

Mr. Speaker, I rise on this occasion to speak about two of the most significant issues facing our society: the twin scourges of domestic violence and sexual assault. Our society has a moral obligation to stand up against those who exploit their power to commit violence against women, men, and children, and I join with other members in taking the opportunity to discuss these issues and participate in the White Ribbon Campaign. On Tuesday, March 22, Dr. David Smith chaired and hosted the White Ribbon Breakfast-hundreds of local people met again to raise awareness of DV. Later in the week several men including Dr. Smith donned women's shoes for the "Walk a mile in my shoes campaign." The White Ribbon Campaign is an international effort that raises awareness about domestic violence and sexual assault issues. It is one of the largest efforts in the world of people working to end violence against women, men, and children. The international campaign has participants in fifty-five countries and involves a general public education effort focused on preventing and ending domestic violence and sexual assault.

Many of my fellow members and I are wearing white ribbons to demonstrate our commitment to putting a spotlight on domestic violence and sexual assault issues. Wearing the white ribbon speaks to our personal pledge to never commit, condone, or remain silent about violence against women and children.

The white ribbons were provided by Vera House, the sponsor of the White Ribbon Campaign. In 1977, Sister Mary Vera, a member of the order of the Sisters of St. Joseph recognized in Syracuse the need for emergency services for women in crisis and helped found Vera House, a shelter for abused women. This original mission blossomed into a wide range of domestic violence services including outreach and advocacy, domestic violence education programming, children's counseling, the Syracuse Area Domestic and Sexual Violence Coalition, and a domestic violence education program for male perpetrators of violence.

In January of 2005, Vera House merged with the Rape Crisis Center, founded in 1974 to provide support and advocacy services for adult rape survivors. Like Vera House, the Rape Crisis Center's mission evolved

over the years--growing over the years to include services for child victims of sexual assault and their families, preventive education programming, and a team of nurses who provide 24-hour response for victims of sexual assault.

For over fourteen years I have offered pro bono legal services through the VBA through Vera House to victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault. I have helped them navigate the legal system, and so therefore I know firsthand the value of the work of Vera House and the impact the organization makes on the community and the world through outreach activities like the White Ribbon Campaign. I have also seen through my volunteer work at Vera House a glimpse of how pervasive are the problems of domestic violence and sexual assault. These problems affect people of all races, religions, socio-economic conditions, ages, and relationships.

Woman whose husband was well-known media figure, educated, financially secure

Domestic violence is known by many names: domestic abuse, spousal abuse, family violence, and intimate partner violence. It also takes many forms from physical violence involving such things as hitting, kicking, biting, shoving, or restraining. It can be emotional or verbal abuse which manifests in many types of behavior—controlling, domineering, threatening, or humiliating.

It can also be economic abuse in which the abuser control the victim's money. This abuse often happens to the elderly.

Tragically, domestic violence is not a rare phenomenon. The Centers for Disease Control estimate that domestic violence is a public health problem affecting over 32 million Americans, or 10 percent of the population.

The effects of domestic abuse are staggering. Physical abuse can be bruises, broken bones, head injuries, lacerations. But those are just the external physical wounds. Internal bleeding and chronic health conditions such as arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome, ulcers, migraines, and miscarriages can also be linked to physical abuse in abuse victims.

But there are other effects to abuse victims. Many victims experience anxiety, stress, fear, guilt, and depression. Abuse victims also frequently manifest a condition we think of in relation to veterans, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Victims with the condition have flashbacks, nightmares, or exaggerated responses.

The effect of abuse can also be financial. Many victims courageously leave their abusers but often lack the education, skills, and resources to find gainful employment to care for themselves and any children they might have.

Insert a personal experience story

The other societal scourge I referenced in my opening remarks is sexual assault. Sexual assault is simply put: any unwanted contact of a sexual nature. It does not matter if the victim was on a date or drinking when it occurred. It is never okay for someone to force sexual contact on you against your will.

Like domestic abuse, sexual assault knows no privileged class immune to its ravages. Women, men, and children of all ages, races, religions, and ethnicities are victims.

The effects are often similar to the victims of domestic abuse, and the effects can be especially troubling for children and men.

Insert personal story about a rape victim

I serve on the Veterans Affairs Committee, and I am passionate about veterans' issues. I am the daughter and sister of veterans and believe we owe a debt of gratitude to our men and women in uniform. But part of that debt extends to making sure we don't turn a blind eye to sexual assault of women and men in our armed services.

We have much to do, but I applaud the U.S. Air Force's recognition that sexual assault against both female and male airmen is a serious problem that needs a systemic solution. While the Air Force has emphasized sexual assault prevention and response for several years, they acknowledge that sexual assault is still a problem for the Air Force, as it is for our other military services.

In their own words, "...sexual assault continues to burden our Airmen and degrade our mission effectiveness. Sexual assault is a crime, and there is no place for this behavior in our Air Force. We demand better of ourselves."

Consequently, they contracted with Gallup to conduct an anonymous survey about sexual assault in the Air Force. The findings were—to put it mildly—disturbing. The results of the survey in the twelve months prior were that 2, 143 (3.4%) women and 1,355 (0.5%) men reported that they had been sexually assaulted, with the majority of female victims reporting that their assailant was a fellow Airman.

Even one victim is one too many.

Sadly, it is unrealistic to think our armed forces would be immune to the kind of problems endemic in our society. We must engage as men, women, moms, and dads, community leaders, airmen, soldiers, marines, sailors, and guardsmen. Churches, synagogues, mosques, youth centers, sports teams, schools, colleges....

The list goes on. It will take all aspects of society to change a culture that increasingly devalues human life. I believe that we are created in the image of God and that He has a purpose for each one of our lives. No woman should ever have to fear for the safety of her unborn child because of an abusive husband. No child should ever dread going to bed because of a parent who is molesting her. And no man should be raped because blind justice turned a blind eye to prison rape.

I have six children and eleven grandchildren. As a parent and grandparent I think about the lessons I have tried to teach them. Some of those lessons were very successful. Some less so... But I taught my kids to help others. Helping others includes living up to the pledge I mentioned earlier that I am making by wearing this white ribbon: I will not commit, condone, or remain silent about violence against women, men, and children.

We have a serious problem in front of us—in every community in America. But I have hope. America is an amazing country, and I am so privileged to be an American—to be free. I believe that the greatness of

this country is a reflection of both the greatness of our founding and the greatness of our people. We are equal to the task of fighting domestic abuse and sexual assault if we put our minds and spirits to it.

Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.