



New Wisconsin cell phone law sends message on domestic violence

Victims can now retain phone access without abuser's approval

by Wisconsin Rep. Jessie Rodriguez (Rep.Rodriguez@legis.wisconsin.gov)

Our nation's most difficult problems often require a most difficult solution. The issue of domestic violence is no different.

Imagine a scenario in which a young woman, married with children, makes the incredibly difficult decision to leave an abusive relationship. After securing her safety, finances and shelter (among other factors) for her and her children, she discovers that yet another barrier stands between her and freedom from her abuser: her cell phone plan.

Prior to April 2016, in Wisconsin, as in many other states across the country, wireless service plans such as the typical shared family plan could not be separated without prior consent from the primary account holder. This means a victim would not only be required to abandon her cell phone but would also need to acquire a new number.

Sadly, this is not an uncommon experience for someone trying to escape an abusive relationship.

Domestic abuse is not a new problem plaguing our society. In fact, the common occurrence of and statistics surrounding domestic abuse are staggering.

Statistics understate deadly reality

In Wisconsin alone, each year at least 30,000 instances of domestic violence are reported to law enforcement, according to the Wisconsin Governor's Council on Domestic Abuse. The numbers soar even higher when one considers that most incidents of domestic violence are never reported.

The horrifying consequences of domestic abuse account for dozens of deaths each year and can leave lifelong scars for survivors.

Nationwide, according to *NOMORE.org*, approximately "12.7 million people are physically abused, raped or stalked" in one year. According to the site, that figure equals the total population of Los Angeles and New York City combined, and even worse, the abuser is often someone the victim knows.

For someone trying to escape an abusive relationship, there is nothing worse than encountering subsequent barriers after making the brave decision to leave.

With my colleague Sen. Roger Roth and wireless provider AT&T Wisconsin providing the impetus for the bill, we authored Assembly Bill 767, legislation that allows victims of domestic

Estimated lifetime prevalence of rape, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner in Midwestern states

State of victim's residence	% reporting as victims	
	Women	Men*
Illinois	37.7%	25.7%
Indiana	40.4%	26.8%
Iowa	31.3%	19.6%
Kansas	29.0%	23.0%
Michigan	41.8%	23.0%
Minnesota	33.7%	23.5%
Nebraska	38.5%	26.1%
North Dakota	25.3%	26.1%
Ohio	35.6%	30.0%
South Dakota	33.7%	30.2%
Wisconsin	32.4%	23.0%
United States	35.6%	28.5%

* Most of the violence reported by men was physical violence; 2.1% of men, overall, experienced stalking by an intimate partner.

Source: "The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (2010)", U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

violence in our state to have a shared wireless service plan separated without approval from the primary account holder.

Cell phones have become an essential tool in our everyday lives, containing phone numbers, addresses and even personal banking information. Having to purchase a new phone and number is an unnecessary hurdle for a victim trying to escape an abusive relationship.

In early April, Gov. Scott Walker signed several new laws, including Wisconsin Act 353 (AB 767), that strengthen protections for victims of domestic abuse and increase funding for victim protection programs in the state.

The new laws provide needed protections for victims, but legislation should not be the only way to combat domestic violence.

Powerful campaigns have been waged recently to raise awareness to end domestic abuse.

Prominent NFL players, for example, partnered with NO MORE, releasing an ad campaign called "NFL Players Say No More." The campaign

features well-recognized NFL stars with somber expressions, each saying "no more," directly into a camera.

These public service announcements began airing during televised football games and inside stadiums during the 2014 season.

A similar ad called "Text Talk" aired during the Super Bowl this past February. The NO MORE campaign has developed into a nationwide effort featuring athletes, celebrities and well-known figures joining the cause.

Problem requires community response

Partnerships with prominent organizations such as the NFL and NO MORE are a key component in the fight to end domestic abuse.

U.S. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan once said that two crucial elements to resolving our most persistent issues are people and local communities — communities with a passionate group of stakeholders.

Government should carry the torch. But it only makes perfect sense to bring in a variety of people, community members and experts who have experience successfully solving these issues.

Perhaps government can be the catalyst to bring these groups to the table, where ideas and strategies can be shared to develop an effective plan that will eradicate domestic violence.

A number of invested stakeholders came to the table before AB 767 was drafted in the Wisconsin Legislature. Nonprofit organizations such as End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin, as well as major cell phone carriers, contributed to the final legislation. The president of AT&T Wisconsin even joined me to testify on behalf of the legislation.

Domestic violence is a chronic social issue that continues to plague our country. The solution will not be easy, but it is time we develop an inclusive, effective strategy to stem the problem and bring a voice to those who have been suppressed.

We owe it to the victims, those women, men and children who have had their lives altered by the cowardice of an abuser. ★

Rep. Jessie Rodriguez, a Republican from Oak Creek, was first elected to the Wisconsin Assembly in 2013.

Submissions welcome

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