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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS NEED SUPPORT AT STATE LEVEL

Rep. Scott Conklin

Domestic violence is a problem that affects people from all walks of life. The abuse, both physical and emotional, creates a lasting burden on its victims, no matter their economic background, age, ethnicity or gender.

Too often, this problem goes unchecked. We must correct this. Part of breaking the silence includes creating awareness for programs aimed at helping domestic abuse victims.

In Pennsylvania there are a host of helpful places a victim can turn to: 24-hour hotlines, individual and group counseling, court and emergency room assistance, shelters and safe homes, and state assistance programs to help compensate victims financially with hospital costs and destruction of property as a result of domestic violence.

I am thankful for these programs because many of them undoubtedly help domestic violence victims in Centre County. For some, that help is a lifeline and helping hand when there's nowhere else to turn.

Victim assistance is just part of the solution. As a state lawmaker, I realize the need to be proactive, not reactive in the fight against domestic violence.

The unfortunate victims of domestic violence need many advocates in state government. Since I was elected to serve, I have

been one of them. My record of support for victims of domestic violence is strong and consistent. During my tenure as a state legislator, I have sponsored a number of legislative initiatives to help women, particularly teens and young women, to recognize the early signs of abuse and become armed with the information they need to leave an unhealthy relationship. In addition, I am diligently working to expand protections for abuse victims who live in fear of being repeatedly victimized by their abuser.

Domestic violence is most commonly associated with abuse inside a home. The definition of domestic violence is outlined as behaviors used by one person in a relationship to control the other. Domestic violence knows no boundaries; it can happen outside of four walls and a picket fence. Sadly, it does. It happens between partners married and not married, those living together, separated or dating.

Shortly after being sworn in as a state legislator, I introduced a bill to curb sexual violence on the campuses of Pennsylvania's colleges and universities. The first few months of college are the most dangerous for new students due to the availability of drugs and alcohol, the absence of parental supervision and a lack of education and awareness about sexual assault.

The bill was aimed to require colleges in Pennsylvania to establish educational programs to provide discussion on various topics relating to sexual violence, including educating students about consent, the relation between drugs, alcohol and sexual violence, and the possibility of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

The legislation was also designed to establish a cohesive support network for victims among members of campus security, local law enforcement, the campus health center, women's center, rape crisis center and counseling services.

The statistics clearly show that the new freedom college provides students only months out of high school makes many far more susceptible to sexual violence, especially when one figures in the influence of alcohol and drugs. We need programs that will educate them about the warning signs so they can recognize when

something they are engaging in could lead to them becoming a victim and help them avoid an attack before it starts.

It is likewise important to make it clear to students when their own interaction with another student may be approaching what is considered sexual violence.

The programs proposed in my bill were designed to teach first-time students about the myths and truths concerning rape and sexual assault, to understand what constitutes rape or sexual assault, and create their own risk reduction strategy, as well as make students aware of options for individuals who are victimized. This initiative was well received by my colleagues, as it overwhelmingly passed the House of Representatives with a vast majority of state lawmakers voting in favor of the plan.

In addition, I was the author of a bill aimed to curb teen dating violence that was named the "Demi Brae Cuccia Law" after a Monroeville teen who lost her life as a result of dating violence.

Demi was a beautiful young lady, a high school cheerleader, a typical 16-year-old who idolized Jessica Simpson and one day planned on becoming a doctor or lawyer. On the day after her 16th birthday, Demi's ex-boyfriend, who had a reputation of being controlling and possessive, attacked Demi inside her home and fatally stabbed her.

Unfortunately, Demi's picture is now one that serves as a symbol of the tragic consequences dating violence can have. Oftentimes violence doesn't begin until a relationship has ended. Too many teens have been victims, and sadly too many have unnecessarily lost their life.

The statistics are alarming. In fact, teen girls face relationship violence three times more than adult women. That is why I introduced a bill that was designed to integrate teen dating violence education into middle and high school curriculums, by requiring school districts to develop an anti-dating violence policy that could be taught in health class, for example.

