

(Lawrence, NJ) – U.S. Rep. Rush Holt (NJ-12) today joined advocates for women and Leidy Toro Groomes, a survivor of domestic abuse, at Womanspace in Lawrence to oppose Republican legislation that would weaken key provisions of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA).

The Republican legislation, H.R. 4970, which was passed in the U.S. House over Holt's objections last week, would remove protections in VAWA designed to enable women to escape from domestic abuse.

"The Republican bill would remove key protections that enable women like Leidy to escape from abuse," said Holt. "The effect is to provide new tools to abusive families and spouses – new ways to threaten violence and abandonment to the most vulnerable women in our midst. This is shocking, and it is unconscionable."

Groomes, a 25-year-old former Trenton resident, came legally to the United States from Colombia as a child. She was abused and abandoned by members of her extended family, and after living in a series of violent temporary homes, she was forced to flee to a transitional living program. Through the provisions of VAWA, and with help from Holt and a local mentor, Groomes successfully left her abusive home and applied for a green card. She recently married and had her first child.

The Republican VAWA legislation would repeal protections that helped Groomes along the path to permanent legal residency. In particular, the Republican bill would weaken VAWA's "self-petition" provisions, which enabled Groomes to apply for citizenship without being forced to seek the aid of those in her family who had abused her.

"I always thought we were lucky," said Katie Barnett, a longtime advocate for Groomes who was formerly her mentor through Mentor Power. "So many people helped us navigate the very confusing laws and procedures to get Leidy out of an abusive life of hiding in the shadows and into a system that was designed to protect her and let her grow and thrive. It was not until I learned of the attack on the Violence Against Women Act that I realized we were not only lucky because of the people we found to help us through the existing laws but because we were going through her horrendous ordeal at the right time in history, a time in history when the Act protected undocumented women and children in this country."

The Republican VAWA bill was opposed by over 300 groups, including the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the American Bar Association, and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. An alternate bill to extend and strengthen

VAWA recently passed the Senate with bipartisan support, and Holt is a cosponsor of similar legislation in the House.

The group met at Womanspace's recently opened facility in Lawrence, which for the first time in the organization's history provides space for its counselors, emergency response coordinators, educators and administrative staff to work together under one roof. In its new space, Womanspace is continuing its advocacy and support work for victims of abuse: in 2010 alone, Womanspace Victims Response Advocates responded to 202 cases of domestic violence where a child was present.

"Advocates in the field understand the urgency of strengthening protection under the Violence Against Woman Act to include everyone who suffers from the trauma of domestic and sexual violence," said Patricia Hart, the executive director of Womanspace. "No vulnerable group should be excluded and no funding should fall prey to politics. Keeping victims safe is not a point of negotiation it is a right. Womanspace is so grateful to the leaders of our country who refuse to compromise on victim safety."