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WI Domestic Violence Programs Applaud Passage of Bill that Offers Additional Protections for Advocates Who Experience Abuse

Madison — Advocates for victims of domestic violence across Wisconsin are lauding the passage of Assembly Bill 581 (AB 581), a proposal that will offer additional legal protections for victim advocates, legal system employees and members of law enforcement who are also themselves victims of abuse. AB 581 will allow this specific category of professionals (or their partners) to file for protective orders in a county within 100 miles of the one they reside in, offering them crucial anonymity that is often lacking for victims seeking these life-saving legal services while also working in the field.

“In 2013 the Wisconsin domestic violence advocacy community lost Patricia (Trish) Waschbisch, a tireless advocate and longtime friend to so many in the movement, at the hands of her abuser. The fact that someone so committed to eradicating domestic violence for the sake of others could at the same time be experiencing abuse speaks to the fact that victims working in the field face unique barriers to safety that must be addressed,” said Patti Seger, executive director of End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin. “When a victim advocate knows the judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers and other members of the justice system, the process of getting a restraining order forces them to reveal their status as a survivor to their entire professional community. No victim of abuse should have to give up their privacy just to access these often life-saving services, particularly when they are committing their life to keeping survivors safe every single day.”

While domestic violence program staff who also experience abuse are commonly considered to have easier access to protective services than victims who do not work in the field of advocacy, the opposite tends to be true.

“There is nothing ironic about an advocate becoming a victim of domestic violence. One out of four American women will be the victim of severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime and advocates such as Trish are not immune,” said Courtney Olson, Executive Director of Rainbow House. “We deserve the same rights to privacy and confidentiality as those we serve. This bill will save lives by offering an alternative path to safety for those engaged in this work.”

“I can’t even find the right words to express how much the passage of AB 581 will assist advocates and other professionals working in the field of domestic violence as they seek protection for themselves and their families,” said Jessica Honish, Lead Advocate at Rainbow House. “Trish would have been proud of this bill, knowing that it will keep advocates safe as they work to protect others.”

AB 581 passed out of the Senate this week without a single opposing vote and will now be sent to the Governor’s desk to be signed into law along with over 100 other proposals recently passed by the legislature. Victim

advocates report that the additional safety measures included in the bill will ensure that fewer survivors are precluded from utilizing critical protective orders and left at risk of further abuse or homicide.

“We would like to thank the bi-partisan group of authors who worked on AB 581 for recognizing the unique barriers to services that this category of victim experiences, and taking action to ensure that they have the necessary privacy to stay safe,” continued Seger. “Although we may have lost our friend, Trish, this bill will help to protect others facing similar circumstances, which is something we know she would have wanted.”

The changes laid out in AB 581 will take effect the day after the bill is signed into law by Governor Walker.

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End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin: The Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence is the leading voice for victims of domestic abuse in Wisconsin. At End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin, we educate shelter and program volunteers and advocates, law enforcement, legislators, and community members to provide safety and support to survivors. We strive to shift Wisconsin from the attitudes and beliefs that cause domestic violence to values of mutual respect and equality, and we partner with communities in the effort to prevent and end domestic abuse. We encourage reporters to include the National Domestic Violence Hotline number [1-800-799-SAFE(7233)] in their stories for victims who need help. A list of local Wisconsin domestic violence victim service providers can be found at <http://www.endabusewi.org>.