By Cody Begaye

Sun Correspondent

Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., hosted a press call Dec. 13 to discuss the importance of reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act.

VAWA was enacted in 1994 under then-President Bill Clinton to fund prosecution of violent crimes against women, impose automatic, mandatory restitution on those convicted and allow civil redress in un-prosecuted cases.

The Act also established the Office on Violence Against Women within the Department of Justice.

VAWA was previously reauthorized in 2000, 2005 and 2013 — the most recent expansion added Native Americans and same-sex couples, along with increased protection for victims of sex trafficking.

Heinrich was joined in the Dec. 13 call by Deleana Otherbull, executive director of the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women.

“We need to not only reauthorize (



the act), we need to build on it,” Heinrich said during the call.

Reauthorizing VAWA would help people who face severe levels of opposition, according to Heinrich.

“[The act] will provide victims with safe housing and communities to get them back on their feet,” he said.

Otherbull said the safety of Native Americans has not been prioritized at the national level as much as it should be. She said Native women are 10 times more likely to be murdered as non-Native women.

She said reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act would bring funding for training staff

and prosecution against domestic violence, trafficking and sex crimes, along with more comprehensive victim support services.

When asked if anything would be different in the act with this time around, Heinrich said they would focus on the feedback they have gotten.

“We’ve listened to law enforcement, advocates, and asked them what can be done to improve this law,” he said.

As for funding, Heinrich said this version of the act is an extension of the existing legislation with flat funding, and the state would seek out additional financial resources for the programs that Otherbull mentioned.

Heinrich added that reauthorizing this act presents an opportunity for grants that can be used to build judicial capacity in local tribal governments, which can help to ensure successful prosecutions of the perpetrators.

While the Navajo Nation has already made use of this program to some degree, other tribes have not because of a lack of judicial capacity, Heinrich said.

Otherbull said the high number of tribal citizens in the state presents a unique challenge for New Mexico, along with the rural nature of the state.

The state will face these challenges for the benefit of the people, Otherbull said.

“[This program] will provide healing for survivors and their families,” she said.

