



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Ruth Hassell-Thompson

Senate Democratic Conference Holds Public Forum on Domestic Violence

RUTH HASSELL-THOMPSON May 30, 2012

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Conference Calls on Republican Majority to Bring Domestic Violence Legislative Package to a Vote Immediately

(Albany, NY) The Senate Democratic Conference today held a public forum on the need to provide additional protections for those affected by domestic violence. The forum was convened to highlight legislation sponsored by members of the Democratic Conference which the Senate Republican Majority has refused to move out of committee and bring to the floor for a vote. Attendees at today's forum included Democratic Senators as well as activists, legislators and criminal justice professionals. "The Senate Democratic Conference has sponsored multiple pieces of legislation that will provide dignity and greater protection to the victims of domestic violence," **Democratic Conference Leader John Sampson** said. "Unfortunately, the Senate Republicans have refused to bring these bills to the floor for a vote, choosing to play politics rather than protect vulnerable New Yorkers. In light of their national party's opposition to the Violence Against Women Act, it is more important than ever for the Senate Republican Majority to join us in passing this legislative package."

Today's public forum was organized by the Democratic Conference to discuss multiple pieces of legislation designed to reform the state's criminal justice system and how it handles cases relating to domestic violence. As a long-time proponent of domestic violence awareness, Senator Ruth Hassell-Thompson presided over the forum and was joined by other members of the Democratic Conference. "Ending domestic violence and reforming our state's criminal justice system should not be a partisan issue," **Senator Ruth Hassell-Thompson** said. "Today's forum provided a platform for advocates and members of the public to discuss this issue and the many bills my colleagues and I sponsored to protect the rights of domestic violence victims. I call on the Senate Republicans to respond to today's forum by advancing these pieces of legislation and bringing them all to the floor for a vote."

Included in the bills discussed at today's forum was S.3784, which will prohibit housing discrimination against victims of domestic violence as safe, affordable housing is one of the greatest needs of domestic violence survivors. Also discussed were bills mandating better training and services at hospitals and legislation which would require hospitals to offer to contact a local advocate when admitting or treating confirmed or suspected domestic violence cases.

Additionally, a focus of today's forum was the urgent need to reform the state's criminal justice system to protect the rights and dignity of domestic violence victims and provide them with greater safeguards against their abusers. The Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act would provide judges with the

discretion to sentence domestic violence survivors convicted of crimes related to the abuse they suffered to shorter prison terms. Legislation, (S.1489), has also been proposed to provide judges with the discretion to impose the use of global positioning devices as a condition of release under certain circumstances. Bills to extend the statute of limitations on domestic violence offenses, ensure those accused of domestic violence are not given access to firearms or their victims were also discussed at the forum.

“The role of government is to defend the most vulnerable among us - those who cannot defend themselves,” **Senator Toby Ann Stavisky** said. “As legislators, and as women, we must stand up for victims of domestic violence and pass these critical bills.”

“Every 15 seconds, a woman in the United States is battered,” **Senator José Peralta** said. “This violence has an enormous negative effect on the physical and mental health, economic security and future safety of victims. As lawmakers, we are obligated to act immediately to stem the tide of violence against women.”

“The need to combat domestic violence is something we can all agree must be a priority. The bills discussed at today’s forum will not only help those impacted by domestic violence, but they will also reform our criminal justice system and how it responds to these cases,” **Senator Velmanette Montgomery** said. “I urge Senate leadership to respond to the calling of advocates, experts and victims of domestic violence and move these bills to the floor for a vote.”

“The heinous crime of domestic violence affects New Yorkers of all ages, race and socio-economic circumstances,” **Senator Suzi Oppenheimer** said. “As a society and a legislature, we owe these victims better and more effective protections against their abusers, as well as access to the resources they need to reclaim their lives.”

“Millions of women and families across America continue to be victims of domestic violence, an assault on the very fabric of our society,” said **Senator Adriano Espaillat**. “It is critical that we come together and take a stand against domestic violence. I urge the immediate passage of my legislation (S. 1861) which enacts the inclusion of domestic violence awareness education in school curriculum, so we can educate the next generation about the dangers of domestic violence.”

“At a time when domestic violence is on the rise and considered an epidemic, we ought to do all we can in New York State to protect survivors of domestic violence,” **Senator Kevin Parker** said. “The legislation included in this package responds to the needs of victims of domestic violence. My legislation (S.1489) in particular would ensure that judges have the discretion to impose the use of global positioning devices as a condition of release under certain circumstances.”

“Survivors who find themselves at the mercy of the criminal justice system by way of defending themselves and/or their children from their abusers or for committing a criminal act where the abuse suffered was a contributing factor should not be further victimized by harsh and unfair prison sentences,” **Senator Bill Perkins** said. “This legislation would allow judges to use certain discretions to sentence current cases and to resentence past cases where domestic violence is a significant element of the offense.”

