

American Overseas Victims of Domestic Violence in VAWA 4

Inclusion of Americans Overseas in the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act

The current reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA 4) is the first piece of legislation that will address American overseas victims of domestic violence and will create measures of outreach, prevention, intervention, and coordinated community responses to this severely underserved population of Americans. Until recently, this population has lacked national recognition and organizations serving this population have faced severe funding deficits. Please support the passage of the reauthorization of VAWA while ensuring that Americans Overseas are included.

Approximately 99,000 American women are victims of domestic violence in foreign countries

American citizens living in foreign countries are not included in demographic census data; however, the U.S. State Department estimates there are approximately 5.25 million Americans living abroad. If these Americans were in one state, it would be the 17th largest state in the US. The CDC-funded National Violence Against Women Survey (Tjaden & Thonnes, 2000) found that approximately 1.9% of American women indicated they had been victims of intimate partner violence in the past 12 months. Based on these estimates, more than 99,750 adult overseas American citizens may be victims of domestic violence each year.

There is a shortage of services to American domestic violence survivors in foreign countries

For Americans being abused abroad there is an immense gap in defined services available. The U.S. embassies and consulates have significant organizational variations between individual locations regarding the domestic violence resources available, means to address victims' needs, and knowledge of local resources among individual staff members. Embassies provide swift emergency crisis relief for victims of crimes overseas, yet are unable to deliver a holistic continuum of domestic violence prevention and mediation services due to structural limitations. Additionally, American survivors find they cannot access national domestic violence services while abroad and face addition barriers to services when they return to the U.S. because the incidents of abuse occurred in foreign countries.

American survivors face unique and specific barriers while living abroad

Barriers for survivors living in foreign countries include language, culture, and restrictive marital and child custody laws. In many foreign countries there are not established networks or coalitions to provide advocacy and referrals. Domestic violence survivors are often isolated, unaware of their status, and financially insecure. If a survivor chooses to flee and return to the U.S. there are myriad barriers she faces including homelessness, inability to obtain alimony or child support, and protracted family law cases.