

Report: States lag with dating-violence laws

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The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Only a handful of states have responded to teen dating violence with laws enabling the youthful victims to obtain protection orders on equal terms with adults, an advocacy group says in a new national survey.

The report on state laws by **Break the Cycle**, a teen-violence prevention organization that has worked with the Justice Department, gave A grades to only five states. Twelve states got D's and 11 failed.

Grades were based on various comparisons between the legal treatment of adult victims of domestic violence and teen victims of dating violence. Failure was automatic for states where protective orders are unavailable for minors, or where dating relationships are not explicitly recognized as valid for obtaining such orders.

"It is essential that dating violence and the needs of minor victims be specifically addressed within state domestic violence statutes," said Marjorie Gilberg, executive director of Break the Cycle. "Lawmakers have a responsibility

... to propose legislation that will ensure the protection of all victims of domestic violence — regardless of their age."

National surveys have estimated that one in three youths experiences dating abuse at some point during their teens — incidents ranging from a slap on the cheek to homicide. Despite the high rate of abuse, Break the Cycle and other advocacy groups say too many states do not treat dating violence with appropriate seriousness.

"Some states feel that if have they good child abuse laws, minors are protected," Gilberg said in a telephone interview. "There's definitely a lack of awareness about the prevalence of abuse among teens in their relationships."

Break the Cycle contends that all young people over 12 should have the right to petition for protection on their own behalf and that domestic violence protection orders should be available even against abusers who are minors.

The new report gives states lower grades if their laws block minors from seeking protective orders on their own, without parental involvement.

Sheryl Cates, CEO of the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline, said parental involvement is a challenging issue.

"If you're a parent, you want to know if your child is in danger, but on other hand, teens want the anonymity, to not have to tell their parents," she said. "It's very complicated, trying to find a balance between a victim's rights and parents' right to know."

Kristina Korobov, an attorney with National Center for the Prosecution of Violence Against Women, said it's sometimes crucial for teens to be able to seek protective orders on their own. They may have strained relations with their parents or come from a home where domestic violence already is occurring.

Korobov, a former prosecutor in Indianapolis and Loudoun County, Va., said it's important in such instances for courts to provide an attorney or other expert to guide the youth through the legal process.

The report commended New Hampshire as the only state where the law specifically allows minors of any age to go to court by themselves to request a protection order. It received an A along with California, Illinois, Minnesota and Oklahoma.

Date: Monday, March 24, 2009