

AG Kaul: COVID-19 pandemic is putting domestic violence victims and survivors at further risk

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MADISON, Wis. – Attorney General Josh Kaul and a coalition of 24 attorneys general [are urging the U.S. Senate to reauthorize](#) the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which expired more than a year ago. As isolation and uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic increases the risk to domestic violence victims, the Senate must act immediately, the attorneys general argue.

In April 2019, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill with bipartisan support reauthorizing the act, but after more than a year, the Senate has yet to take up consideration of the bill, nor has it taken up a companion bill.

“The U.S. Senate must stop delaying the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act,” said Attorney General Kaul. “The bill passed by the House of Representatives expands VAWA’s protections, and the Senate should act so those protections can become law.”

The Violence Against Women Act, originally passed in 1994, created an Office on Violence Against Women within the Department of Justice, and provides billions of dollars for investigation and prosecution of violent crimes against women, as well as financial support to women in need.

The act has been reauthorized several times, most recently in 2013. Each time Congress reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act, it expanded the protections under the law with bipartisan support.

The letter notes that the COVID-19 pandemic makes reauthorizing the act even

more urgent, as measures to contain the virus can exacerbate isolation, uncertainty, and economic instability, directly impacting victims of domestic violence.

“Violence against women has been a public health crisis for generations, and the COVID-19 outbreak illustrates the urgent need to further strengthen protections for women under federal law,” the letter states.

Domestic violence is also a threat to law enforcement, the letter notes. According to a 2017 report by the U.S. Department of Justice, 29 percent of the 133 line-of-duty deaths responding to calls for service were related to domestic disputes.

The House bill expands the protections of the Violence Against Women Act by:

- Strengthening protections for Native women by expanding jurisdiction of tribal courts over non-Native men who abuse Native women;
- Codifying important protections for LGBTQ individuals; and,
- Closing the “boyfriend loophole,” which allows certain abusive dating partners to continue possessing firearms under federal law.

“Reauthorization of (the Violence Against Women Act) will not end the scourge of gender-based violence, but it is an important step toward more fully addressing the tragic epidemic,” the letter states. “The importance of urgent action is underscored by the particular challenges faced by victims and survivors during the COVID-19 outbreak. We urge you to move quickly to adopt the House-passed bill or the Senate companion sponsored by Senator Feinstein. Women in our states are counting on it.”

Attorney General Kaul is joined by the attorneys general from California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Washington, D.C.