



## Twenty Years of the Violence Against Women Act: Dispatches from the Field

Office on Violence Against Women  
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## Twenty Years of the Violence Against Women Act: Dispatches from the Field

The passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994 marked a critical achievement in a long history of efforts in the United States to afford victims of domestic and sexual violence their rights to safety, justice, and autonomy. The original VAWA was, at its core, a criminal justice bill focused largely on improving how law enforcement and the court system respond to domestic violence. It was designed to equip the justice system with resources, training, and policies to deal with a crime that historically was treated as a private matter between a husband and wife, and about which misperceptions still persist. Recognizing that domestic and sexual violence require a coordinated community response that extends well beyond the justice system, Congress reauthorized VAWA, with revisions to its policies and funding streams, in 2000, 2005, and

“If it wasn't for VAWA, I would not be sitting here today telling you of all the successes and the growth that we've had and all the victims we've been able to serve.”

2013. The general shift over the three subsequent iterations of VAWA has been towards enhancing services for victims, recognizing sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking as serious crimes that communities are under-resourced to address; and strengthening legal protections and civil remedies for all victims, particularly those for whom accessing safety and justice is harder because of their race, ethnicity, immigration status, age, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

The Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) was established in 1995 to administer VAWA, and it has awarded more than \$6 billion to communities across the country since then. To mark 20 years since VAWA was first enacted, and hear directly from the communities that have benefited from its funding, OVW leadership and staff launched the VAWA 20-Year Anniversary Tour and visited grant recipients in 50 locations in 20 states between November 2014 and September 2015. We visited rural, urban, suburban, and tribal communities to witness the impact of VAWA funding on—and the role of a coordinated community response in—their efforts to combat domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. This report is a summary of those conversations, highlighting the lasting influence of VAWA on communities' ability to respond to sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence and stalking, and identifying persistent barriers and gaps in services.

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“I found a lot of help within the system during my comeback from [domestic violence]. Many kind, well-meaning people—police officers, advocates, prosecutors—all of whom I know have benefited from training and resources provided through VAWA. They were there to help me and I appreciate every single one of them.”

All of us at OVW are grateful to the communities that hosted the Tour, and awed by the dedication, collaboration, and innovation underlying each community’s approach to supporting victims and holding offenders accountable. Participants spoke candidly about what has worked and what they continue to struggle with in their efforts to prevent and respond to domestic and sexual violence. They described the lessons they have learned along the way, and the accomplishments and challenges they see on the horizon. These conversations were an opportunity for OVW to observe what VAWA has achieved in its first 20 years and the promise it holds for the future.

This report presents the five key messages from conversations at stops along the Tour, summarizing key points under each message. Themes from the conversations are presented in Tour participants’ own words throughout the document, but quotes are not attributed to speakers or communities to ensure confidentiality.

## **Working together—across systems and cultures—made the accomplishments to date possible, and it must remain the overarching strategy for combatting domestic and sexual violence.**

A key achievement of VAWA is the coordinated response it has prompted in communities across the nation. As one district attorney who participated in the Tour said, “dealing with [system] distinctions—like the difference between a felony and a misdemeanor—means nothing to women in crisis.” Any single piece of the complicated and disjointed network of law enforcement, courts, social services, healthcare, and nonprofit organizations in most any community can be difficult to navigate for a financially-secure person who is not abused. But for a person without resources whose safety is in jeopardy, navigating all of those systems at once is virtually impossible, and can be traumatic in and of itself.

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Therefore, OVW has funded—and requires under most of its grant programs—a coordinated community response to domestic and sexual violence as a way to make the whole of the systems’ response greater than the sum of its parts. A police chief explained that through VAWA funding, “we’ve evolved from siloed investigations and a few advocacy referrals to a robust collaboration and a coordinated model that involves detectives, prosecutors, system-based advocates and our OVW-funded, co-located, community-based advocates.” Similarly, an advocate in another community reported that “historically, the domestic violence community hadn’t really been on speaking terms with child welfare. But we asked them to join us in an effort to continue the momentum that’s been going on in this state related to the intersection of child welfare treatment and domestic violence.”

“One thing I learned over the years is that no matter how well I’ve done my job and served a victim, without the collaborative effort, we cannot make that victim safe.”

### **Working across systems**

Coordinated community responses vary in form, but some examples are Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs), which have been found to improve the quality of forensic evidence collection and healthcare for sexual assault victims, as well as increase prosecution rates; and Domestic Violence Fatality Review Teams, which identify how system deficiencies contribute to the circumstances surrounding domestic violence homicides, and correct those deficiencies to increase victims’ chances of survival.<sup>1</sup>

“We took the approach that we’re all planks in a bridge. It’s not like running a race. You don’t take a baton and pass it off with the victim. You all have to work together to get the victim from where they are to where they need to be.”

