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A Secret Weapon In Fighting Domestic Violence

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True or False: There is a proven way to dramatically reduce rates of domestic violence, yet this method is largely ignored by the public and private sectors.

True or False: Reducing the prevalence of domestic violence can save the state significant sums on safety net spending.

Both statements are true.

Research shows that the availability of legal aid for survivors significantly lowers rates of domestic violence and reduces spending on state-funded support services related to intimate partner violence. As we see more partnerships among public and private sector leaders to end intimate partner violence — such as the recent initiative backed by Attorney General Maura Healey and New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft — we need to include access to civil legal aid in the discussion. Women living in households in the lowest income brackets are seven times more likely to experience intimate partner violence than women in higher-earning. In other words, the women most likely to need potentially life-saving legal counsel are the least likely to be able to afford it.

In 2000, researchers at the Carnegie Mellon Census Research Data Center were intrigued by a U.S. Department of Justice report noting that rates of domestic violence had significantly declined during the 1990s. Additional data from the National Crime Victimization Survey and the U.S. Census showed that access to civil legal aid was a primary reason for the decline. In a study of these data published in *Contemporary Economic Policy* in 2003, the researchers concluded that access to protective orders from courts; legal assistance with child custody and support; divorce and property distribution; and domestic violence-related legal disputes around immigration, housing, and public benefits help survivors over the long-term, because these services provide them with “real, long-term alternatives to their relationships.”

Once freed from abusive situations, survivors accrue both short- and long-term financial gain. For example, their earning power increases, as they are more productive at work and miss fewer days on the job. In fact, a study by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) puts the annual number of lost workdays because of intimate partner violence at about eight million, for a total cost of \$1.34 billion a year. Survivors who have successfully left their abusers also spend less on medical treatment for physical injuries and mental health care services. This is no small consideration given that the CDC estimates that the annual cost of medical and mental health services related to intimate partner violence is close to \$6.4 billion.

Our communities also benefit when civil legal aid is available to help women escape their abusive relationships. A recent report from New York University School of Law's Institute for Policy Integrity (IPI), "Supporting Survivors: The Economic Benefits of Providing Civil Legal Assistance to Survivors," shows that reducing domestic violence can "save large amounts of public money that would otherwise be spent on responding to domestic violence through law enforcement, health care, and homeless services," among other public programs. The report cites independent analyses done for Massachusetts showing that the state saves approximately \$8 million dollars annually in averted health care costs related to intimate partner violence as a result of civil legal assistance for survivors.

If we are serious about ending the scourge of domestic violence in this country, as we should be, we must use every tool at our disposal. And the numbers speak for themselves: it's hard to find a more effective tool than civil legal aid.

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