

By Lauren Kirkwood and Anamika Roy

January 23, 2013

Washington, DC

The Maryland delegation put women's issues at the forefront of its agenda Wednesday with the reintroduction of both the Violence Against Women Act and the Paycheck Fairness Act.

Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., took the lead in the Senate, reintroducing the VAWA on Tuesday, while House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer, D-Mechanicsville, publicized the bill at a news conference on Wednesday. Mikulski also reintroduced the Paycheck Fairness Act Wednesday.

"This is not just a women's issue; this is not just a men's or a children's issue," said Hoyer. "This is an issue of safety; it's an issue of security; it's an issue of health."

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., flanked by more than 20 representatives, most of them women, announced the reintroduction of the bill, emphasizing the need to ensure all women have access to resources to protect them from abuse and violence.

The act provides support and protection for victims of violence, and funds training so law enforcement can better respond to instances of sexual and domestic violence.

The legislation has 158 co-sponsors in the House and has bipartisan support in the Senate, according to Pelosi. Representatives were optimistic the bill would gain the necessary Republican support to pass both chambers.

"This is our call to action, our clarion call to action, to House GOP leadership that we're ready and prepared to make this a priority," said Rep. Gwen Moore, D-Wis.

The reauthorization of VAWA, which includes increased protection for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered workers, as well as undocumented victims of violence and Native Americans, passed in the Senate last year 68-31, with the support of 15 Republicans and every female senator.

"This bill meets a compelling human need. It helps families, it helps police officers and it helps our communities," Mikulski said in a statement. "We need to empower victims and help prevent domestic violence and violence against women, whether it's a stranger who perpetrates danger and despicable acts, or in their own home."

House Republicans objected to some of the Senate bill's provisions, particularly the increase in the number of visas for undocumented immigrants, and when those could not be resolved, the bill expired for the first time since it was passed in 1994.

Hoyer, the father of three daughters, said he couldn't imagine any House Republican stating that any victim of violence is not entitled to the same protection under the law.

"It is never too late to do the right thing," Hoyer said. "Domestic violence prevention has always been an area where Democrats and Republicans work together."

Mikulski also reintroduced the Paycheck Fairness Act Wednesday, which allows employees to challenge pay discrimination. The measure expands the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, the first bill President Barack Obama signed as president, which increased the statute of limitations for pay discrimination.

In Maryland, women make 86 cents for every dollar paid to men, according to the National Partnership for Women and Families. This is above the national average, which is 77 cents for every dollar.

The Paycheck Fairness Act passed the House in January 2009, but failed to pass the Senate.

Under this law, employers must show pay differences are based on merit and not gender, and women employees can seek punitive damages for past discrimination and get more compensation. The bill also introduces a grant program to strengthen salary negotiations for women.