These and other models are forums for problem-solving, cross-training, and strengthening referral systems, but one of their most critical functions is to develop policies and procedures that streamline the community response. One Tour participant said: “We spent a lot of time developing

and putting standards and procedures in place, putting it in writing, so that we can all have something to follow.” That way, team members can hold each other accountable and ensure that the community response is consistent, even when

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<sup>1</sup> See the Recommended Resources list at the end of this report for sources of information on research and data.

there is staff turnover and new leadership. It is through the establishment of these policies and procedures that each system player solidifies their commitment not just to their own piece of the response, but to the shared goals of safety and justice.

### ***Working across cultures***

Some Tour participants recognized that having voices from culturally-specific and marginalized communities at the table is not just a way of enhancing their work, but is fundamental to its success. A Tour participant whose organization specializes in serving South Asian victims explained that “there are actually many cultures that we serve...we are like a bridge between the victims, the mainstream culture where they have to survive, and their own home cultures which are a mixing ground of where they're coming from and where they're heading to.”

“Trust of government agencies, especially law enforcement—it doesn't come easy. [Because of our collaboration with those agencies], we're not just sending clients to a 1-800 number, just sending them out the door, which is disorienting to an immigrant who is isolated...It's comforting for them to have a place where they can go...where they can speak; where they are heard.”

Culturally-specific organizations must be represented in discussions and decision-making related to sexual and domestic violence, not only to better equip communities to serve victims on the margins, but to prevent mainstream systems from causing further harm to people who may distrust those systems. “There are always unintended consequences in communities of color and in Native communities when you do any work in the criminal justice system, because of how the system is set up,” said a Tour participant who was concerned that a particular strategy, while successful in helping white women escape domestic violence, could be simultaneously alienating women of color and preventing them from seeking help from law enforcement. Participants at several stops on the Tour described how organizations that specifically serve women of color, LGBT survivors, and other underserved communities connect clients with “someone that looks like them, or that they can identify with,” which may be critical to the work of healing individual trauma in the context of historical and collective trauma. They talked about the importance of culturally-specific community-based organizations having access to VAWA funding to build capacity and leadership within marginalized communities to better address domestic and sexual violence, and to develop more comprehensive and culturally relevant prevention and response efforts.

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## This is about social justice.

Everybody has a basic human right to live a life free of violence and abuse. This notion is at the center of the movement to end domestic and sexual violence, and has always been essential to VAWA. In October 1992, a Senate Judiciary Committee majority staff report written in support of VAWA stated that “violence impairs some of the most fundamental liberties of life in America.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the

“There's a culture that permeates what we do. There's a sign on my wall for peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all people. That guides our work.”

different roles they play in responding to sexual and domestic violence, VAWA Tour participants representing law enforcement and advocacy described how their work is about helping people survive violence that often disproportionately affects those who have “complex and multiple trauma histories, on top of the fact that they can't get their basic needs met.”

There are statistics and research findings that begin to quantify the far-reaching and long-lasting impacts of violence and victimization,<sup>3</sup> but participants were clear that they have come to understand the issues, and know what to do, by listening to victims: “We talk with battered women and sexual assault survivors more than anyone...we have clients who we walk through the whole system. Wherever they're at—if they don't have a place to live, and they can't get a job or health insurance or daycare for their kids—we walk with them. We do what we can do.”

“Some of these cases are just horrific, something you never see in the news. And, you know, when I explain to my family and friends what I do, I say, a lot of it is just actually unspeakable. I wouldn't even put it into your head because it's too much to carry around.”

Participants at several Tour stops explained how doing their jobs well requires them to recognize that the “perfect victim” is a deceptive myth that—while perpetuated by the media and society at large—serves no use in the real world for helping victims and holding offenders accountable. One law enforcement investigator said, “I treat victims the way I

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<sup>2</sup> Majority Staff of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Violence Against Women: A Week in the Life of America*, S. Rep. 102-118 (1992).

<sup>3</sup> See the Recommended Resources list at the end of this report for sources of information on research and data.

want to be treated. I don't judge them. We're all human. So the bottom line is that we should want the best for each other, and this is my assignment.”

Finally, participants emphasized the need to bolster support for core services—housing, advocacy, and legal assistance—which are fundamental to safety and helping victims regain control of their lives. As the field evolves to respond to new challenges, participants cautioned against losing sight of the need for core services.

### **Housing**

Housing was identified as a significant, urgent shortage, particularly in communities where housing costs are high and space is limited. As one participant explained, “before someone decides that they are going to break free from a violent relationship, many times they want to know where they are going to go, how are they going to get there, and what effect is this going to have on them and their children?”

