposed bill authorizes increasing appropriations under the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act by $50,000,000 for the fiscal year 2000. The funds would be made available only to qualified, non-profit, non-governmental organizations for the purpose of providing supportive housing to individuals or families victimized by domestic violence, stalking, or adult or child sexual assault. In addition, the money would also provide tenant-based rental assistance, financial assistance for security deposits, and first month's rent or ongoing rental assistance to these families.

Under this Act "domestic violence" includes acts or threats of violence or extreme cruelty (not including acts of self-defense) by a person with whom the victim has a child in common, is living with or has lived with the victim, or a person who is or who has been in a relationship of a romantic or intimate nature with the victim. Any state official or licensed agency recognized or authorized by the state to provide services to victims of domestic violence, stalking, or sexual assault can determine that domestic violence has occurred. But most importantly, a victim's statement that domestic violence, stalking, or sexual assault has occurred shall be enough unless the agency has a reasonable, independent basis to find the person not credible. This is important because it means that victims will be able to report this violence without the fear of not being able to survive on their own and provide for their children.

Congress has found that there is an overwhelming connection between violence and homelessness. Fifty percent of homeless women and children are fleeing domestic violence. Almost fifty percent of the women who receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families funds cite domestic violence as a factor in the need for assistance.

A large number of women who flee violence return to their abusers because they lack money or shelter. Those who do leave their abusers are not guaranteed emergency shelter. In fact, eighty percent of shelters report having to turn away homeless families due to inadequate resources for services. Many of these shelters have strict time limits that require women to find alternative housing immediately which separates them from their children.

A stable home base is crucial for women who have left abusive partners. Traditional housing resources and services like this bill proposes provide a continuum between emergency shelter and independent living.

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1 See 42 U.S.C. §11389 (a).