



DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE  
**SEXUAL ASSAULT PREVENTION  
AND RESPONSE OFFICE**



## **STANDING STRONG FOR MILITARY SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT**

Speech Delivered by Rear Admiral Ann Burkhardt,  
Director of the DoD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO)  
At the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA) 43rd Annual Training Event  
San Diego, CA, August 15, 2017

Good morning. Thanks for having me here today. I speak for the entire Department of Defense when I say we appreciate all that the National Organization for Victim Assistance does to help victims of crime. From hosting this training event for the last 43 years – that’s since 1974, by the way! – to advocating for victims’ rights and compensation, to training crisis responders and facilitating a national response team. Your service to our nation is invaluable!

And thank you for your dedication to the people in the communities you serve. Our collective efforts are nothing without you, working every day to help victims of crime chart their paths to recovery.

I truly value opportunities like this to learn from you, share our expertise, and unite for a common cause. My predecessor spoke here last year and it is clear to me that this annual event is a must-attend opportunity for my office and many of our Department of Defense advocacy professionals. I’m told there are more than five hundred Service members and DoD Civilians at the conference this week; a number that is consistently high each year.

I think this speaks to the high priority our leadership places on advancing victim assistance within military service. It also gives you a glimpse of the thousands of certified victim advocates in the Department, working together to support survivors of sexual assault.

Sexual assault continues to be a significant challenge for us all – despite recent gains we’ve seen in the military, colleges and universities, and other segments of our society. We all have seen firsthand how this criminal act can forever alter lives and families. A broader concern within our armed forces, though, is that perpetration of sexual assault erodes the very fabric of trust and honor we expect from every Service member.

One incident of sexual assault, for example, can break the trust between members of a unit, distract our people from their mission, and degrade the lethality of the force. In short, one incident can pull multiple people and their focus away from national defense and our commitments to allies.

However, we all have seen how the right care and support can inspire hope. As both the Director of SAPRO and in my previous role leading the Navy’s 21<sup>st</sup> Century Sailor Office, I’ve seen how our dedicated people can inspire hope for survivors in the commands they serve every day. Using your advice – the advice from the civilian community – we have substantively changed Sexual Assault Prevention and Response in the military over the past ten years –

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applying education, research, and data analysis to make our program stronger and tailor resources to the unique needs of survivors.

We recognize, however, programs are nothing without great people providing a personalized response. Making sure the right people are available to stand with survivors is at the heart of all our efforts.

That's why this week's theme is so powerful to me. "Standing Strong." It speaks to me because recovery from sexual assault can be a tremendous and lengthy challenge. Therefore, our system of responders must be a source of enduring strength for survivors. So, today, I want to take a few minutes to talk about what has helped the Department of Defense stand strong for our military survivors.

First, we have found strength in collaboration. As I mentioned before, we learned from you the importance of professional victim advocacy. Our Sexual Assault Response Coordinators and Victim Advocates in the military form the cornerstone of our sexual assault response capability.

Our ongoing work with NOVA helped us professionalize these roles in the Department. NOVA adapted their national advocate credentialing program for the military culture and environment. Through the program, we've developed a corps of credentialed advocates who stand ready to serve survivors in every location we operate. Sixty eight thousand Service members and DoD civilians have been certified through our credentialing program since two thousand twelve.

We also recognize that this collaboration is important in how we support the survivor. NOVA, the Rape Abuse Incest National Network, Office for Victims of Crime, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, and other agencies have shaped how we support survivors – both on base and off.

Second, we find strength in community. As I've listened to victims recount their experiences, I've seen how important it is for survivors to have a knowledgeable and compassionate person at their side. Someone who can understand and comprehend the magnitude of the situation. Someone who can act by facilitating medical care, legal support, and mental health support. Someone who can guide them through what can be an arduous and emotional process. Through the advocate, survivors can re-discover their power to put their lives back together.

While advocacy professionals do indeed represent a lifeline for survivors, we cannot ask them to shoulder it all. Within the Department, we stand stronger for survivors of sexual assault by relying on overlapping roles.

Ours' has become a multifaceted program with professionals working side by side throughout the reporting, healthcare, investigative, and legal processes. This community response led us to enhance the skills of everyone involved. Our cadre of professionals carry

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with them the credentials of their profession, and they have received specialized training and education to better understand the impact of trauma.

