



Against Domestic and Sexual Violence

TO Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing, and General Affairs
Sen. Kevin Mullin, Chair

FROM Auburn Watersong, Associate Director of Public Policy

RE: S.15 - An Act Relating to Absence from Work for Healthcare and Safety

DATE January 27, 2015

Thank you very much for allowing me to speak with you today. As you may know, the Network is the statewide coalition of 14 member programs who serve survivors of domestic and sexual violence and stalking throughout Vermont. I am here speaking as a representative of the Network and on behalf of all of the victims and survivors who cannot be here to tell their own stories for fear of retaliation from their abuser, for fear of losing their job if they speak out publically, or for numerous other reasons related to their victimization.

We at the Network wholeheartedly support the passage of S. 15, relating to absence from work for health or safety. S.15 would provide critically important paid time off from work to enable survivors of domestic and sexual violence and stalking to access potentially life-saving support services.

The Network is especially supportive of proposed section 483 (a)(4), covering absence due to domestic or sexual violence. This is a critical issue which both the legislature and the Governor have already acknowledged as a priority. In the authorizing statute for the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence, the legislature directed the Council to work with many stakeholders to address the issue of domestic violence in the workplace. As a result of that work, in May of 2013, the Governor signed a Domestic and Sexual Violence in the Workplace policy that applies to all Vermont State employees. This policy seeks to support State employees who are victims and to hold perpetrators accountable. S.15 goes further toward that same goal of protecting employees and employers by

providing a small window during work hours for survivors to seek services and protections for themselves and their families.

Domestic violence doesn't stay home when its victims go to work. It can follow them, resulting in violence in the workplace. The need for this workplace protection is highlighted by four horrific instances of domestic violence-related homicide linked to workplaces in Vermont in the past two decades:

- Brownington, 1992 - Diane Young Waterman was kidnapped from her place of work and shot by her husband Gerald. He then killed himself.
- Newport, 1999 – Carole Chibani was shot to death in her office by her estranged husband, Moez Chibani, who then shot himself.
- South Burlington, 1999 – Patricia Sears was stabbed to death in a parking lot by her estranged husband Carl while she was on her way to work.
- Essex, 2007 - Christopher Williams, looking for his ex-girlfriend, shot her mother, Linda Lambesis, then went to her workplace at Essex Elementary School where he shot two teachers, killing Alicia Shanks and wounding another.

These cases represent the worst case scenarios, where services and supports fail to keep survivors of domestic and sexual violence safe. These tragedies highlight a much more pervasive problem in our communities and workplaces:

- A 2011 survey of Vermont men convicted of domestic assault demonstrated that domestic violence negatively impacts Vermont workplaces and employees.
- 74% of battered women nationally report experiencing harassment at work. For example, Tina Fontaine, murdered by her boyfriend in Vermont in 2006, was forced to leave two jobs because he repeatedly called and texted her at work.
- At least 1 million women in the U.S. are stalked at work each year.

Domestic and sexual violence and stalking take a huge toll on our communities; they also have a huge economic impact on employers:

- One third of senior corporate executives in a national poll stated that they thought that the problem of domestic violence has an impact on their bottom lines;

- 66% of these business leaders believed that their company's financial performance would benefit from addressing the issue of domestic violence among their employees.

It is crucial that domestic abuse be seen as a serious, recognizable, and preventable problem like thousands of other workplace health and safety issues that affect a business and its bottom line.

S.15 **supports** employers in addressing the problem of domestic and sexual violence directly by permitting employees to take a few days to seek services and safety.

The State of Vermont has worked for decades to develop a comprehensive range of services and protections for survivors of domestic and sexual violence, but survivors need the flexibility to access these services in the safest way possible. Sometimes the **safest** time to seek counseling, health care, or legal protection is during work hours. Court hearings only happen during business hours, which requires many survivors to take time off from work. Batterers who also economically abuse their partners may monitor their partners paychecks and work schedules. When the partner takes time off to file a court document, for example, it may be reflected as less pay or missed time – and this may put her at greater risk. It is not always possible or safe for a victim to simply make up lost time on the weekends if her abuser monitors her schedule.

It is clear that S.15 provides a small, critical window of time for survivors to seek safety and protection for themselves and their children. Without this critical provision, survivors of domestic and sexual violence and stalking may be forced to make an absolutely untenable choice between a paycheck and safety.

We at the Network strongly encourage you to pass S.15 and support the safety and economic security of survivors of domestic and sexual violence and stalking.