

Do You Feel Safe at Home?

Posted on Mar 31, Posted by [Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



This week Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about legislative changes meant to help and protect victims of domestic violence. □ The Bills (SB 160, AB 464, and AB 176)□ help domestic violence victims who can't answer “Yes” and passed both houses of the Legislature with strong bi-partisan support. The bills await the governor’s signature.

MADISON - “Do you feel safe at home?” the nurse asked the woman. The nurse was helping to identify and protect those who may be at risk for domestic violence.

One in three women will, at some time in her life, experience domestic violence.

Recent World Health Organization research confirms what earlier studies found: worldwide one in three women are physically or sexually assaulted by a current or former partner. Experts advocate for screening questions, like the one above, and training to recognize domestic violence for health workers and law enforcement officers.

Wisconsin law enforcement officials are trained to recognize and respond to domestic violence. Many officers tell me domestic violence situations remain their most common call and are difficult to resolve.

Lawmakers recently passed several bills aimed at protecting victims of domestic violence, standardizing the actions of law enforcement and the courts and bringing perpetrators to justice. One change for law enforcement is a requirement to refer domestic violence victims to shelters and make sure the victim knows about and can get help from a victim advocate.

In many domestic violence situations both adults and children are victims. Testimony by advocates during an Assembly hearing reminded lawmakers “about half of men who abuse their female partner will also abuse their children.” Changes were needed to protect victims, including children.

Protecting children includes protecting their privacy. Legislative changes will close the courtroom during restraining order hearings for children, and keep child victim records off CCAP - the court’s public Internet record - and other measures to protect victim confidentiality, including children. The legislation also protects the non-offending parent from the legal expenses of the court appointed child advocate known as the guardian ad litem.

This new legislation also makes it clear that restraining orders stop all contact between the abuser and the victim, including stalking behavior.

Sometimes the law or court processes actually put victims at risk. These parts of the law were changed: victims no longer are required to notify the abuser if a restraining order is extended – the court will now do this. Also privacy is protected for those who must change their name.

Sometimes when the perpetrator requests a new judge the restraining order protecting the victim became invalid. The new legislation will make sure this does not happen.

Nearly 20 years ago Wisconsin passed laws protecting victims of domestic violence by requiring the abuser to surrender firearms. But advocates tell me many courts never checked up on whether or not perpetrators actually surrendered firearms.

New legislation sets out a process by which individuals subject to a restraining order must surrender firearms. The legislation came about because of domestic crimes committed by those who illegally possessed a firearm. Work began on this proposal in 2008 when the Governor’s Council on Domestic Abuse discovered that while state and federal law required action only 12 Wisconsin counties had policies in place to actively ensure that abusers followed the law.

The legislation followed the procedures developed through a pilot project in four Wisconsin counties. This successful project showed lawmakers common sense procedures could be developed that were effective and inexpensive. The state's chief judges endorsed the bill as a best practice approach to resolving the problem.

These bills, SB 160, AB 464 and AB 176, passed both houses with strong bipartisan support and now await the governor's signature.

We can work to change our culture and end domestic abuse. We can treat each other with respect and teach respect and nonviolent conflict resolution to our children. We can also tell those at risk about available resources. Wisconsin invested in a statewide system of shelters and advocates helping when abuse happens.

Reach out to those who need help and let them know shelters and advocates are available throughout Wisconsin. In the Eau Claire, Buffalo and Jackson County call Boulton Refuge House at 1-855-526-5866; In La Crosse and Trempealeau call New Horizons at 608-791-2600. In Dunn and Pepin call Bridge to Hope at 715-235-9074. For other locations around the state call End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin at (608) 255-0539 or visit their website at <http://www.wcadv.org/gethelp>.

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