

Sexual Assault

Prevention & Response

A federal lawsuit filed in February alleges that the Department of Defense promoted a culture in which rape and sexual assault were treated with indifference, victims were targeted for retaliation and the entire issue was given short shrift by military leadership.

In response, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates told the House Armed Services Committee that the military has “zero tolerance” for sexual assault and has drastically increased the amount of training service members receive to adequately respond to and reduce the stigma associated with reporting incidents of sexual assault.

“It has no place in the U.S. military and cannot be tolerated,” Pentagon spokeswoman Cynthia Smith said. “The result of these crimes degrades morale, unit cohesion and can affect mission readiness.”

The Army’s efforts to train junior leaders in preventing and responding to incidents of sexual assault include a revamped lesson in the Warrior Leader Course that focuses on dispelling myths and emphasizing sensitivity.

ARMY POLICY: Sexual assault refers to offenses of a sexual nature that are committed without the lawful consent of the victim. This can include rape, forcible sodomy, indecent physical contact or sexual intercourse with a minor.

Besides the Army’s zero tolerance for such actions, sexual assault is a criminal offense that is punishable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Per-



U.S. Air Force photo by Margo Wright

petrators found guilty can face penalties ranging from one year in prison to a life sentence or even death in cases of rape.

Before prosecution, however, the responsibility for caring for victims of an assault often lies with first-line supervisors who must handle the situation with seriousness, timeliness and respect for the victim’s privacy.

TRENDS: Army sexual assault statistics show that the majority of victims knew the perpetrator, were assaulted in their barracks or home, were intoxicated or drug-impaired when they were assaulted, and delayed reporting the assault because of embarrassment or fear of retribution. The highest number of victims came from the junior enlisted ranks.

The Defense Department’s efforts to combat the problem do seem to be having an effect on the numbers of incidents, Gates told the House panel. The percentage of service members who reported a sexual assault dropped from

6.8 percent of women and 1.8 percent of men in 2006 to 4.4 percent of women and 0.9 percent of men in 2010.

“We are making headway,” Gates said. “The fact is, we aren’t where we should be. It is a grave concern, and we will keep working on it.”

RESPONSIBILITY: All leaders are charged with making the Army’s sexual assault prevention and response program work by reinforcing appropriate values and the message that sexual assault can and will be prevented.

When made aware of an incident, leaders must take immediate action to support the victim, get assistance for him or her, notify the chain of command, and protect the victim’s rights and confidentiality. Indeed, caring for a Soldier following such a trauma embodies the Warrior Ethos’ call to “never leave a fallen comrade.”

Donna Miles of the American Forces Press Service contributed to this story.



Responding to a sexual assault: Everyone's responsibility

THE VICTIM SHOULD:

If you are a victim of a sexual assault, your primary concern should be going to a **safe place**. From there, despite a desire to immediately shower or wash, **avoid destroying evidence by cleaning up**. Seek assistance from a **fellow Soldier you trust** and **contact the appropriate authorities**.

LEADERS SHOULD:

Respond to victims of sexual assault by **giving support, listening**, reassuring victims that **they are not to blame** and encouraging **official reporting**. The chain of command should be notified, but the victim's **confidentiality should be protected**. Get help; don't leave the victim alone.

RESTRICTED REPORTING

This allows victims to disclose details of an assault and receive medical treatment and counseling **without triggering an official investigation**. Reports can be made to **victim advocates, sexual assault response coordinators**, civilian or military **health care providers** or **chaplains**.

UNRESTRICTED REPORTING

Victims desiring an **official investigation** can report to those listed under "Restricted Reporting" as well as the **chain of command**, civilian or military **police, Army Community Services, Staff Judge Advocate, 911** or **Army One Source**. Information is shared only among those with a need to know.

RESOURCES

Army One Source provides confidential assistance to victims 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Call **1-800-464-8107** (toll-free) or **484-530-5889** collect from international locations.

DOD Sexual Assault Hotline

supplements Army One Source with confidential assistance to victims 9 a.m. – 9 p.m., Monday–Friday. Call **1-800-497-6261**.



Sgt. 1st Class Murphy Terry, left, serves as a unit victim advocate and equal opportunity adviser for the Soldier Support Institute at Fort Jackson, S.C. Victim advocates can be valuable resources for those traumatized by a sexual assault.

Photo by Kris Gonzalez

MYTH VS. FACT

Soldiers may believe various misconceptions regarding sexual assault. As junior leaders, it is important to be aware of the truth yourself and to ensure your Soldiers are able to separate myth from reality, too.

Myths:

- ✗ **People cannot be sexually assaulted against their will:** In many cases, attackers do use force of some kind, such as choking, beating, using a weapon, threats or intimidation.
- ✗ **Victims provoke sexual assault by their actions or dress:** Offenders often rationalize their crimes by claiming victims "asked for it." This way of thinking wrongfully blames the victim for the crime rather than the offender.
- ✗ **Victims who do not fight back have not been raped:** Rape occurs when victims are forced to have sex against their will, whether or not they fight back.
- ✗ **If individuals are not hysterical after a rape, they are lying:** People have very different reactions to traumatic events such as sexual assault. Often, victims may appear calm at first; the emotional effects are merely delayed.
- ✗ **Victims will not suffer any long-term effects unless physically harmed:** People can experience long-term emotional distress such as depression, withdrawal or anxiety.
- ✗ **Sexual assaults only affect women:** Men often do not report a sexual assault for fear of being seen as weak.
- ✗ **Underage Soldiers who are drinking or using drugs should not report a sexual assault for fear of getting in trouble:** Commanders can delay disciplinary action on any related offenses a victim may be involved in until after a sexual assault investigation is complete. Your safety and the safety of others in your unit may be at risk if an assault goes unreported.