“We are recognizing now more than ever that racial justice and economic justice are at the foundation of all of our work. If we want to be ‘trauma-informed’, we also have to fight for social justice.”

Furthermore, housing programs that place unrealistic expectations and strict rules on residents can prevent victims from leaving and not returning to their abusers. One participant, highlighting the importance of the voluntary services model<sup>4</sup> supported by OVW Transitional Housing grants, said: “It's not just the money, it's the philosophical way in which OVW has given us the money that has been really critical.”

High housing costs impede organizations’ efforts to sustain their services in a climate of uncertain funding and budget cuts. Put simply by one participant, “housing is a huge, huge, huge problem.” A rare exception to this challenge was described by one participant, whose organization had a benefactor purchase a housing facility and is selling it back to the organization on land contract. The organization is now paying off the land contract at a significantly lower cost than it previously paid on a monthly lease. But this kind of scenario is uncommon: many victim services organizations have waitlists and struggle to be able to offer transitional housing that meets victims’ basic needs.

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<sup>4</sup> Voluntary services, as opposed to mandatory services, means that clients do not need to complete a program or take part in other services as a condition of receiving housing. Services are offered based on each person’s specific needs.

### ***Other services outside the justice system***

Several of the greatest needs cited by participants, other than housing, were legal assistance and mental health and substance abuse services. For many victims, the burden of their legal issues is a barrier to establishing safety and independence from their abusers. “I don't know what these women would do if we didn't have an attorney for them. They're so afraid to go and ask for help because of the immigration issues. So we understand their problem, we're able to let them know that you're a human being, you have legal rights,” said one participant.

Participants talked about how VAWA funding has helped them establish programs that serve higher numbers of victims with a wider range of services. “Services are now available in our community that were not here ten years ago. We've been able to change things and make things better for sexual assault survivors,” one participant said. On the other hand, participants also explained how economic instability has led to “closures of community resources, which have definitely affected the survivors in rural communities” and in cities hit hardest by industrial decline. As a result, there are fewer places where victim services organizations can refer people to for help with healthcare access, food security, and other matters of survival.

### ***Accessibility***

In addition to augmenting core services, participants described the need to ensure that services are physically, culturally, and linguistically accessible. Violence and abuse disproportionately affect people with disabilities and other marginalized people, yet the populations that suffer high rates of domestic and sexual violence are underrepresented among clients served by mainstream organizations. “When we started this project, very few women with disabilities were seeking services at rape crisis centers. There were no collaborative efforts between rape crisis centers and disability service agencies and self-advocates in this state,” said a Tour participant who leads an OVW-funded project designed to increase access to services for survivors with disabilities. “And now, nine years later, we've seen an increase of more than 250 percent in people with disabilities seeking services at our centers.”

“Disability humility means relying on people with disabilities as the experts, and listening to them, and taking what they tell us—trying to improve services using their guidance.”

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“[Native people] have been denied justice because of how the laws are set up. [VAWA] is truly an amazing thing...what it did for gay and lesbian people, and immigrants. This last incarnation of VAWA is going to make such a huge difference in what we can do.”

Participants at several Tour stops also talked about the significance of VAWA 2013’s broader inclusion of, and protections for, LGBT victims. A participant who runs a general support group for transgender people remarked that two-thirds of the group attendees said they had been sexually assaulted at some point in their lives, which mirrors national statistics on the higher rate of victimization among transgender people. “The sad part is that none of them felt that there was anywhere they could go,” the participant said. “I think that goes to the whole LGBT community—the importance of finding

supportive services and making sure there is funding out there specifically to help LGBT people.”

While participants cited funding limitations as a challenge, programs that have achieved greater accessibility understood that doing so is necessary and fundamental to their work. One participant, describing a court-based language access project in a metropolitan area where around 70 different languages are spoken, said: “We try to show that language access is not something extra that we’ll just try to implement. Language access comes attached to it, because that’s part of the population we’re serving.” Interpreters hired in that court are trained on domestic violence and sexual assault as part of a VAWA-funded project, so they can be better equipped to interpret for litigants who need to discuss sensitive and traumatic issues in court.

It is worth noting that conversations on the Tour in those places where people from underserved communities are meaningfully involved in discussions and decision-making were most candid about how the response falls short of physical and cultural accessibility in those places where people from underserved communities are meaningfully involved in discussions and decision-making. For instance, at one Tour stop where there is OVW-funded work underway to make victim services accessible, a participant was frank in admitting that historic courthouses in the region are notoriously inaccessible to people with physical disabilities, and efforts to fix this problem have been met with resistance. A participant at another site recalled her team’s approach to improving access for the Deaf community: “We started with these grand ideas that we were going to implement new policies. But we met some victims who set us straight, and so we went back and did a needs assessment. We interviewed people in the Deaf

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community, and asked them what they would do with the response we envisioned—what that response would be like for them. We did this before talking with other professionals.” Another participant acknowledged that, while some communities have established coordinated community responses that involve primarily mainstream organizations, there is much more work to be done in terms of making “marginalized communities, communities of color, LGBT communities, and people with disabilities really a part of the coordination.”

