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Did Phil Hartman Die from Congressionally-Sanctioned Discrimination?

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After Saturday Night Live comedian Phil Hartman was shot and killed in his sleep by his wife Brynn, people revealed Brynn's long-standing abusive treatment of Phil. CNN quoted one acquaintance saying that Brynn "got attention by losing her temper."¹ Grieving friends recalled how Phil tried to avoid her when she became abusive, and how he made excuses for her abusive behavior.

Sponsors of the Violence Against Women Act, would you believe that Phil could have sought help from battered women's shelters funded under the Act.

During the 2000 VAWA reauthorization hearings, Senator Orrin Hatch stated that men "are eligible under current law to apply for services and benefits that are funded under the original Act."²

Senator Joseph Biden recently introduced the 2005 VAWA reauthorization bill. When challenged to make the bill gender inclusive, Biden responded, "Nothing in the act denies services, programs, funding or assistance to male victims of violence."³

If these services are so readily available to men abused by their wives, why didn't Phil seek help from one of the numerous battered women's shelters around Los Angeles? Could it be that being "eligible to apply for services" is quite a different thing from being able to receive services when you need them?

Despite the good senators' reassurances, VAWA-funded organizations routinely discriminate against men seeking help. Ten VAWA-funded women's shelters in Los Angeles were recently sued for refusing a male victim help.⁴ Rather than offering to stop their blatant discrimination, they went to court to defend their right to continue the discrimination.

Considering the attitudes of many shelter staffers, this is not surprising. Although the U.S. Dept. of Justice reports that 36% of all people physically assaulted by their intimate partner are men (835,000 men annually),⁵ many battered women's advocates insist that only 5% of victims are male.

In a *Boston Globe* interview about battered men, a director of the Massachusetts Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence, dismissively quipped, "Sometimes it snows in Florida ... but we don't make public policy around it."⁶

Columnist Cathy Young notes a case in her files that "speaks volumes about most advocates' view of female violence. Brenda C. was admitted to a shelter after being arrested for assaulting her husband (during a divorce) and ordered out of their home. A letter to her attorney from a shelter counselor gave a fairly accurate account of what happened: In an argument, 'Mrs. C. grabbed Mr. C. by his necktie (and) he pushed her away. Mrs. C. then punched his face and her nail cut his neck.'" The shelter's assessment? "'Physical abuse' of Brenda by her husband."⁷

Time and time again VAWA-funded women's organizations have demonstrated indifference or outright hostility toward male victims. Meanwhile, federal regulations are routinely cited to justify denying funding to organizations that want to help men.⁸ The Texas VAWA funding

application form is typical. Item number one under "ineligible activities" is "Programs that focus on children and/or men".⁹

Richard Gelles, Dean of the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, was one of the first researchers to study family violence. He notes that although there are more than 1,800 shelters for women, there's nowhere for men to turn. Shelters for battered men are occasionally created, but usually fail due to lack of funding.¹⁰

Gelles also reports that men who retain their children in order to protect them from abusive mothers, often find themselves arrested for "child kidnapping."¹¹ How many children are harmed by these gender-biased policies? How many children are victimized by a system that removes the father they feel safe with and gives total control to their abusive mother?

Having grown up in such a family myself, I find the prospect horrifying.

Many fathers stay in abusive marriages to protect their children. That's probably why Phil Hartman stayed. Wouldn't his children be better off if VAWA had funded an outreach program for abused men, and Phil had gotten out of the marriage alive and able to protect them?

Even as VAWA helps some people, its discriminatory effects cause immense harm to others. Do we really want to condemn children to lives of misery because their protective parent is the wrong gender?

The Senate Judiciary Committee will hold hearings on VAWA reauthorization on July 19th. Now is the time to tell committee members that despite Congress' intentions, the law is actually applied in an unconstitutionally discriminatory fashion.

Unless the law is changed so programs focusing on men are no longer "ineligible activities," more men will lose their lives thanks to VAWA-funded shelter workers who hypocritically preach, "There's no excuse for domestic violence."

¹ "Hartman's friends, fans ask: 'What went wrong?', Autopsy shows comedian shot in head several times", CNN.com, <http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/TV/9805/29/hartman.death.folo>

² U.S. Congressional Record, 10/11/2000, pp. 10191-92

³ "Biden pressed to make abuse bill gender neutral, Senator: Bill already applies to both sexes", Hockessin Community News, June 2, 2005, p. 8, http://www.communitypub.com/WKLYART/HCN_06.02.05.pdf

⁴ Eldon Ray Blumhorst v. Jewish Family Services Of Los Angeles, House of Ruth, Inc., Su Casa Family Crisis and Support Center, Domestic Violence Center of the Santa Clarita Valley, Rainbow Services, Ltd, Peace and Joy Care Center, Haven Hills, Inc., Southern California Alcohol and Drug Program, Inc., Young Women's Christian Association of Glendale, California, and Haven House, Inc., California Court of Appeal, Second Appellate District, <http://www.menshealthnetwork.org/library/Blumhorstbrief.pdf>

⁵ Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings From the National Violence Against Women Survey, p. 7, National Institute of Justice, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/172837.pdf>

⁶ "A Search of Equality - Domestic Abuse Groups Dispute Status of Claims by Men", Boston Globe, October 28, 2002, p. B1, http://www.janedoe.org/about/about_news_10_28_02.htm

⁷ "No excuse for domestic violence. Period", Cathy Young, Detroit News, May 6, 1997, <http://www.menweb.org/cyoungdn.htm>

⁸ Rejection letter from Domestic Violence Coordinating Council of the State of Delaware to Forum for Equity and Fairness in Family Issues, October 9, 2002, <http://www.menshealthnetwork.org/library/VAWArejectDel1002.pdf>

⁹ Rejection letter from North Central Texas Council of Governments to Fathers for Equal Rights, December 16, 2002, <http://www.menshealthnetwork.org/library/VAWArejectDallas1202.pdf>

¹⁰ "The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence: Male Victims", Richard J. Gelles, Ph.D., The Women's Quarterly, 1999, <http://www.ncfmfla.org/gelles.html>

¹¹ Ibid