

September 25, 2007

**Chairman Byron L. Dorgan
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510**

Dear Chairman Dorgan,

On behalf of Alaska Native Women and children that are in need of safety, we would like to thank you for your leadership in the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). We believe that it is imperative that the implementation of VAWA is achieved specifically, we seek your full support and advocacy for the Tribal Title IX – Safety for Indian Women.

The Alaska Native Women's Coalition (ANWC) is a statewide non-profit grassroots coalition whose goal is to provide a unified voice for Alaskan Natives against domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking. Our membership is comprised of Alaska Native women who are both survivors of violence and advocates for safety from such violence. The coalition members include men and women from around the state in rural communities - we are first responders, health care workers, tribal chiefs and administrators, shelter workers, and other concerned community members. ANWC provides direct victim services, court advocacy, shelter services, and training for tribal specific issues, among other things. Over the last several years the Alaska Native Women's Coalition has worked to increase the safety of Alaska Native women through gatherings on the regional and statewide level, including local resources and state resources to dialog potential solutions and enhance current systemic responses.

The danger Alaska Native women face is disproportionately higher than any other population in the United States.

STATISTICS

- Alaska reported 83.5 rapes per 100,000 females compared to a U.S. average of 31.7 rapes per 100,000.
- Reported cases of domestic violence in Anchorage alone increased by 120%.
- Alaska Natives make up 8% of the total population of Anchorage yet the percentage of Alaska Native victims was 24%.
- Alaska has one of the highest per capita rates of physical and sexual abuse in the Nation.
- In an informal poll taken in one of the off road communities, 100% of the women there are or have been a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

The underlying issues for this rate of victimization are extremely complex. In light of this we greatly appreciate your concern for and support of Alaska Native Women.

The VAWA 1994 and 2000 recognized the importance of addressing the unique circumstances of Native women. This historic legislation has not only saved lives but has restored hope for hundreds of our Sisters seeking safety from perpetrators of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. Unfortunately, we also must face the reality that many women lost their lives to such violence over the last several years. The 2005 VAWA legislation contained specific sections addressing the safety of American Indian and Alaska Native women primarily providing a tribal set aside. The Tribal Title addresses specific issues impacting the safety of Native women. Each component represents an essential step forward in enhancing the safety of American Indian and Alaska Native Women.

In reviewing the Bureau of Justice Statistics report titled “American Indians and Crime 1992-2002” the findings reveal a disturbing picture of the victimization of American Indians and Alaska Natives. The rate of violent crime estimated from self reported victimizations for American Indians is well above that of other U.S. racial or ethnic groups and is more than twice the national average. This disparity in the rates of exposure to violence affecting American Indians occurs across age groups, housing locations, and by gender. American Indians are more likely than people of other races to experience violence at the hands of someone of a different race, and the criminal victimizer is more likely to have consumed alcohol preceding the offense. Among American Indian victims of violence, the offender was more likely to be a stranger than an intimate partner, family member, or acquaintance. Strangers committed 42% of the violent crimes against American Indians during 1992-2001. An acquaintance committed about 1 in 3 of the violent victimizations against American Indians. About 1 in 5 violent victimizations among American Indians involved an offender who was an intimate or family member of the victim.¹

- Rates of violent victimization for both males and females were higher for American Indians than for all races.
- American Indian females were less likely to be victims compared to American Indian males.
- The rate of violent victimization among American Indian women was more than double that among all women.
- American Indians were more likely to be victims of assault and rape/sexual assault committed by a stranger or acquaintance rather than an intimate partner or family member.
- Approximately 60% of American Indian victims of violence, about the same percentage as of all victims of violence, described the offender as white.

Under Title II, Improving Services for Victims of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking, there are new opportunities through the Sexual Assault Services Program that ANWC is in full support of. These new provisions will improve the lives of women and children across the nation, and create new opportunities for women to access services. Because of the rates of rape and sexual assault in Alaska these services are essential from a health care perspective.

¹ Bureau of Justice Statistics - “American Indians and Crime 1992-2002”

There are many obstacles that we face in our attempts to create a coordinated community response (CCR) that is Alaskan Native specific. The primary obstacle is the lack of resources at the village level. While our Lower '48 and urban counterparts are considering non-profit victim advocacy agencies, health care, social services, and criminal justice systems in their development of a CCR, most Native Alaskan communities do not have the luxury of these resources. In many villages to have a health aide practitioner and the tribal councils who act as the tribal court, are the community resources, additionally 75 of the 229 villages have an on site Village Public Safety Officer or Village Peace Officer. The Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) has limited authority and no place for detention of perpetrators in most situations. Approximately 40% of these 229 villages have no form of local law enforcement present in their community. The challenge for these communities lies in getting together a team of people who can be as impartial as possible while dealing with relatives, friends, and acquaintances in incidents of violence against women and children. Community members need to set the standard of behavior and create community based solutions that restore their customary and traditional means of living in non-violence.