## It’s about procedural justice, too.

The effectiveness of the justice system is often measured using arrest and conviction rates. But arrests and convictions reveal little about what the justice system actually does in response to domestic and sexual violence, and they do not account for the experiences victims have when they report the crimes they have suffered. The unfortunate reality is that sometimes the system plainly fails,

“We heard over and over again that the first person that the survivor talks to can make a world of difference. So if that person is in the emergency room, or that person is a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner who is trained to deal with the impact of trauma on the victim, it could change everything moving forward.”

and sometimes the victim disengages, because it is not safe for her to face her abuser in court, or because the justice process can feel as traumatic as the violence itself, or for other reasons. And a rape conviction is rare, even in cases in which the justice system does its job exactly as it is supposed to. Therefore, enhancing procedural justice—or, to put it simply, treating people fairly regardless of how their cases turn out—is a goal that underlies much of the work funded by VAWA.

For victims of domestic and sexual violence, the notion of justice is far more complex than who goes to jail and for how long. As a prosecutor said in describing efforts to engage rape survivors in the justice process years after their sexual assault kits were shelved by law enforcement, sometimes “they have families and they’ve moved on. Their idea of success at this point might not be a conviction, and they might not want to go forward with a charge. As difficult as it is for me as a prosecutor to say, their idea of justice is different from what ours is.”

Participants shared numerous examples of how their communities have focused on making the justice process fairer. They explained how a court-based language

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access program provides skilled interpreters of many languages spoken in the community. A police chief in another community described how a strong referral system means that police “no longer say ‘We don’t have enough to move forward with your case,’ and hang up the phone. Instead we have people right in our office who are there to take the call and help” by updating victims on their cases and connecting them with services. In another community, one prosecutor handles each domestic violence case “from filing to adjudication, because that way they get to know not only the needs of the victim but also the family dynamic in which the violence happened,” and there are dedicated resources in the probation department for domestic violence cases.

“I want to make sure that whether you're out in the suburbs or inside the city, your cases are handled the same.”

Systems and services that account for cultural diversity, and respond competently to the different ways in which culture and victimization intersect in people’s lives, is also a critical element of ensuring justice. Service providers and justice system professionals need to “offer services in a respectful, non-judgmental way...when you do that, you increase safety because you engage people.” Participants at several Tour stops also described partnerships among law enforcement, mainstream services providers, and community-based programs that serve specific communities. For example, in developing a program to address the school-to-prison pipeline that leads to disproportionately high rates of incarceration of African Americans, Tour participants started with the question: “What can we do instead of shutting kids out and bringing them into the disciplinary system?” Recognizing that children’s exposure to violence predisposes them to behavior for which they are often just punished instead of helped, especially children of color, the program aims to “increase understanding in schools, and ask the right questions to identify things that are going on at home, and then be more trauma-informed” in the response.

Despite these accomplishments, there is much work that remains to be done in affording justice for victims. Many jurisdictions are trying to figure out how to ensure that sexual assault kits are regularly submitted to crime labs for testing, and follow-up investigations are timely and victim-centered. Other jurisdictions struggle to ensure that protection orders are consistently served and enforced. And participants in several communities described how the family court system can leave families more fragmented and, at times, in greater danger than they were before going to court, with protective parents losing custody of their children, visitation arrangements that do not account for the risk of escalating

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abuse after leaving an abusive relationship, and punitive measures taken against women who try to defend themselves against their abusers. One participant described how “we have this wonderful response set up in criminal court to hold offenders accountable, but then as soon as [the family] moves over to family court, [the violence] just—it doesn't seem to matter.”

## Teaching and learning are critical to sustaining what VAWA has achieved.

Participants described how they have learned a great deal over 20 years of implementing VAWA programs about strategies that best serve victims and hold offenders accountable. They also pointed to some gaps in knowledge that could be filled with training, and through research, data, and studies of the effectiveness of strategies that VAWA funds support.

### **Training**

VAWA funds have been used to develop training to help various professionals work effectively with victims and offenders. While, for example, law schools train people to practice law, and nursing schools train people to care for patients, attorneys and nurses need to be educated on the impact of violence on the lives of the clients and patients they serve. But—because the dynamics of domestic and sexual violence are rarely a significant piece of a person’s academic preparation for working in their field, and even seasoned professionals need ongoing training to maintain their expertise—it is important to provide practical training for everyone who encounters victims, whether they work in a police precinct, a courthouse, a hospital, or a school. One participant discussed her role as a trainer in faith communities as helping faith leaders be “aware of domestic violence so that the victim is not re-victimized in their faith community.”

