

Casey to Feds: Victims of Domestic Violence Should Not Be Targeted for Eviction

In PA, Many Local Ordinance May Inadvertently Penalize Domestic Violence Victims

In Letter to DOJ, HUD Senator Casey Urges Agencies to Inform Communities About Rights of Victims

Washington, DC- Today, U.S. Senator Bob Casey (D-PA) announced that he has written a letter to the Department of Justice and Housing and Urban Development urging the agencies to work collaboratively in a process that informs local municipalities about the rights of domestic violence victims. According to the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence, there are 19 known “disorderly conduct” ordinances within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, in communities such as Pittsburgh, Allentown, Harrisburg, Wilkes-Barre, York, and Lancaster.

There may be as many as 59 others throughout the United States. Although many of these ordinances are designed to address crime in local communities, many inadvertently penalize victims of domestic violence. It is important to ensure that they are structured in accordance with federal protections that prevent victims of domestic violence from being targeted. Currently there are laws on the book that can leave victims of domestic violence vulnerable to eviction from their homes.

“It is imperative that we strike the right balance on this,” Senator Casey said. “Domestic violence victims should never fear calling the police for help. It’s critical that DOJ and HUD work with municipalities to ensure that the enforcement of these ordinances is done in such a way that helps police do their job and protects victims of domestic violence.”

The full text of Senator Casey’s letter can be seen below:

The Honorable Eric Holder
Attorney General of the United States
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530

The Honorable Shaun Donovan
Secretary
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban
Development
451 7th Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20410

Dear Attorney General Holder and Secretary Donovan:

I write today to request that the Department of Justice and the Department of Housing and Urban Development work together to educate local communities about the protections that the Violence Against Women Act establishes for tenants who are victims of domestic violence. In particular, it is important to ensure that local governments, landlords and tenants are aware of important protections that prohibit recipients of federal housing assistance from being evicted for reporting domestic

violence.

Recent events in Pennsylvania highlight the urgent need for a focused federal outreach effort. As you may be aware, the Borough of Norristown previously enacted an ordinance that penalizes landlords if they do not evict their tenants when police are called to a property three times in a four-month period. As a result, Lakisha Briggs, a Norristown resident and a recipient of federal housing assistance, alleges that she was threatened with eviction after calling the police for protection from her ex-boyfriend. According to her lawsuit, Ms. Briggs was afraid to call the police when her ex-boyfriend showed up a third time, and had to be airlifted to the hospital for emergency medical treatment after being physically assaulted. When neighbors called the police after this final attack, Ms. Briggs says she was again threatened with eviction from her home.

While I understand that Ms. Briggs was ultimately not evicted from her home, and that Norristown has taken steps to change the language of the ordinance, I am concerned that this situation may be indicative of a larger issue. According to the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence, there are 19 known “disorderly conduct” ordinances within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, in communities such as Pittsburgh, Allentown, Harrisburg, Wilkes-Barre, York, and Lancaster. There may be as many as 59 others throughout the United States. Although many of these ordinances are designed to address crime in local communities, many inadvertently penalize victims of domestic violence. It is important to ensure that they are structured in accordance with federal protections that prevent victims of domestic violence from being targeted.

It is vital for every American to be protected against domestic violence. As part of that goal, the appropriate federal agencies must ensure that key stakeholders in local communities are aware of the rights and obligations that are established by existing federal laws that protect victims of domestic violence. I ask that you supply my office with information regarding any efforts under way at your agencies jointly or separately, to educate local governments, law enforcement, landlords and tenants about their rights and obligations under these laws as they relate to victims of domestic violence.

If I or my staff can be of assistance on this matter, please contact my office.

Sincerely,

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

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