



April 3, 2019

The Honorable Lindsey Graham
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Graham and Ranking Member Feinstein:

As the respective chairmen of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committees on Domestic Justice and Human Development; Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth; and Religious Liberty; we write to offer principles for your consideration as you contemplate the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). We condemn domestic violence in all its forms and laud the efforts of you and your colleagues to continue and enhance the often life-saving resources for victims, law enforcement, and others in an attempt to eradicate this scourge from our families and communities. As the bishops of the United States have stated unequivocally, "violence against women, inside or outside the home, is *never* justified. Violence in any form . . . is sinful; often, it is a crime as well. We have called for a moral revolution to replace a culture of violence."¹ As you deliberate and draft a reauthorization bill, we propose the following goals of the legislation for your consideration:

1. **Safety for victims of domestic violence.** First and foremost, we are concerned with the safety of victims of domestic violence. The ability of law enforcement to intervene in domestic violence situations saves lives. Thus, we commend the efforts of lawmakers to continue robust support for state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies so they can better investigate, neutralize, and hold accountable those who commit acts of domestic violence. We also support measures to remove weapons, especially firearms, from persons who are deemed by courts to be threats to the people around them.
2. **Resources for victims and their families.** Domestic violence can often escalate into risks of serious bodily injury or death. Thus, the immediate need is often for safe, emergency housing for victims, most often women and children. We praise lawmakers' continuing support of greater resources and services for victims and families. Ensuring that emergency or transitional shelters are safe is imperative and requires providers' having the freedom to make placement decisions based firstly on security and preventing distress (physical, mental, or emotional) for everyone, especially in sex-based settings. Besides housing, these

¹ *When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women* (2002).

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/domestic-violence/when-i-call-for-help.cfm>

resources include access to counseling, healthcare, social workers, and legal services. We also support efforts to ensure that holding a perpetrator accountable not be grounds for victims and their family to lose publicly subsidized housing, or other safety-net benefits. It is also important to support reforms so that victims who must move for safety reasons are not denied benefits that help the family stay out of poverty at a time of great vulnerability.

3. **Measures to prevent domestic violence in the future.** Greater information and education are essential to help prevent the tragedy of domestic violence from occurring in the future. Abusers are often formed in connection with previous experiences, so efforts to intervene in the lives of young people are crucial. We support continued funding for education campaigns, as well as greater training of law enforcement and public officials, in order to better deter domestic violence and provide stronger aid and resources to victims and their families.
4. **Respect for integrity in sexuality.** At the heart of VAWA is recognition that relationships in families, or between men and women, are sometimes broken in tragic and harmful ways. The underlying need for VAWA cannot be fully addressed without cultivating healthier family life. To that end, we are unable to support the codification of “sexual orientation” and “gender identity,” which is unnecessary to establish the protection from violence that is due all persons. Such terms tend to reduce the human person to sexual inclinations and elevate license over one’s body in ways that look toward satisfaction rather than temperance or selflessness. The terms also undermine the meaning and importance of sexual difference. As Pope Francis wrote in his encyclical, *Laudato si*’, “It is not a healthy attitude which would seek to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it” (no. 155). Recognizing the unique complementary gifts and significance of men and women for one another may help needed fundamental healing of families and strengthening of domestic life.
5. **Freedom to serve.** Religious freedom is a value enshrined in American law and shared by the Catholic faithful. Countless Catholic charities exercise faith by serving people of every need each day – the poor, the ill, the incarcerated, the migrant – often in collaboration with public sector partners. We commend efforts to include protections in VAWA so that faith-based organizations that administer its grants and programs out of members’ religiously-motivated love for others are able to continue to do so consistently with their moral convictions. Without such adequate protections, the ability to serve will be put in jeopardy, impacting organizations but also, more importantly, those in need.

What is at stake in this conversation is not just violence in families, but violence in our society as a whole. Pope Francis reminds us that it is “fundamental that nonviolence be practiced before all else within families,” which requires “an end to domestic violence and to the abuse of women and children.”² The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops stands ready to work with Congress in meeting these important and life affirming goals.

² Pope Francis, Message for the Celebration of the Fiftieth World Day of Peace (Jan. 1, 2017).
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-1-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html

Sincerely,

+ Charles J. Chaput, OFM Cap.

Most Rev. Charles J. Chaput, OFM Cap.
Archbishop of Philadelphia
Chairman, Committee on Laity, Marriage,
Family Life and Youth

+ Frank J. Dewane

Most Rev. Frank J. Dewane
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+ Joseph E. Kurtz

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