“As police officers we’ve been trained on things that are mandated, but my department has always gone above and beyond. We’re engaged with our community. We try to do things out of the norm; find ways to do things differently. That can only happen by going to training and conferences, sharing with people, opening our minds to how things are done in other parts of the country and other parts of the world.”

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“This field—this demanding work—requires training and knowledge and wisdom that comes over time. And it’s a very hard way to make a living. We need to acknowledge that and find ways to support people who are committed to doing this.”

Some training is convened by national organizations that receive technical assistance funding from OVW, and grantees also train their staff and colleagues as part of their OVW projects. Participants described using grant funds to develop innovative approaches to training, like roll call videos for police officers and mock trials for attorneys. The purpose of these trainings is to help grantees align their work with recommended practices, and to maximize the impact of VAWA grant dollars. In many communities, cross-training is a way for each member of a SART or other multidisciplinary team to learn about what the

other does. A law enforcement leader said of a local domestic violence organization’s training for his officers: “It was a learning curve...to recognize the value in our partner agencies. We've come a long way. They did a great job training us, and we're very thankful for that.”

Participants explained that there is a significant need for basic training for all members of a coordinated community response team on the dynamics of sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence and stalking. One participant said that in her state, they “were not able to do anything for in-service police officers until STOP funds came along” through VAWA. While participants appreciate the opportunities OVW offers them for advanced and specific training, they emphasized that *basic* training for advocates and law enforcement is a major unmet need. High rates of turnover in some fields, combined with normal attrition of personnel over the years, mean that communities need to provide ongoing and frequent training to equip new staff with necessary skills and knowledge.

“We’re taking data from cases and looking at which offenders are most likely to re-offend. Now that we have a new data management system, we can have that data electronically and look at recidivism and lethality to get a better sense of the cases and offenders we need to target first.”

## **Knowledge**

Some Tour participants identified gaps in research as a barrier to doing their jobs as effectively as possible. People want to know what approaches work for

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preventing and responding to violence. “As somebody who consumes a lot of research and data in my field, looking at the larger context, I would really like some of that big-picture work done, because—as a practitioner—I would like to be able to tell funders that what we do is working.” When it comes to strategies they know are useful because they have seen them yield good results time and time again, people want to know the circumstances under which those things work. One participant remarked, “We see how [services] can be cathartic for the people we serve, and it would be helpful if we had more research around trying to determine why that is, or how that works.”

While research gaps were mentioned as a challenge, every community visited on the Tour offered examples of how they use data or existing research to guide their work. “We’re using timely and accurate information now to better allocate our resources,” reported a law enforcement representative who described new, more victim-centered approaches to monitoring domestic violence offenders and investigating sex trafficking in his city. In another community, where a multidisciplinary team was started 20 years ago with VAWA funding, a participant described how she and her colleagues “started looking at the research” and for the first time “brought national experts into our community to talk about the issues...that first conference did a lot more than just train people. It turned the corner for our collaborative work in terms of our visibility and our credibility in the community.”

## **The problems vary across regions and landscapes, as do the solutions.**

Conversations during the Tour highlighted how challenges to combatting domestic and sexual violence vary across regions, changing with the economic and political terrain. For example:

- On both coasts, commercial sex trafficking is a complex problem where, in some communities, “a lot of the work until now focused on the criminal response,” and trafficking victims were treated as offenders. Now, law enforcement and victim services providers are forging new partnerships “to create a comprehensive way” to identify sex trafficking victims and provide them with culturally-appropriate services.
- In rural areas, lack of transportation and housing are major barriers to helping victims, and there are practical limitations to protecting victim confidentiality in small towns, where everyone knows everyone and word

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travels fast. However, participants shared examples of how VAWA funding has helped them implement 24-hour advocacy covering a larger area, greater access to trained Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANEs) for medical care and evidence collection after a sexual assault, and supervised visitation centers where domestic violence victims can safely take their children to see the other parent for court-ordered visits.

