



CFSO Legislative Corner 3/30/21  
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The 117<sup>th</sup> Congress has been slow to start legislatively. Normally, the budget would be delivered to Congress and hearings would be on-going to discuss the content of that budget, as well as any policy legislation on the majority's agenda. At this time, the budget has not been delivered and it is expected that a "skinny format", meaning high level figures only, will be delivered to Congress soon and the full budget will be delivered in May. As a result, the focus is on policy and authorizations. Currently, there are two programs that are under discussion and debate that directly affect forensic science-the Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Act as part of the Justice for All Act and the Violence Against Women Act. ***But why should forensic scientists care about this and get involved? Simply put, money and how you are allowed to spend that money.***

Congress has specific tasks, through legislative debate and compromise it makes laws and passes budgets, it is set up to be the voice of the people. While Congress may affect you in your daily life with the passage of legislation that change your taxes or dictates how you receive healthcare it also affects the field of forensic science and how you are able to do your job. Legislation is what creates grant programs and oversees its proper expenditure. Legislation can also dictate the operation of your lab. It can put restrictions and requirements on that grant and or the lab that may be helpful to a lab or it may hinder your ability to effectively do your job. Since legislation is a compromise and a process, however, the American people and more specifically the forensic science community has the ability to make its voice heard during this process and influence the outcome of the legislation by educating the policymakers. ASCLD belongs to the Consortium of Forensic Science Organizations (CFSO) and works with the other forensic science organizations who are Members of the CFSO (AAFS, IAI, NAME, SOFT and ABFT) to present your positions on the legislation being debated and ensure that language and funding are beneficial and adequate for your community. But you can also help also by letting your Member of Congress know what the needs are in your lab.

As we said there are currently two bills being debated and discussed in Congress that affect our community- the Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Act, as part of the Justice for All Act, and the Violence Against Women Act. These are re-authorization bills. An authorization is the creation of a program for a specific limited time period. That program needs to be reauthorized at the expiration of that time period. In the case of this authorization, it states that it is a formula grant, it provides how much the government make take from that grant as overhead, it determines what reports need to be made to the government about those grants



and what the grants can be used for. A re-authorization is also an opportunity to make changes to the grant that are needed by the grantees, such as what the grant can be used for. This process is separate from an appropriation. The appropriation process will fund these programs at the levels recommended in the authorization.

The Justice for All Act (JFA) requires re-authorization this year, 2021. This re-authorization will address the Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grants, the Innocence Protection Act of 2004, the Wrongful Conviction Review Program, the Kirk Bloodsworth Post-Conviction DNA Testing Grant Program and the DNA Sexual Assault Justice Act as all of these grants fall under the larger bill of JFA. Discussions on this re-authorization are on-going and the bill has not been introduced by the House or Senate as of yet.

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) passed the House on March 17, 2021 and will now move to the Senate for debate. VAWA is a 1994 law that was written to provide resources for victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence. It passed 244-172. The authorization expired in 2018 and Congress has not been able to re-authorize it despite several attempts due to partisan disputes over gun and transgender language in the bill. The Senate Republicans are expected to introduce a counterproposal to the House Bill. This bill authorizes 19 grant programs (<https://www.justice.gov/ovw/grant-programs>).

Of note if an authorization does not pass in time and if the funding is discretionary, which it is in forensic science grants, the government can continue to fund those grants while the authorization is being debated.

As we move through the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress we will provide details of each of these bills and others as they are introduced.