



**United States Conference of Catholic Bishops**  
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March 9, 2022

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Joni Ernst  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Durbin  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Feinstein, Senator Durbin, Senator Ernst, and Senator Murkowski:

We, the undersigned bishop chairmen of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) write to share our analysis of the currently proposed bill to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act (“VAWA”) (S. 3623), which we recognize has now been incorporated into the omnibus appropriations agreement for FY2022. The Catholic Church opposes all forms of violence and teaches that violence against women is never justified, and in fact, in speaking recently with a survivor of domestic abuse, Pope Francis described this violence as almost “[satanic](#).” According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, one in five women have been raped in their lifetime, one in four have been the victim of severe physical violence by an intimate partner, and one in six have been stalked in their lifetime. These alarming statistics compel all of us to urgently address this crisis. We are, therefore, thankful to you who, by working on the reauthorization of funding for existing victim services, continue to prioritize support for those who have suffered abuse. The USCCB previously [wrote to Congress](#) on April 3, 2019, to offer principles on VAWA reauthorization. By this letter, we offer some analysis of the current bill.

**Safety for the Vulnerable.** In recognizing the dignity and responding to the needs of those who have been victimized, we are pleased with provisions promoting the use of trauma-informed, victim-centered approaches, as well as waivers for victim compensation timelines when there is a delay due to forensic testing backlogs. It is also good that this legislation aims to improve conditions for women in federal custody. The USCCB encourages restorative justice models and hopes the establishment of a pilot program providing funding for the implementation of restorative practices will expand these opportunities. Children are, sadly, often the most vulnerable of victims and this bill increases child safety considerations in child custody proceedings.

**Housing.** Domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women and children. It is imperative that survivors of abuse have access to safe housing and are offered appropriate support, resources, and services. We commend provisions which offer expansions of VAWA housing protections to tenants living in any affordable housing program receiving federal funding and those that affirm these protections and improve their implementation. We also encourage efforts to better understand the housing needs of survivors of human trafficking.

**Preventing Gun Violence.** To prevent violence, persons deemed by courts to be threats to people around them should not have access to weapons, especially firearms. We had previously asked to close the so-called “boyfriend loophole,” but we are grateful for the inclusion of a measure to provide State, local or Tribal law enforcement and prosecutors with a notice if an individual attempts to purchase a firearm and is denied pursuant to the national instant criminal background check system.

**Confronting Child Marriage and Building a Culture of Respect.** In view of the sanctity of marriage, and the dignity of those entering it, we commend provisions that, respectively, repeal a marriage defense to statutory rape in federal law and that shine a light on related inconsistencies in State laws. We similarly support the terms of the incorporated “Choose Respect Act” that would create a campaign to encourage young men toward a much-needed cultural change that respects women and does not harbor violence.

**The Truth of the Human Person and Sexuality.** At the heart of VAWA is recognition that relationships in families, or between men and women, are sometimes broken in tragic and harmful ways. The underlying need for VAWA cannot be fully addressed without cultivating healthier family life. Because of this, we do not support the provisions in this bill that proliferate “sexual orientation,” “gender identity,” and related phrases, as codified terms, which are unnecessary to establish the protection from violence that is due all persons – including those who experience same-sex attraction or gender discordance. Such constructions tend to reduce the human person to sexual inclinations and elevate license over one’s body in ways that look toward satisfaction rather than temperance or selflessness. The terms also undermine the meaning and importance of sexual difference. As Pope Francis wrote in his encyclical, *Laudato si’*, “It is not a healthy attitude which would seek to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it” (no. 155). Honoring the unique complementary gifts and significance of men and women for one another would help the needed fundamental healing of families and strengthening of domestic life.

**Freedom to Serve Others.** These principles are also important to countless religiously-affiliated workers and organizations who serve survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Their freedom to serve as robust VAWA partners on equal footing with others, consistently with their convictions that also motivate their labors, is critical not just for them but for their beneficiaries. For this reason, we are concerned with any stated preferences in grant programs that may disadvantage such partners – who serve everyone, but in accord with the above truths. Further, without adequate protections, many faith-based providers’ ability to serve at all will be put in jeopardy, impacting those organizations and, more importantly, those in need. We also seek greater understanding as to how the specifications for a higher education survey, provided for in the legislation, may be used with respect to religious institutions and their ability to observe and teach their tenets involving marriage or sexuality.

We thank you for your consideration of these views, and we pray for your work in updating this important, life-saving legislation.

Sincerely,



His Eminence Timothy Cardinal Dolan  
Archbishop of New York  
Chairman, Committee for Religious Liberty



Most Reverend Salvatore J. Cordileone  
Archbishop of San Francisco  
Chairman, Committee on Laity, Marriage,  
Family Life and Youth



Most Reverend Paul S. Coakley  
Archbishop of Oklahoma City  
Chairman, Committee on Domestic  
Justice and Human Development