- In tribal communities, participants described how VAWA-funded programs have supported core services for Native women that do not use “a cookie-cutter approach...because all the tribes in the state are unique from one another, as far as our cultural traditions, our histories, and our forms of government.” A participant referred to the special domestic violence criminal jurisdiction, authorized in VAWA 2013, as a “monumental” step in recognizing tribes’ sovereign power to administer justice in some cases in which a non-Indian offender assaults an Indian victim on tribal land. However, participants stressed that the exclusion of tribal justice agencies from accessing criminal justice databases<sup>5</sup> compromises their efforts to keep Native victims safe.
- In the most remote parts of our country—such as in Alaska and the territories—communities are often small and isolated. Resources are scarce, access to law enforcement assistance is limited, and the cost of basic necessities, like food, shelter, and fuel, are extremely high. In some Alaska Native Villages, residents rely on state troopers who can only get to the village by plane, meaning residents sometimes have to wait for days, or longer in bad weather, for law enforcement assistance. However, these close-knit communities, with leaders who prioritize issues of domestic violence and sexual assault, can foster the message that violence is unacceptable by implementing prevention and intervention programs in schools, healthcare settings, community centers, and elsewhere.

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<sup>5</sup> The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) maintains the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database, which houses 21 files that criminal justice agencies rely on to protect the public. Some states have laws or policies which, in effect, prohibit or limit tribes’ access to NCIC. In addition, the equipment and training needed to access these databases are cost-prohibitive for some tribes. Lack of access to these databases impairs tribes’ ability to issue and enforce protection orders, run fingerprints as part of employee background checks, etc. On November 5, 2015, the Department of Justice announced that 10 tribes will participate in an initial phase of the Tribal Access Program for National Crime Information (TAP), which was established to provide federally recognized tribes the ability to access and exchange data with national crime information databases for both civil and criminal purposes. TAP is a promising step towards broader access to crime information for tribes.

Sustained with VAWA funding, the coordinated community response at each Tour stop relies not just on participants' professional expertise, but on the team's collective knowledge about the communities they serve. Participants at several Tour stops talked about how collaboration between law enforcement, domestic violence and sexual assault service organizations, culturally-specific organizations, and healthcare agencies, and community-based organizations is critical to their community's efforts to identify and address issues like elder abuse in nursing homes, improving the response and support for victims of sexual assault, or providing language access and culturally appropriate services to new immigrants.



The Violence Against Women Act has transformed the way domestic and sexual violence are handled and talked about in the United States. At the national level, it sustains funding streams and authorizes programs and policies to improve the response to these crimes. At the state level, it fills resource gaps and supports coordinated solutions, from state task forces and initiatives to standard policies and protocols. And in local communities throughout the country, VAWA has literally opened doors for millions of people who have suffered violence

“I made a deal with God that I would do everything in my power to help others to not ever feel so helpless, if I could just make it out of this. I survived and I’m here today to follow through on my end of the deal.”

and needed somewhere safe to go for help. In every state and territory in the nation, because of VAWA and other funding streams, there is a shelter where a domestic violence victim can take her children in the middle of the night when she knows it might be her only chance of seeing another day. Because of VAWA, a rape victim can go to the hospital to get urgent medical care after an assault, regardless of whether she or he has decided to involve the police. Because of VAWA, an immigrant victim who is afraid to report a crime of domestic violence or sexual assault to the police for fear of being deported can seek protection under a U-Visa. Because of VAWA, survivors struggling with the deeply personal work of healing from abuse can find a trusted advocate at a culturally-specific organization. Because of VAWA and the training and awareness-building efforts it has supported over two decades, there are more people in the justice system and in schools, hospitals, places of worship—and in families and friendship circles—who can respond with compassion and competence when someone discloses sexual assault or domestic violence.

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VAWA makes vital services possible in some places where other funding is insufficient or nonexistent. However, VAWA’s effectiveness relies on the capacity and commitment of community members to develop a coordinated response to help victims and hold offenders accountable. Each community visited as part of the Tour described how it has used VAWA funding to tailor approaches to unique local strengths and challenges.

This report does not fully capture the extent to which the visited communities—and thousands more that were not visited—have helped victims survive domestic and sexual violence. Instead, it reflects the five key messages OVW heard during the Tour, and it offers a snapshot of the impact of 20 years of investing in solutions to domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking.

We’ve come a long way...	...and we have a ways to go.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helping victims and their children survive and thrive, through advocacy and other services</li> <li>• Improving the criminal justice response to domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking</li> <li>• Coordinating among systems and collaborating across disciplines</li> <li>• Training people on how to respond effectively to domestic and sexual violence, at work and in their communities</li> <li>• Maximizing limited funding for core victim services, like housing, legal assistance, and advocacy</li> <li>• Strengthening legal protections and civil remedies for victims of the four crimes</li> <li>• Combatting misinformation, bias, and victim-blaming attitudes</li> <li>• Developing innovative solutions to complex and emerging problems, such as specialized courts and law enforcement units, risk and lethality assessments, and trauma-informed service models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting the basic needs of all victims for food, shelter, health, and safety</li> <li>• Making services accessible and culturally-relevant, largely through stronger partnerships with experts from different cultures and the disability community</li> <li>• Ensuring equal access to justice for women of color, Native women, LGBT people, immigrants, people with disabilities, youth, older individuals, and male victims</li> <li>• Addressing the intersections among complex trauma, multiple victimizations, mental health and substance abuse, and poverty</li> <li>• Providing basic and ongoing training for people who respond to domestic and sexual violence, especially law enforcement</li> <li>• Addressing the indisputable link between access to firearms and the prevalence of domestic violence-related homicide and familicide in the United States</li> <li>• Generating better research, evaluation, and data that are presented in ways that are accessible to practitioners</li> <li>• Preventing violence, not just through risk reduction, but through eliminating its root causes</li> <li>• Helping victims pursue alternative paths to safety, other than the criminal justice system and shelter services</li> </ul>

