

September 14, 2007

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
United State Senate
201 Senate Russell Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Arlen Specter
United States Senate
711 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: National Domestic Violence Volunteer Attorney Network Act

Dear Senators Biden & Specter:

The organizations below together express our appreciation to you both for introducing the National Domestic Violence Volunteer Attorney Network Act”, S. 1515 as well as our strong support for its passage. This legislation addresses the dire need to increase legal services for victims of domestic violence by harnessing the skills, enthusiasm and dedication of volunteer lawyers to create a coordinated, nationwide referral system to help domestic violence victims. If enacted, the measure will solicit lawyers, train them, organize them into a central network, and the National Domestic Violence Hotline will refer victims to statewide legal coordinators.

Domestic violence is a well-documented epidemic in America that hurts millions of families each year. Nearly one in four women will be a victim of domestic violence in her lifetime and between three and ten million children witness acts of domestic violence each year, which puts them at increased risk for engaging in juvenile crime and abusive relationships. Without a doubt, domestic violence permeates every aspect of victims’ lives and damages their physical, mental and emotional health as well as their participation in education systems and the workforce.

Together, as national organizations committed to increasing access to justice for victims of domestic violence, we know that there is a need to increase, safe, affordable, accessible, high-quality legal services to victims. In a 2003 study examining domestic violence, Professor Amy Farmer found that legal assistance is the most effective intervention for victims, but the cost of this intervention makes it inaccessible to many victims of family violence. Obtaining effective protection orders, initiating divorce proceedings or designing safe child custody arrangements often enables battered women to take the first real step away from an abusive home. Yet the sad fact remains that thousands of the estimated one and a half million victims of domestic violence go without representation every day in this country. It is estimated that legal service providers are

only able to serve about 170,000 low-income domestic violence victims each year. At best then, less than one out of five low-income victims ever has access to a lawyer.

The National Domestic Violence Volunteer Attorney Network Act will enhance access to legal services for victims of domestic violence in the following ways:

- Mandates a Government Accountability Office study on the scope and quality of legal services available to victims of domestic violence across the country and issue a report to Congress within a year;
- Creates a National Domestic Violence Volunteer Attorney Network Referral Project to be managed by the American Bar Association Commission on Domestic Violence in partnership with other national domestic violence and pro bono organizations, including the National Domestic Violence Hotline;
- Authorizes a Pilot Program to establish the National Attorney Network in five states; which would then be followed in two years by a National Rollout; and
- Establishes a National Domestic Violence Legal Advisory Task Force to provide on-going guidance regarding the network.

We strongly support the National Domestic Violence Volunteer Attorney Network Act and urge Congress to promptly enact this important legislation. We commend your leadership on this issue and appreciate your willingness to work with us to resolve this gaping hole in the legal system. We look forward to working collaboratively to meet the tremendous demand for legal assistance for victims of domestic violence.

Sincerely,

Battered Women's Justice Project
Immigrant Women's Project, Legal Momentum
Legal Resource Center on Violence Against Women
National Association of Women Lawyers
National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges
National District Attorney's Association
National Domestic Violence Hotline
National Legal Aid and Defenders Association
National Network to End Domestic Violence
Womenslaw.org