Today’s public forum was part of the Democratic Conference’s ongoing efforts to highlight issues facing New York’s women that demand legislative action in Albany. The Conference held a roundtable discussion on the struggles of women in the workplace and the need for pay equity on May 15, and will conduct a forum on Tuesday, June 5, which will focus on pressing issues concerning women’s health in New York State.

“Domestic violence should never happen nor be tolerated by any person or society. Anyone can be a victim at anytime and it often isn’t taken seriously until the situation culminates into violence,” **Senator Shirley Huntley** said. “Domestic violence is often preceded by verbal, psychological, and emotional abuse these of which can leave lasting scars and damages in a person’s life.”

“Domestic violence has been a scourge in our society for too long,” **Senator Michael Gianaris** said. “We must continue to raise awareness about this horrific problem in a greater effort to stop it from plaguing families across New York and this country.”

“Domestic violence is overwhelmingly violence against women, and it is one of the ugliest, most tragic problems we face as a society,” **Senator Liz Krueger** said. “Today we are discussing crucial legislation to prevent domestic violence and strengthen our society’s support for victims and survivors -- measures which ought to pass the state legislature with broad bipartisan support. It’s a shame the Senate’s Republican majority, like their partisan teammates in Congress, have sunk to holding up legislation to prevent domestic violence because their party’s base is at war with women.”

“Protecting the victims of domestic violence should not be a partisan or political issue,” **Senator Tony Avella** said. “The bills discussed at today’s forum would reform our criminal justice system, protect victims from further abuse, and defend the dignity of all those who have been impacted by domestic violence. These bills should be brought to the entire Senate for a vote immediately.”

“It is incredibly important to address issues of domestic violence that impacts the daily lives of too many of our constituents,” said **Senator Gustavo Rivera**. “Everyone deserves to feel safe in their community and safe at home. We as legislators should work to protect those basic rights. That is why I believe the State Senate should be advancing policies that help victims of domestic abuse as well as strategies for how to prevent or curb domestic violence.”

“According to the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, there were over 29,000 domestic violence assaults reported in 2010,” **Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins** said. “Among the 73 domestic violence homicides in 2010, 85% of the victims were women. These statistics demonstrate the need for this forum to discuss and promote policies that will better protect women and families from the devastation brought on by domestic violence.”

“New York State must do a better job of preventing domestic violence and protecting victims,” said **Senator Tim Kennedy**. “While advancements have been made toward raising awareness of domestic violence, more must be done to improve the ways the criminal justice system responds to domestic violence. In addition to reforming and improving criminal sanctions, our state must commit to domestic violence prevention and follow through, so that all New York families are protected from violence.”

“Today, domestic violence abusers are able to rack up offenses without any promise of protection for their victims,” said **Senator Daniel Squadron**. “The legislation being considered today, including a bill I carry that would make repeat domestic violence offenses a felony crime, would help provide victims and families with the protections, dignity, and support they deserve. Thank you Senators Sampson and Hassell-Thompson for holding today’s forum.”

Nyasha Griffith, Policy Manager for Education & Child Welfare at the Coalition for Asian American Children & Families (CACF), said, “Domestic violence is a prevalent problem across all racial and ethnic groups and is no respecter of income or immigration status. Asian Pacific American community-based organizations break this cycle of violence by providing support services to children and families impacted by domestic violence in ways tailored to address cultural norms and language needs. CACF urges support of the New York State Violence Against Women Act, which if passed, would be an invaluable step in the struggle to ensure that all children and families impacted by the scourge of domestic violence have access to the services they need, and justice they deserve.”

Dr. Anne Klaeyen, Leader of the New York Society for Ethical Culture, said, “Theologians continue to debate the existence and nature of hell, and will never reach consensus. But here’s what I know: Hell on earth is being abused by someone you love; enduring pain and feeling abandoned. We needn’t wait for divine intervention; we can intervene right now. Protect victims of abuse, provide them with professional help and safe environments, and, if all else fails, show them mercy.”

Tamar Kraft-Stolar, Director of the Women in Prison Project at the Correctional Association of New York, said, “We applaud Senators Hassell-Thompson, Krueger and Stewart-Cousins and the Senate Democratic conference for standing up for the rights of women across the state. The Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act, sponsored by Senator Ruth Hassell-Thompson and Assembly member Jeffrion Aubry, is a critical part of this effort. All too often, domestic violence survivors who defend themselves

from their abusers are sent to prison for years, sometimes decades. When this happens, it represents a shameful miscarriage of justice. Instead of giving survivors who have suffered life-shattering abuse compassion and assistance, we give them harsh punishment and incarceration. The Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act would allow New York to take a significant step toward reversing this unjust practice and help the state reduce its costly overreliance on incarceration without compromising public safety. Over 100 domestic violence and social service organizations and thousands of women from across the state stand united in support of this bill.”