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## Appendix A: Stops on the VAWA 20 Tour

**October 30, 2014**

Brooklyn, NY

**November 20-21, 2014**

Oklahoma

**December 1, 2014**

Maryland

**December 8, 2014**

San Diego, CA

**January 20, 2015**

Travis County, TX

**January 28, 2015**

Saint Paul, MN

**January 29, 2015**

Duluth, MN

**February 9-10, 2015**

Puerto Rico

**February 19, 2015**

Memphis, TN

**February 25-26, 2015**

Idaho

**March 11, 2015**

Tulalip Tribes of  
Washington

**March 11, 2015**

King County, WA

**March 12, 2015**

Multnomah County, OR

**March 30, 2015**

Monroe, LA

Bastrop, LA

**March 31, 2015**

Georgia

**April 1, 2015**

New Orleans, LA

Lafourche Parish, LA

**April 6, 2015**

Ketchikan Indian  
Community (Alaska)

**April 7, 2015**

Juneau, AK

**April 8, 2015**

Organized Village of  
Kake (Alaska)

**April 9, 2015**

Maniilaq Association –  
Noatak (Alaska)

**April 10, 2015**

Native Village of  
Barrow (Alaska)

**April 15, 2015**

Contra Costa County,  
CA

**April 16, 2015**

Alameda County, CA

**May 11-12, 2015**

Michigan

**May 27, 2015**

Mississippi Band of  
Choctaw Indians  
(Mississippi)

**June 10-11, 2015**

Vermont

**June 16, 2015**

Reno-Sparks Indian  
Colony (Nevada)

**June 17, 2015**

Washoe Tribe of  
Nevada and California  
(Nevada)

**June 30 - July 1, 2015**

Illinois

**August 17-18, 2015**

Iowa

**September 29, 2015**

Penobscot Nation  
(Maine)

**September 30, 2015**

Passamaquoddy  
Pleasant Point (Maine)

Indian Township  
Passamaquoddy  
(Maine)

**October 1, 2015**

Houlton Band of  
Maliseet Indians  
(Maine)

Aroostook Band of  
Micmacs (Maine)

## Appendix B: Recommended Resources

### ***Technical Assistance Resource Library***

OVW provides funding for national training and technical assistance providers. These organizations routinely present and publish information, tools, resources, and promising practices focused on how to best address domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, stalking, trafficking, and other violent crimes. Many of those resources can be found on the organizations' websites and in a library of OVW-funded products, found here: <http://ta2ta.org/library.html>.

*The following resources in this appendix are published and/or maintained by the federal government.*

### **Selected Recent Governmental Reports**

[Not Alone: The First Report of the White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault](#) (2014)

This report is the first set of action steps and recommendations released by the White House regarding sexual assault on campus.

[1 is 2 Many: Twenty Years Fighting Violence against Women and Girls](#) (2014)

This report summarizes how VAWA has helped to change the United States by increasing accountability for domestic and sexual violence and strengthening access to services. The appendix provides details from over 100 programs throughout the country that VAWA has helped to inspire and support.

[Report on the Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence](#) (2012)

This report presents the findings and policy recommendations of the Task Force, and serves as a blueprint for preventing and reducing the negative effects of children's exposure to violence.

[Rape in the United States: The Chronic Failure to Investigate Rape Cases](#) (2010)

Proceedings of a September 2010 hearing of the Senate Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs, about widespread criminal justice system failure to investigate sexual assault reports.

## Selected OVW Publications

### [2014 Biennial Report to Congress on the Effectiveness of VAWA Programs](#)

In response to the statutory requirement of Section 1003 (b) of the Violence Against Women Act of 2000 (VAWA 2000), the Attorney General is required to report biennially on the effectiveness of activities carried out with grant funds, including the number of persons served and the number of persons seeking services who could not be served.