Teens need to know that if someone is texting them constantly and it feels uncomfortable, it's wrong; if they're being yelled at or pushed or hit, it's wrong. The numbers are staggering when you hear of students as young as sixth-graders have reported being hit by a boyfriend or girlfriend. It was imperative to me to have the tools in place so when teens are looking to talk, there is someone there to listen.

The Cuccia family joined me in my effort to pass this legislation to help raise awareness of teen dating violence issues. After it cleared the hurdle of the House, during one of the news conferences we held to call on the Senate to also pass the bill, Demi's father, Dr. Gary Cuccia, said: "My daughter was experiencing teen dating violence, we were all just unaware. Getting an education on the dangers of teen dating violence is the best defense we can offer our children. I stand with Representative Conklin to urge the state Senate to pass this bill so no other family has to go through the same agony mine has."

After the bill passed overwhelmingly in the House, it stalled in the state Senate. However, part of it was amended into the 2010 school code that passed alongside that year's state budget.

The language adopted in the school code was scaled back from my original proposal to recommend schools take up a dating violence education and response program rather than mandating them to do it. The law also instructed the state's Education Department to develop a model dating-violence complaint form to be distributed to Pennsylvania's public schools.

Even though I still think the dangers of teen dating violence and domestic violence are something that all young people need to be educated about, I am pleased that we were able to get to the point of passing a similar law.

And while domestic violence isn't confined to the home, in a perfect world that is where the education and awareness should start. In that perfect world, every family would eat dinner together every night of the week and discuss the tough issues. But the reality of the situation is that we have kids whose parents are unable to be there for them, kids whose parents aren't around to teach these things. These

things, like dating violence, don't always get discussed. That is one of the main reasons why I am pleased to say that we took a step forward in raising awareness of this issue so we don't lose one more young life unnecessarily.

I am continuing to fight against domestic violence by working to add protections to the current law for victims of abuse.

I originally introduced such legislation during the 2013-14 legislative session, and have reintroduced it in January, following the 2013 murder of Centre County resident Traci Ann Raymond Miscavish. Two months prior to her death Traci was granted a protection from abuse order, commonly known as a PFA, from her husband. Traci had a PFA against her husband yet lived in fear of him. Sadly those fears were valid, as he violated the order, tracked her down at work and took her life and his own.

My legislation would allow electronic GPS monitoring of an alleged abuser in certain domestic violence cases. Under the bill, courts could grant the monitoring in abuse cases while a PFA is in effect.

A PFA bans a suspected abuser from harassing, stalking, threatening or further abusing a protected person. Under Pennsylvania law, abuse is defined as causing or attempting to cause bodily harm, stalking, sexual assault, false imprisonment, and physical or sexual abuse of a minor.

Twenty-one other states, including neighboring Ohio, permit the use of electronic monitoring devices in domestic violence cases. We've got to get on board. We need to give domestic violence victims more peace of mind while expanding tools for law enforcement so they can get in front of abusers who try to break the law.

If this bill had been law in 2013, Traci's death might have been prevented. What happened to her was a tragedy. Passing this bill would be in her honor and send a message to domestic violence victims that we are listening to their calls for protection.

As a member of the state legislature, I am proud to be part of a body that can make laws against domestic violence. Just as the victim assistance programs, my efforts are one more part of the solution. It's going to take more than legislation. It's going to take education and empowerment, and it's going to take all of us being proactive. We can be proactive by implementing programs in our schools, like the teen dating violence program, and in community centers and churches. Stopping an abusive relationship before it starts is the ultimate goal and I believe if we continue to work together we can achieve that.

Throughout my legislative career, I have dedicated a good deal of time and effort to ensuring the safety and well-being of women – teens and adults alike - particularly the unfortunate victims of rape and domestic violence. I stand behind my accomplishments and will continue to place a high priority on this issue.

Rep. Scott Conklin represents the 77th Legislative District within the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. He serves constituents within the Centre Region who reside in Philipsburg, State College borough, Huston and Rush townships, and portions of Ferguson and Patton townships. Rep. Conklin is currently serving his fifth term upon taking the oath of office on Jan. 6, 2015. More information: www.pahouse.com/Conklin.