



Eliminating Sexual Assault Should Be a Top Priority of the Department of Defense

Despite the attention given to the issue in recent years, the sexual assault of military women is an *ongoing, serious* problem within our armed forces. Sexual assault is a grave criminal offense with detrimental effects on readiness, and preventing it should be an urgent priority of the Department of Defense. While the focus of this paper is on sexual assault against women, men, too, can be victims of sexual assault. Both women and men must be able to serve in the military without fear of sexual assault.

Background:

According to the FY07 Department of Defense Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, there were 2688 reported sexual assaults against military women in 2007. Unfortunately, the Government Accountability Office in its July 2008 report, *Preliminary Observations on DOD's and the Coast Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Programs*, found that occurrences of sexual assault may be exceeding the rates reported. GAO noted, among other things, that a recent survey of active duty members by the Defense Manpower Data Center showed that the majority of those surveyed did not report unwanted sexual contact. At the military academies, more than 15 percent of female respondents said they had been sexually assaulted, according to a 2004 survey by the DoD Office of Inspector General. While DoD has taken some positive steps aimed at better preventing and responding to sexual assaults, both the number of reported cases and official surveys point to a significant, continuing problem.

Sexual assault is not only criminal; it directly and indirectly impedes military readiness. It negatively affects women's physical and mental health, restricting their ability to perform their missions and, too often, their ability to lead productive civilian lives after their military service as well. It undermines efforts to recruit and retain women, when they see that commanders do not treat complaints of sexual assault seriously and are not held accountable for the presence of criminal activity in their units.

Congresswoman Jane Harman, in testimony for the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, stated another reason that sexual assault should not be tolerated: "Most of our servicewomen and men are

patriotic, courageous and hard-working people who embody the best of what it means to be an American. The failure to stem sexual assault and rape in the military runs counter to those ideals and shames us all." As part of the Defense Authorization Act for 2005, Congress established the Defense Task Force on Sexual Assault in the Military Services. The Task Force is charged with examining matters relating to sexual assault and giving an independent assessment of DoD policies and programs to combat sexual assault. The Task Force will report its findings and recommendations to the Secretary of Defense and the secretaries of the military services. This report, which may provide useful insights and strategies, is expected later in 2009. But DoD leaders should immediately take a strong position against sexual assault, with policy statements and actions in accordance with the following recommendations that are broadly applicable, including to the military academies.

Recommendations:

1. DoD should make clear that prevention of sexual assault a top priority across the Department of Defense, with a focus on both individual and command responsibility.
2. DoD should ensure that sexual assault prevention efforts are an integral part of regular military training at all levels and improve data collection efforts to better measure the effectiveness of this training.
3. DoD should ensure that an individual who has been assaulted receives confidential, expeditious, and respectful treatment and that perpetrators of sexual assault are subjected to appropriate criminal processes.
4. DoD should include in performance reviews the extent to which commanders are successful in fostering an environment in which individuals can serve without fear of sexual assault. Commanders who succeed should be recognized and commanders who fail should be penalized.

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