*Additional reports to Congress can be found [here](#).*

### [Federal Workplace Responses to Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, and Stalking](#) (2013)

On November 19, 2013, the Deputy Attorney General issued a Department of Justice (DOJ) Policy on Federal Workplace Responses to Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, and Stalking. This is an internal DOJ policy, binding only on DOJ employees and contractors, but can serve as a model for other employers.

### [Recommendations for Administrators of Prisons, Jails, and Community Confinement Facilities for Adapting the U.S. Department of Justice's \*A National Protocol for Sexual Assault Medical Forensic Examinations, Adults/Adolescents\*](#) (2013)

The Confinement SAFE Protocol is designed as a guide to assist administrators of prisons, jails, and community confinement facilities in drafting or revising protocols for an immediate response to incidences and reports of sexual assault. It also identifies issues and recommendations for administrators of lockups and juvenile corrections. This guide extends the efforts of the PREA Commission and the Department of Justice to address an immediate response to sexual assault in correctional environments by offering guidance on how to comply with the PREA Standards, follow a uniform evidence protocol and coordinate response activities, and help correctional facilities strive towards the standards in the SAFE Protocol.

### [National Protocol for Sexual Assault Medical Forensic Examinations](#) (2013)

Released in April 2013 by the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) this revised edition of the protocol maintains the same commitments of standardization and quality as the first SAFE Protocol, but is updated to reflect current technology. It also increases the emphasis on victim-centered care and includes additional information reflecting changes from the Violence Against Women Act of 2005. OVW developed a [short fact sheet](#) (PDF) and [long fact sheet](#) (PDF) on the updated protocol.

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[National Protocol for Sexual Abuse Medical Forensic Examinations, Pediatric \(2016\)](#)

The *National Protocol for Sexual Abuse Medical Forensic Examinations, Pediatric* (Pediatric SAFE Protocol) offers guidance for multidisciplinary agencies that coordinate with health care providers to facilitate medical care that addresses both the acute and longer term health needs these children face. The goal of the Pediatric SAFE Protocol is to provide evidence-based, trauma-informed recommendations for health care providers who conduct sexual abuse medical forensic examinations of children.

[Report on September 2011 Sexual Violence Research Roundtable](#)

An OVW roundtable brought together experts on sexual violence, representing fields including research and academia, victim advocacy, law enforcement, prosecution, the judiciary, and health care; as well as survivors of sexual violence. Participants identified new and emerging priorities for research on the criminal justice system's response to sexual assault and generated ideas for bridging the gap between research and practice. A [short summary](#) (PDF) and [full report](#) (PDF) of the meeting are available.

[Sexual Violence in the United States: Summary of the Roundtable Proceedings \(2010\)](#)

In October 2010, OVW collaborated with the White House Council on Women and Girls and the White House Advisor on Violence Against Women to host a Roundtable on Sexual Violence in the United States. Participants represented many disciplines and also included survivors. The discussion focused on barriers to advancing the issue of sexual violence, such as lack of community engagement which stymies public discourse, the need for more effective training, and gaps in research.

[Civil Protection Orders: A Guide for Improving Practice \(2010\)](#)

Recognizing the need to promote effective issuance, service, and enforcement of protection orders, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, in partnership with OVW and the National Center on Protection Orders and Full Faith and Credit, created this streamlined guide. It provides a fundamental understanding of the values and practices necessary for a more effective civil protection order system.

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## **Selected Sources of Federal-funded Statistics and Research**

### [National Institute of Justice, Crime, Violence, and Victimization Research Division's Compendium of Research on Violence Against Women, 1993-2014](#)

Lists and briefly describes all projects funded under [NIJ](#)'s Violence Against Women and Family Violence Program.

### [CrimeSolutions.gov](#)

CrimeSolutions.gov uses research to rate the effectiveness of programs and practices in achieving criminal justice-related outcomes in order to inform practitioners and policymakers about what works, what doesn't, and what's promising.

### [National Archive of Criminal Justice Data \(NACJD\)](#)

NACJD facilitates research in criminal justice and criminology, through the preservation, enhancement, and sharing of computerized data resources; through the production of original research based on archived data; and through workshops in quantitative analysis of crime and justice data.

### [National Crime Victimization Survey \(NCVS\)](#)

NCVS is the primary source of information on criminal victimization in the United States.

### [National Criminal Justice Reference Service \(NCJRS\)](#)

NCJRS is a federally funded resource offering justice and drug-related information to support research, policy, and program development worldwide.

### [National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey \(NISVS\)](#)

Housed at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), NISVS provides statistics on the national prevalence of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and stalking among women and men in the United States.

### [Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics](#)

Maintains statistics on various crime and criminal justice topics in the United States.

### [Uniform Crime Reports \(FBI\)](#)

Collects and publishes national crime statistics for the Summary Reporting System and National Incident-based Reporting System (NIBRS).

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