

The Fight Against Domestic Violence

Senator Joe Biden

As the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence marks its thirty-year commitment to ending violence against women, I want to thank you for the invaluable work you do to make our families and communities safer. For three decades, you have shined a light on the dark scourge of abuse that affects one out of four Americans each year, and you have empowered survivors of abuse to break the cycle of violence in their homes. One of my proudest accomplishments was working with you to pass the Violence Against Women Act nearly fifteen years ago. The Act has transformed the way police, prosecutors, judges and advocates tackle domestic violence – but we are not done.

I believe there is a wealth of untapped resources in this country – lawyers who want to volunteer. Last spring, I introduced the National Domestic Violence Volunteer Attorney Network Act, legislation that, for the first time, creates a streamlined national system to recruit and train volunteer lawyers and match them with domestic violence victims.

As many of you know, once a domestic violence victim steps out from the shadow of an abusive relationship, one of the first things she needs is a lawyer. Victims are in desperate need for legal help for everything from obtaining protection orders to arranging child custody to instigating divorce proceedings.

A national survey by the National Network to End Domestic Violence found that in just one 24-hour cycle, more than 5,000 pleas for services – be it for an emergency shelter, transitional housing or legal aid, were unmet because of a lack of resources. This shortage means that thousands of victims of domestic violence go without legal representation in this country every day. In fact, reports indicate that fewer than 1 out of every 5 low-income domestic violence victims ever sees a lawyer.

Victims walk out on a limb when they seek help, often risking their personal safety. The very second a battered woman calls the Hotline, reaches out to the police or walks into a courtroom, we need to connect this courageous person with legal assistance. These first calls for help are critical moments when a victim must feel supported; if she doesn't, she may retreat back into the abuse.

The National Domestic Violence Volunteer Attorney Network Act will harness the skills, enthusiasm and dedication of these lawyers and infuse 100,000 new volunteer lawyers into the justice system to represent domestic violence victims. I believe this initiative builds on the best of American ideals – volunteerism, technology know-how, collaboration between the private and public sectors and our unwavering commitment to justice and service.

Using the power of the Internet, this nationwide network of attorneys will be coordinated by American Bar Association - statewide legal coordinators would manage legal services in their individual states, and the National Domestic Violence Hotline and Internet-based services would provide legal referrals to victims. The historic partnership forged in my bill will mean that enthusiastic potential advocates will seamlessly link to training and new clients. And at the same time, desperate victims will be referred to a statewide coordinator and quickly connected to a lawyer. I want to end the frustrating, and often fruitless, task of calling different agencies, offices, or groups, either to volunteer or find a lawyer.

My commitment to ending and preventing domestic violence and rape remains as unwavering as it was when I started this process with you in the early 1990's. I am grateful for the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence's leadership over the past thirty years. Together, we can raise an army of volunteer lawyers for the battle against domestic violence – we can turn legal hurdles into hope.