

Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence
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To: Members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety
Date: March 10th, 2021
From: Jenna Gormal, Director of Public Policy and Systems Change, End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin
Re: AB 83 – Relating to Stalking

Chairperson Spiros and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Assembly Bill 83, the bill regarding stalking and electronic communication.

My name is Jenna Gormal, Director of Public Policy and Systems Change, and I represent End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin (End Abuse), the statewide voice for survivors of domestic violence and the membership organization representing local domestic violence victim service providers in all of Wisconsin's 72 counties. I would like to express our support of this bill amending the definition of stalking to explicitly include electronic communication and internet comments.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention conducted the most recent National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey State Report from 2010 to 2012. On the very first page about stalking, researchers at the CDC wrote "advances in technology and social networking have created more choices for harassing and threatening victims."¹ 7 years and countless technological advances later, the prevalence of electronic stalking is doubtless higher, but the statistics reported from 2012 are still sobering. 1 in 6 women – over 19 million nationally – experienced stalking resulting in a fear of physical harm or death in her lifetime.² The most commonly reported stalking tactic was electronic; 76% of these women received unwanted phone calls and text messages, and 29% of stalking victims reported unwanted emails or social media posts within the past year.³ 12 of these 19 million women were stalked by current or former intimate partners.⁴

Between 2000 and 2019, 811 lives were lost to domestic violence in Wisconsin. 811. That we know of.

Each year, End Abuse drafts a Wisconsin Domestic Violence Homicide Report. In addition to detailing these incidents of domestic violence homicide, the reports have analyzed trends seen across the state. In every year of the report, stalking is found as a trend indicator of subsequent homicide.⁵

¹<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS-StateReportBook.pdf>, pg. 85.

²<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS-StateReportBook.pdf>, pg. 85.

³<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS-StateReportBook.pdf>, pg. 88.

⁴<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS-StateReportBook.pdf>, pg. 118.

⁵ https://s3-us-east-2.amazonaws.com/edaw-webinars/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/24101634/FINAL_2019-Wisconsin-Domestic-Violence-Homicide-Report_revised_9_21_2020.pdf.

In 2008, Jennifer Vordermann was in the process of leaving her husband due to domestic violence. After receiving threatening text messages, she and her mother contacted law enforcement to report the threats. Her husband had also begun using telephone tracking devices to follow her. Police made contact multiple times but did not take her husband into custody or take possession of his weapons. He shot Jennifer in the back, killing her before turning the gun on himself, four days after Jennifer's mother reported the text message stalking to police.⁶

Jennifer's story is one of many incidents of domestic violence, stalking, and death detailed in our Homicide Reports. Some of the incidents date back to when the victim was 15 years old. In fact, intimate partner violence has been reported as young as the age of 12,⁷ and the number of teens in a relationship who say they have been called names, harassed, or put down by their partner through mobile devices is 1 in 4.⁸ With the advent of new technology, this number is set to rise.

End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin supports explicitly including identifying electronic and social media communication in the statute defining stalking. Stalking is an abusive and violent act. And stalking through texts, emails, and social media is still stalking. Threats are threats and sending them through the internet does not reduce the harm caused. The message may be electronic, but the fear is real, and so is the danger.

End Abuse would like to take this opportunity to emphasize that no victim in Wisconsin should have to take the courageous step of leaving an abusive relationship without the safety and support offered by domestic violence victim advocates and without the benefit of a coordinated community response. Domestic violence programs across the state are chronically underfunded. Responses to violence should be survivor centered, and we hear from survivors that they are in dire need of stable housing, economic support, legal representation, mental health, and other community resources. A response to violence that focuses on punishment is not effective since it does nothing to address the conditions that allowed that violence to happen in the first place. Focusing on repairing the conditions - the root cause - would prevent the harm from happening again. Updates to statute such as this are necessary reforms, and they mean very little if they are not accompanied by resources that support survivors' access to safety, healing, and economic security. We welcome your ideas and look forward to working with the legislature in the future on the needs we have identified.

Speaking for domestic violence survivors and advocates, we at End Abuse support the passage of this bill.

⁶https://www.endabusewi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2008_dv_homicide_report.pdf, pg. 13-14.

⁷<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS-StateReportBook.pdf>, pg. 167.

⁸ <https://dare2knowwi.org/resources>