

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Task force's domestic violence to-do list prompts bills

By [Rachel Stinebring](#)

February 14, 2011 | 12:45 p.m. CST

COLUMBIA — Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia, is about to introduce in the House one of two bills overhauling domestic violence laws for the first time in 30 years.

To create bipartisan support for the bill, Rep. Ryan Silvey, R-Clay, will sponsor the other bill.

The legislation seeks to implement [recommendations made by Attorney General Chris Koster's Domestic Violence Task Force](#), a unit he created in September to review current laws. Kelly, a former judge, was a member of the task force.

Colleen Coble, [CEO of the Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence](#) and member of the task force, said there have been many changes to the law over the last 30 years. "Some of these changes have been inconsistent," she said. "The task force is striving to make the laws as clear and consistent as possible."

The task force presented the recommendations in two parts: one focused on legislative changes and the other on improvements in law enforcement and the judicial process.

Some of the recommended changes include:

- Creating consistent definitions of terms used in orders of protection.
- Modifying the process for orders of protection.
- Allowing courts to require the Division of Probation and Parole to supervise probation related to domestic violence misdemeanors.
- Establishing standards for batterer intervention programs.

The recommendations also suggest forming closer relationships between law enforcement agencies and domestic violence advocates as well as extending the power of the courts to control issues such as bond for domestic violence suspects.

Barbara Hodges, executive director at True North, a Columbia shelter for victims of domestic

violence, said the most significant change to the court system will be to orders of protection.

“Broadening the terms, including workplaces and schools, making them more automatic with no time delays or gaps, these will extend orders of protections,” Hodges said.

Kelly said the bills would be introduced within the next few days.

The two bills, which split the recommendations into two parts, will be rolled together as they move through the House, and Sen. John Lamping, R-Ladue, will sponsor the bill in the Senate.

Columbia services among best

Columbia leads the state in the services and protections it offers for domestic violence victims, Kelly and Coble said.

“I think that Columbians are very fortunate that our law enforcement, victims services and courts have all been working together to address this issue,” Coble said.

Domestic violence victims have access to a variety of resources, including the city’s Domestic Violence Enforcement Unit.

The [DOVE Unit](#), established on in 1998, comprises Columbia's victim’s advocates, assistant prosecutors, detectives and people who interact with the court system, such as bail bondsmen. The unit specializes in investigating domestic violence cases and offering support and resources for domestic violence victims.

“We (at the unit) are ultimately trying to eliminate domestic violence, but right now it's about education, victim safety and lowering offender rates,” said Aleshia Marso, victim advocate for the DOVE Unit.

Revisions to the law

According to the coalition, 1,042 people sought shelter from domestic violence in central Missouri in 2009, an increase from the 961 who sought help in 2008.

Kelly said the task force was hopeful that the recommendations would reduce the overall number of domestic violence cases in Columbia, especially through the changes in the treatment of domestic violence in the courts.

“These recommendations make the court system more efficient, more effective and allow courts to devote greater resources to domestic violence problems,” Kelly said.

Kelly hopes that the bill, which includes recommendations to improve protections afforded by the court to domestic violence victims, will pass within the session.

Coble said she didn't foresee barriers to the bill passing. "In a time of tight budgets, these recommendations don't cost anything."

But the problem is costly for society, Kelly said.

"Domestic violence is a criminal issue; it's a health issue," he said. "It affects the whole community."

As a circuit court judge in Boone County, Kelly developed an interest in domestic violence, especially after seeing a woman in court who'd been the victim of three different men.

Kelly said he hoped the legislation would make a difference in the lives of the victims he saw from the bench.

"Some things you do as a judge don't matter, but this really does," Kelly said. "There is no more basic deprivation of humanity than being abused. We want these women to receive the protection and support they need."