

Concord Monitor - N.H. Senate passes 'Joshua's Law' bill making domestic violence a crime

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Thursday, February 13, 2014

(Published in print: Friday, February 14, 2014)

Senators unanimously passed two bills to strengthen protections for domestic violence victims yesterday, including one called "Joshua's Law" in honor of the boy shot by his father at a Manchester YWCA last year.

Joshua's mother, Becky Ranes, watched from the gallery as senators applauded her courage in sharing her family's story. With tears in her eyes after the vote, she hugged both Sen. Donny Soucy, a Manchester Democrat who championed the legislation, and Gov. Maggie Hassan, who happened to be passing by in the hall.

"Keep at it. You're doing great work," Hassan told her.

Joshua's Law would make domestic violence a distinct crime; New Hampshire is one of 15 states that don't have a separate classification for it. Under the bill, domestic violence would include violent actions, threats or stalking by a person's spouse, intimate partner or other household members. By labeling these crimes as domestic violence, police officers and prosecutors will be able to identify patterns by abusers more easily, Soucy said.

"When a person punches someone in a bar, that person is charged with assault. When that same punch is thrown in your home, at the hands of someone you trust and have a relationship with, is that really the same crime of assault? I don't think so," Soucy said.

The second bill, sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Jeb Bradley, a Wolfeboro Republican, mandates that parental visitation centers have metal detectors and trained security personnel. Joshua's father, Muni Savyon, used a gun he brought into the YWCA during a court-supervised visitation to shoot Joshua, 9, and then himself. The YWCA had handheld metal detectors, but an investigation showed Savyon was not searched that day.

As of now only two visitation centers, in Nashua and Boscawen, meet the metal detector and supervision requirements, Soucy said. The bill will also create a commission to study visitation centers and recommend improvements by November of this year.

Both bills will now go to the House.

Sen. Lou D'Allesandro, a Manchester Democrat, said he was in downtown Manchester when Savyon's shooting happened last year and went to the scene.

"It's a growing problem in our society, something that we must deal with," he said. "To think that we might be able to prevent things like this from happening in the future is very important, and really, isn't that the reason why we're all here?"

Amanda Grady Sexton of the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence said Soucy's bill will help agencies better identify which people and families are victims of or at risk of domestic abuse.

"We were very moved to see that there was just this tremendous outpouring of support for Becky, for this bill, for this law and really for the issue of domestic violence," she said. "This body truly understands the risks associated with this crime."

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