expand the availability of special U-visas for undocumented immigrants who are victims of domestic violence. That move was supported by law enforcement to encourage victims to come forward and testify against their abusers.

The regressive House alternative removes these and other improvements, including new protections for students on college campuses. The House measure would eliminate a confidentiality requirement in current law that protects the identity of immigrant women who file domestic violence complaints against a spouse who is a citizen or legal resident and allows the women to apply for legal status on their own.

House Republicans claim there is a big fraud problem in this area, but there is no hard evidence of that. And their plan to end the centralized handling of these issues by a Vermont-based office would undermine the government's ability to detect untruthful stories.

House members on both sides of the aisle who are serious about combating domestic violence must work to defeat this atrocious bill. If that fails, the Senate will need to insist on fixing it during the reconciliation process.

[From latimes.com, May 15, 2012]

PARTISANSHIP AND THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT

The House needs to reauthorize the law, without limits, as it has in the past, so Republicans can demonstrate that helping battered women is more important than political games.

The political climate in Congress is so noxious these days that even a law that originally passed with overwhelming bipartisan support because it provided much-needed help to abused women is now a partisan issue. That's shameful. Republicans in the House should drop their attempts to undermine the Violence Against Women Act and instead move swiftly to reauthorize and strengthen the existing program, as the Senate has already done.

First enacted in 1994, the law has been renewed twice without a fight. Last week, however, some of the same GOP lawmakers who once endorsed the law retreated, voting in committee to strip out provisions designed to protect immigrants. Under VAWA as it has long existed, if an immigrant married to a U.S. citizen or a green-card holder—and therefore eligible to stay in the country permanently—can show evidence of abuse, he or she may file independently without having to rely on the abusive spouse. VAWA's gender-neutral protections apply to legal and illegal immigrants and allow the victim to file confidentially.

Confidentiality is crucial. As the Republican-led House Judiciary Committee noted in its 2005 report to reauthorize VAWA and expand protections, without such guarantees, an abuser could try to derail a spouse's green-card application or push to have him or her deported. A battered woman whose application depends on her abusive husband certainly might think twice about filing if she knew her abuser would be notified that she was seeking help without him.

Eliminating the confidentiality provision is one of several changes House Republicans would like to make to weaken the law. They argue that the changes are necessary to combat fraud, in which immigrants falsely claim to have been abused in order to obtain visas. But where are the data and studies that fraud is a problem? Immigrant victims who petition for visas under VAWA are already required to supply ample evidence of abuse, such as police reports or medical records. And applications undergo intense scrutiny. In fiscal 2011, immigration officials denied nearly a third of those petitions.

The House reauthorization bill also seeks to undercut a provision that allows undocumented immigrants who assist in prosecutions of serious crime for U visas, and ultimately obtain green cards. The proposed changes would allow victims to obtain temporary visas only. Surely, even those lawmakers who embrace anti-immigrant legislation can appreciate that U visas help protect American citizens too, by encouraging witnesses to step forward without fear of deportation. That's why the program enjoys the backing of many law enforcement groups.

The House will vote on Wednesday. It should reauthorize VAWA without limits, as it has in the past, and demonstrate that helping battered women, those who are immigrants, isn't a partisan issue.

THE FARM BILL

Mr. BENNET. Mr. President, I rise to highlight for my colleagues how Congress now has a critical opportunity to support the competitiveness and prosperity of American agriculture. We need to move the farm bill forward. It is fitting that this week marks the 150th anniversary of the founding of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Federal Department solely dedicated to meeting the needs of America's farmers, ranchers, and rural communities.

Agriculture is at the heart of Colorado's history and cultural fabric. It also continues to be one of our most significant economic drivers. At a time when many sectors are struggling to find growth, Colorado farmers and ranchers are more productive than ever, finding innovative ways to harness growing consumer demand for agricultural products both at home and in overseas markets.

As evidence of this success, agriculture is the one sector of the U.S. economy that boasts a trade surplus. During the first 2 months of 2012, Colorado exports of agricultural products grew by 25 percent over the same period in 2011, led by an 80-percent increase in dairy exports. This good news comes on the heels of several consecutive years of double-digit increases in Colorado agriculture exports.

The USDA is part of this success story. Colorado farmers and ranchers work closely with local USDA employees to support the productivity of their operations and to maintain the health of their land and water resources. It is a vital partnership. And with expiration looming on many programs important to Colorado agriculture, I can think of no better way to commemorate the USDA's 150th anniversary than by reauthorizing the farm bill.

Over the last several months, the Senate and House committees on agriculture have come together to craft a bipartisan farm bill that not only provides America's farmers, ranchers, and rural communities with the tools they need to keep growing but also makes a significant contribution toward important national deficit reduction goals. The farm bill passed by the Senate Agriculture Committee makes very significant progress in simplification, accountability, and taxpayer savings.

Using feedback I received from over 20 listening sessions statewide, I worked to secure Colorado's top farm bill priorities. In particular, I am encouraged by the farm bill's revamped conservation title. It maintains vital authorities for land and water protection while also consolidating over 20 existing conservation programs to provide producers and landowners with much needed flexibility.

I also strongly support efforts by the Senate Agriculture Committee to strengthen the Federal crop insurance program. Time and time again, Colorado farmers have told me that affordable crop insurance is the single most important risk management tool the USDA can provide to producers for addressing today's economic and ecological challenges.

According to Colorado State University, agriculture contributes $40 billion toward the State economy annually. Of course, the benefits of a strong farm economy extend far beyond the farm. It means stronger energy, transportation, and retail sectors. It also allows us to provide food assistance to the most vulnerable populations at home and in countries suffering from famine due to drought and conflict.

In short, reauthorizing the farm bill is one the most important things this Congress can do to provide farmers and ranchers with the certainty they need to plan for the future. It will help to keep rural America growing and thriving, and it will help to invigorate an economy just now getting back on its feet. Acting on this legislation during USDA's 150th year would make the accomplishment even better.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

TRIBUTE TO FATHER RICHARD J. KELLEY

• Ms. AYOTTE. Mr. President, today I wish to recognize and honor my friend, Father Richard J. Kelley, a Catholic priest who has devoted decades of service in parishes across New Hampshire. It is my privilege to congratulate him as he celebrates his 40th anniversary of ordination to priesthood.

Father Kelley was born in Boston, MA, on May 10, 1943. He was raised in Needham and West Roxbury and graduated from Catholic Memorial High School in 1961. His seminary studies took place at the Holy Apostles Seminary in Cromwell, CT, and Catholic University in Washington, DC.

In addition to his commitment to the Catholic Church, Father Kelley has always reached out to help those in need. Before his ordination to priesthood, he spent time performing inner-city social work in Kansas City, MO. Shortly thereafter, Father Kelley was ordained to priesthood on May 20, 1972, at the St. Joseph Cathedral in Manchester, NH.