Kim Dadou, a member of the Coalition for Women Prisoners, survivor and advocate, said, “I was a victim before I was a defendant. I spent years being abused by my boyfriend and then, when I protected myself, I was sent to prison for 8 1/3 to 25 years. I was denied parole five times and spent 17 years in prison. The court system is supposed to protect you and instead it was turned against me. Prison is not a place for a woman who has been dehumanized by her abuser to rebuild herself. I share my story in support of the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act, to help all of those women who remain locked up, and to change the system that failed to protect me. It is essential so that women don’t lose years of their lives like I did.”

Lady Kathryn Williams, a member of the Coalition for Women Prisoners, survivor, and domestic violence and HIV advocate, said, “I was arrested for protecting myself after years of abuse. The DA in my case ultimately agreed to let me plead guilty to a lower offense and five years probation supervised by STEPS to End Family Violence. STEPS was critical in helping me recover, rebuild my self-esteem and improve my quality of life. I am not saying I or anyone else should be exempt from responsibility but please take into consideration what led to that crime. To be sent to prison for protecting yourself is like being re-victimized. Love should not hurt. Love, kindness and respect, these should be the main values that guide our society, and the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act can help orient the criminal justice system in that direction.”

William Gibney, Director of the Criminal Practice Special Litigation Unit at the Legal Aid Society, said, “We applaud the Senate Democratic Conference for their leadership on this important issue. The victims of domestic violence deserve a criminal justice system that not only protects them from further abuse, but one which also defends their dignity. Under current law victims of domestic violence are treated the same way as people who never experienced the life shattering effects of an abuser’s violence. This leads to long, unfair prison sentences for many survivors.”

Jonathan E. Gradess, Executive Director of the New York State Defenders Association, said, “Today’s public forum demonstrated that the Senate Democratic Conference has targeted a problem of longstanding duration. Many women who are victims of domestic violence find themselves incarcerated or facing incarceration even though the violence of a spouse or intimate partner played a substantial contributing role in bringing them in conflict with the law. By addressing this longstanding problem the legislation would dramatically improve the lives of those impacted by domestic violence.”

Kristin Brown Lilley, Director of Policy Advocacy for the Empire Justice Center, said, “The Empire Justice Center extends our thanks to Senator Hassel Thompson for her ongoing leadership on issues affecting domestic violence victims, to the Senate Democratic Conference and to Assembly member Pretlow for sponsoring this Forum today. As the legislative session kicks into high gear, this is a great and timely opportunity to highlight several bills that would have a positive impact on victims of domestic violence. We are particularly supportive of Senator Hassell Thompson and Assembly member Stevenson’s bill which would prevent landlords from discriminating against domestic violence victims, an issue that plunges victims and former victims into crisis far too often and desperately needs to be addressed.”

Sandra Park, Chair of the New York City Bar Association’s Domestic Violence Committee, said, “We thank Senator Hassell-Thompson for holding this important public forum. The City Bar has supported legislation addressing housing discrimination against victims of domestic violence and the sentencing of victims who are convicted of committing crimes where abuse was a significant contributing

factor to the criminal behavior. Enacting laws addressing these issues will reinforce our state's recognition of the myriad ways that domestic violence impacts victims, such as in housing and the criminal justice system."

Lisa A. Frisch, Executive Director of The Legal Project in Albany, said, "These proposed bills reflect a clear understanding of the very real needs of victims of domestic violence – for safety, for independence, for justice -- and for making important changes in law to help meet those needs. We look forward to working together to move this legislation forward."

Jennifer Ching, Director of Queens Legal Services, an affiliate of Legal Services NYC, said, "Our advocacy program serves hundreds of domestic violence survivors every year, and we experience daily the numerous barriers that the legislative proposals here address. We applaud the Legislature for taking important steps forward to remove obstacles to such important issues as discrimination in housing, use of immigration status as a tool of a batterer, more robust hospital domestic violence policies and greater safety protections for domestic violence survivors. Every step forward represents lives saved, and a clearer path to long-term security and freedom from violence."

Nancy Goldhill, Director of the Staten Island Legal Services, said, "Domestic violence is a crime of epidemic proportion. This package of bills fills gaps in the laws and offers tremendous additional protections for domestic violence victims. Just two examples: they would make sure that abusers don't continue to threaten victims with weapons and they would protect the confidentiality of victims' immigration status. The bills will make it easier for victims to report abuse and stay safe. We applaud the Democratic Conference for proposing them and, for the sake of our clients who struggle every day, we hope they are enacted."

CarlLa Horton, Executive Director of Hope's Door NY, said, "The number one lethal threat to women victims of domestic violence is the presence of a firearm in the home. If we are to save lives and end the murder of women victimized by abuse, we must remove the weapons. To achieve that goal, Hope's Door extends our support to S.1003-A Peralta/A.2494-B O'Donnell and S.674 Peralta-A/A.1475 Rosenthal."

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