I liken the thousands of people that make up our multifaceted response team to the bundled strands and overlapping sections of rope that give a safety net its strength. Individually, each makes an impact on the personnel in the commands they support. But as a collective group, they are advancing a movement that is creating real change within their communities and throughout our armed forces.

Who comprises our response community?

In addition to Sexual Assault Response Coordinators and Victim Advocates, they are the Sexual Assault Medical Forensic Examiners – specially-trained medical professionals who conduct SAFE exams and address specific concerns of the survivor.

They are the Special Victims Counsel and Victims Legal Counsel – dedicated lawyers who give survivors a voice, the power of knowledge, and confidence in the court room.

They are the Military Chaplains, who are there to listen, help, and provide spiritual advice, with compassion and confidentiality.

They are the Investigators, Prosecutors, and other legal personnel that comprise our Special Victim Investigation and Prosecution capability within each Military Department – all of whom must complete specialized training, which includes the effects of trauma on memory and recall.

In short, real people who provide real solutions at every step of the process. Now, I can't say we are perfect. But we are a learning organization. And when multiple organizations work as a community, it weaves a tighter net of support for our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines.

The third source of strength is our commitment. We have a unique mission, yes. But at its heart we are an organization comprised of people who understand what this problem means to an effective fighting force. We engage every individual – from the Secretary of Defense, the Service Secretaries, and the Chiefs of the Military Services, to the newest recruits and future Service members on delayed entry – to be part of the solution. To help stop the crime.

We are asking all Service members, especially those who aren't part of our SAPR program, to reconsider their role. As part of our forthcoming prevention approach, we're looking at how small changes at the individual level can spur monumental change in a population. It's one thing to know. It's another to do!

As for leaders, the military isn't the military without the chain of command. Through constant dialogue, engagement, and education, we are enabling leaders to be laser focused on promoting healthy operating environments.

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When leaders buy-in, junior Service members buy-in. As you've heard from us before, this starts at the very top. We are fortunate to have had consistent engagement and action on this issue at the highest levels of the Department for a number of years now – with the past four Secretaries of Defense making sexual assault prevention and response a top priority.

In short, this issue will not fall off the radar. We won't let it.

Through these sources of strength – Collaboration, Community, and Commitment – we have felt the tide begin to turn.

Our most recent data show Sexual assault is occurring less often among Service members and a greater share of Service members are choosing to report the crime. We estimate one in three service member victims are now reporting and getting help – a much larger proportion than the one in fourteen we heard from in official reports 10 years ago.

This is a significant milestone that speaks to a growing confidence and trust in our response system.

Progress? We can demonstrate some in a number of areas – but we are careful not to confuse progress with success. Despite major declines in occurrences of sexual assault, far too many of our people still find their lives changed by a perpetrator of this crime. And far too many continue to suffer in silence.

I'm grateful for forums like this, where we can come together to talk about tough challenges. My staff and I look forward to sharing more about our program and learning from you as the week goes on. We share a common interest and a common goal – helping people recapture their lives. It is in our nature to take care of one another, whether we are talking about someone's sister or brother in arms, a college classmate, or a member of the community. As we say in the military: No one gets left behind.

I'm reminded of a passage I read recently. It's from a short, but inspirational book by Simon Sinek, a leadership author you may have heard of. On the subject of perseverance, he writes... "Life is difficult and dangerous. Anyone who would attempt to do it alone is simply mad. ...if the journey of life is to be filled with setbacks and disappointments, with confusion and uncertainty, it makes sense that we should trust others to join us on the journey. As individuals, we're useless. We can't lift heavy weight and we can't solve complex problems. But together? Together we are remarkable."

So again, thank you all for the remarkable things you do for victims of crime. Never lose sight of just how far one small act of kindness can go for someone in need.

Our collective collaboration, community and commitment allow us to stand strong together as a source of strength for those who need us.

I can assure you we will remain committed to preventing this crime in every way we can and providing first-class care and support to our Service member survivors – just as you remain committed to those survivors in our cities, counties and states.

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If you see someone in a uniform this week, please do me a favor. Ask them about their role and where they are assigned. And then – tell them yours and where you work. You will never know where your military neighbors live and work until you ask!

Thank you for the honor of a few minutes to speak with you – enjoy the week!