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Georgia Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Groups Urge Lawmakers to Strengthen Family Violence Laws and Protect Victims

ATLANTA, GA – January 30, 2018 – Hundreds gathered at the Georgia State Capitol today to urge legislators to support proposals which seek to enhance the safety of domestic and sexual assault survivors. A proposal led by the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (GCADV) seeks to mirror existing federal law by making it a felony crime for domestic violence perpetrators to possess a firearm. GCADV's proposal specifies that a felony penalty will be imposed if the perpetrator is subject to a final Family Violence Protective Order or is convicted of a qualifying family violence-related misdemeanor.

"Every neighboring state in the Southeast, including Alabama, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Florida, has already enacted similar legislation," said Fatmeh Baidoun, GCADV's Public Policy Analyst.

GCADV's public safety proposal was one focus of today's Stop Violence Against Women Day, an annual advocacy event which draws attention to the issue of domestic violence and sexual assault in Georgia. Georgia currently ranks 14th in the nation for the rate at which women are killed by men. In the years between 2010 and 2017, over 700 Georgians were killed by firearms in domestic violence incidents. Housing protection for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking was also a focus issue of the day. Often, rental lease agreements can create a barrier to the access of safe housing for domestic and sexual violence victims. The proposed Georgia Tenant Protection Act seeks to address this by extending permissions which would allow survivors to terminate a lease agreement early without financial penalty.

"Stop Violence Against Women Day is an excellent opportunity for individuals across the state to engage with their legislators, to advocate for necessary changes to our laws, to improve victim safety, and to share the critical, life-saving work domestic violence programs do with their constituents," said Jennifer Thomas, Executive Director of the Georgia Commission on Family Violence (GCFV). Ms. Thomas also stated that "the Tenant Protection Act supports stable housing for families in crisis and seeks to limit the adverse effects for children and those dealing with such significant traumatizing stressors."

According to the Georgia Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC), from October 2016 through September 2017, Georgia's 46 state-certified domestic violence programs answered nearly 44,372 crisis calls and provided shelter to 6,022 survivors and their children. During that same period, Georgia's 22 state-funded sexual assault programs answered approximately 10,296 crisis calls and served 3,787 victims of rape and sexual assault, including 1,092 child victims.

"Organizations such as GCADV and the Georgia Network to End Sexual Assault (GNESA) give voice to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Our priority is to ensure their well-being, safety, and access to justice. The firearms proposal GCADV has put forward is in response to this charge," said Jan Christiansen, GCADV Executive Director. "When roughly 70% of domestic violence related homicides in Georgia each year are committed using firearms, we must act."

Christiansen also urges victims of domestic violence to contact Georgia's 24-Hour Statewide Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-334-2836 to talk to an advocate at one of Georgia's 46 state-certified domestic violence programs about how to develop a safety plan and how to access services in their community.

Stop Violence Against Women Day is supported by Mary Kay Inc., which also provides funding to organizations in Georgia and throughout the country that work to end violence against women. "The Mary Kay FoundationSM is proud to have donated more than one million dollars in the state of Georgia alone to shelters providing direct services to domestic abuse survivors," said Anne Crews, Vice President for Mary Kay Inc. and board member of The Mary Kay FoundationSM. "Mary Kay is immensely proud to stand alongside these advocates in our efforts to end and prevent domestic violence in our communities once and for all."

*To find a domestic violence program near you, call Georgia's 24-Hour Statewide Domestic Violence Hotline - 1.800.33.HAVEN (1.800.334.2836)
To find a sexual assault center near you, visit www.gnesa.org or call the National Sexual Assault Hotline - 1.800.656.HOPE (1.800.656.4673)*