Violence against women and children are being perpetuated in communities where there exists no form of law enforcement and no local infrastructure to address these incidents. These facts create the dangerous reality that frequently the only people standing between women in need of protection from a batterer or rapist is the local community. Consequently, the life of a woman depends largely on the local community's ability to provide immediate assistance. Given the extreme danger created by such abusers and the remote isolation of women, communities must develop their own village specific program utilizing their existing local resources. The development of this local response is the only assurance that women and often times their children in rural Alaska are provided with the basic human right to safety.

Although reporting has increased, victim safety, batterer accountability and stalking still remains a big problem. Just last year in one of our smaller villages where there exists no form of law enforcement and where there exists no infrastructure to provide for the basic safety of women and children, a woman was shot and killed by her partner in a domestic abuse incident. In yet another incident in yet another off road community, a woman was shot and killed while her children stood helplessly by and watched. This is becoming an all too common scenario for rural Alaska.

When an incident is reported and no one responds, this sends a clear message to the perpetrator and the community that violence against women is both tolerated and accepted. While there can be many reasons that law enforcement doesn't respond, such as weather, funding, man power and other reasons, the bottom line for women and children in rural Alaska is they are not safe in their own homes and communities.

ANWC have been hosting conferences, meetings and teleconferencing through which we have had many conversations with villages on what challenges and issues they perceive as being prevalent. Through these consistent dialogues we have ascertained that the

unique issues encountered in rural Native villages in Alaska are not being addressed. Amongst the key challenges are the fact that ninety of the 229 communities across the state are without any form of law enforcement and no basic infrastructure to address the incidents of violence that is happening in their community. When there has been a perpetrator that has been through the legal justice system in the community this creates other, as of yet unresolved issues that overflow, into the community. Perpetrators that are directed to Batterer's Re-Education as a part of their sentence, often in rural communities don't have a program available to them and the costs of living in another community and maintaining their home and family, result in many non-compliant offenders. ANWC is working toward several distance delivery methods and hope to be a part of the solution for access to services for our rural communities.

Victims are being re victimized at an alarming rate mostly due to the fact that Native women from remote Alaskan villages have no knowledge of the westernized judiciary system. They are losing their children, their jobs, their homes, and forced to leave their villages and culture due to the fact that they choose to leave an abusive relationship or because they are in one.

We are aware of how much time and effort has gone into each of the sections of the reauthorization language and rather than try to seek specific sections that we support, we choose to limit our comments because each section will improve areas of need for different parts of the U.S., including Indian Country. We do have a couple of comments that we hope will contribute further to improvements for Alaska Native victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Emergency services are only one area of need.

1. Title VI – Housing Opportunities and Safety for Battered Women and Children.

Title VI, Sec. 602. Request for more shelters for Alaska Native victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

While the rate of victimization is higher than any other population of women in the United States, funding for essential life saving services are inadequate. One example of this is the lack of crisis services, such as shelters and rape crisis services which serve the disproportionately large population of Alaska Native women victimized (see statistics above.) And, there are only two Native run shelter programs within the State of Alaska – one in Emmonak and ANWC's Interior Alaska based shelter, "Denaar Tsoo Yuh" (Koyukon Athabascan for Our Grandma's House), opened in January 2005.

Very few rape crisis/sexual assault services programs operate to serve specifically Alaska Native women. Culturally specific services are essential because we know that generally Alaska Native women prefer and frequently will not use services that are not designed to address their beliefs, customs and traditions.

2. Title I – Enhancing Judicial and Law Enforcement Tools to Combat Violence Against Women.

ANWC fully supports Title I, Sec. 101 (f) (i) (2), ensuring that training and technical assistance will be developed and provided by entities having expertise in tribal law and culture. This same message was echoed at our Statewide conference in Anchorage May 24-26, 2005 and again in June of 2006. Such grassroots participation is what makes a community's efforts successful and ultimately protects women and children from domestic violence and sexual assault.

We request your full support for the provision of technical assistance, as mentioned throughout the Bill, and ask that the technical assistance be provided by those with culturally specific knowledge. There are many excellent additions to the reauthorization of VAWA 2005 that will benefit women across the country. ANWC fully supports the Tribal Title IX, which includes vital provisions that will ensure that all perpetrators of violent crimes committed against Indian women are held accountable for their crimes; increase research on violence against Indian women; and establishes a national tribal sex offender registry, as well as ensuring that tribes have an opportunity to address violence in their communities through the 10% tribal set aside. In order to continue the progress of the past thirteen years since the initial passage of VAWA, we must continue to dedicate our resources to addressing the issues, most especially for those that are still affected by violence each day. We appreciate that the Tribal Title IX- Safety for Indian Women was included in the reauthorization of VAWA. For small communities to have access to federal funding is imperative to providing for all women and children to have the basic human right to safety. Thank you for all your support and dedication to seek resources and resolutions for the "Backbone of our Nations" our women.

Please feel free to contact Tammy Young, Director if the Alaska Native Women's Coalition can be of any assistance.

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