

GOVERNOR PATRICK SIGNS LAW TO STRENGTHEN PROTECTIONS FOR VICTIMS OF HARASSMENT

New law broadens protective orders; Follows Governor's announcement that federal funds will support DA's efforts to prevent violent crimes against women

BOSTON - Tuesday, February 9, 2010 - Governor Deval Patrick today signed legislation that will provide stronger protections for victims of sexual abuse and intimidation. The new law will allow victims to obtain criminally enforceable protection against their attackers.

"As a community, we cannot allow victims of abuse to live in fear of their perpetrator," said Governor Patrick. "This new law closes a glaring loophole by ensuring the full extent of the justice system is available to protect sexual assault victims."

"Under the old protective order statute, victims of abuse could only petition for protective orders if the abuser was a family member or someone with whom the victim had a substantial dating relationship," said Lieutenant Governor Timothy P. Murray, Chair of the Governor's Council to Address Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence. "Thanks to the leadership and dedicated work of many individuals, today we have a law that removes those barriers and provides reform to further protect victims of sexual assault."

The law allows victims, regardless of relationship, to obtain civil restraining orders that are criminally enforceable, thereby changing the old definition of harassment that had been an impediment for some victims of stalking and sexual assault.

"During my more than 20 years as a prosecutor, I have often seen victims of harassment, stalking, or sexual abuse who are in fear for their safety and who often lack adequate protections against their abusers. In some instances, we have seen that lack of protections result in further attacks or even murder. I am pleased that the Legislature and the Governor have provided this as an option to further address the safety and security needs of these victims," said Attorney General Martha Coakley.

"We know that restraining orders save lives. This law will ensure that victims of stalking, sexual assault and harassment by strangers have an accessible, affordable option for protection," said Public Safety and Security Secretary Mary Beth Heffernan.

"Massachusetts has always been a leader in the fight against domestic violence, and today we continue to lead the way in protecting victims of harassment, stalking and violence," said Senator Harriette Chandler, lead sponsor of the bill in the Senate. "This act finally closes a loophole that left too many victims of harassment vulnerable to their assailants and open to further abuse. I'm proud of the widespread and ranging collaboration between law enforcement, victims, advocates and politicians that led to this common-sense bill, and am pleased to witness its long-awaited enactment."

"A large number of people from both sides of the aisle and from all different sectors came together to refine this sensitive and complex legislation," said Representative Cory Atkins, a lead co-sponsor of the bill in the House of Representatives. "I am proud of our collaborative efforts to expand restraining order law and provide much-needed protection for victims, and I thank everyone who made this possible."

"Ten years of hard work, determination and heartache have brought us to this moment," said Representative Peter Koutoujian, a lead co-sponsor of the bill in the House of Representatives. "It took the leadership and conviction of this Speaker, this Senate President and this Governor to ensure that all victims of stalking receive the fullest protection under the law."

"This new law recognizes that sexual assault, stalking and harassment are dangerous crimes," said Mary R. Lauby, Executive Director of Jane Doe Inc. "We've learned from years of advocacy and working with survivors that restraining orders are effective tools in the prevention of harassment and violence and that when victims are safe, they are better able and more likely to participate in criminal justice interventions that hold offenders accountable."

Earlier today, the Governor announced that the Patrick-Murray Administration has made available \$708,400 in federal funds to the Commonwealth's District Attorneys to target violent crimes against women, including domestic and dating violence, and sexual assault and stalking. The funds, from the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and other federal sources, were awarded through the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security (EOPSS) to the state's 11 District Attorneys' offices.