

OPENING STATEMENT
OF
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BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS:
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

HEARING:
"INVISIBLE WOUNDS: EXAMINING THE DISABILITY COMPENSATION BENEFITS PROCESS FOR
VICTIMS OF MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA"

JULY 18, 2012

Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member McNerney, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting us to appear today. I am the Deputy Director of the Department's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office and my colleague is Dr. Nate Galbreath, the Senior Executive Advisor for Research and Training.

Let me begin saying by restating Secretary Panetta's bottom line on this serious issue: sexual assault has no place in the Department of Defense. Secretary Panetta has put great emphasis on dealing with the crimes of sexual assault. It is an affront to the basic American values we defend and it is a stain on the good honor of our armed forces. Since our policy was instituted in 2005, we have remained committed to our vision: a culture free from sexual assault.

Our uniformed leadership is committed to driving this change. In May, the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued an unprecedented Strategic Direction, signed by eight four-star leaders, including the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Chiefs of each of the Military Services and the National Guard.

This direction calls on the entire force to focus on four areas: enhancing awareness, encouraging open communication and timely reporting, holding offenders accountable, and providing responsive victim services. Our goal is to create a culture that will not tolerate sexual assault.

While we are absolutely committed to combating and eliminating sexual assault from the armed forces, we remain acutely aware of the brutal facts that point to the challenges we face. Although the Department received 3,100 sexual assault reports in 2011 -- offenses ranging from wrongful sexual contact to rape -- our anonymous survey data suggests that in 2010 as many as 19,000 service members were victims of some form of sexual assault. It remains unacceptable to us that we would have even one of these crimes occurring in our armed forces.

We have undertaken many enhancements to support victims, encourage reporting, and increase the availability of documents for veterans. Let me first speak briefly about some of our efforts to care for victims:

- In Feb 2011, we launched the DoD Safe Helpline, a worldwide 24/7 crisis support service for members who are sexual assault victims. To date more than 47,000 unique users have visited the website and more than 4,000 individuals have received live services. We are professionalizing our key positions that support victims by designing a SARC and victim advocate certification program. It will consist of credentialing that aligns with the National Advocate Credentialing program.
- In December, the Secretary of Defense mandated increased retention for sexual assault documentation. For Unrestricted Reports, documents will be kept for 50 years. This was specifically designed to assist transitioning service members and our veteran's who may desire to make a claim at a later date.
- Also in December, the Secretary created a new protection for victims. They now have the option to request a permanent or temporary transfer from their command or base, or to a different location within their command or base. Victims make the request to their commander and must receive an answer in 72 hours. If denied for some reason, the victim may appeal to the first general officer in their chain of command.

I'd also like to mention several new initiatives that will enhance prevention and accountability:

- In December, the President signed an Executive Order that added a new privilege that protects communications between a victim and victim advocate when a case is handled by a military court, enhancing victim trust in the Department's response system.
- Our Sexual Assault Incident Database gained initial operating capability in March. This tool will standardize reporting for oversight and accountability and help us manage victim care. For victims making an Unrestricted Report, the form will be maintained in DSAID for 50 years, a capability we designed into the system specifically for transitioning service members.
- To advance accountability, Secretary Panetta directed the initial decision on cases of rape, sexual assault, forcible sodomy, and attempts will be elevated to a commander who is at least a Colonel or Navy captain who holds special court-martial convening authority. This mandate became effective June 28 and ensures an experienced commander will make these important decisions.
- In April, Secretary Panetta also directed several other new policies: establishing Special Victims Unit capabilities; requiring sexual assault policies be explained to all Service members within

14 days of their entrance on active duty; allowing reserve and Guard members who have been sexually assaulted to remain in their active-duty status to obtain treatment and support; and he will require annual organizational climate assessments.

- Finally, at the Secretary's direction, in May we conducted a review of existing pre-command and senior enlisted leader Sexual Assault training in the Marine Corps, Navy, and the Air Force and we reviewed the Army's newly developed program. We completed our report last month and have made recommendations to the Secretary. And there are additional oversight assessments on going, to include a review of SARC training and an upcoming Joint Base assessment.

We want the committee to be aware of the work we've done to collaborate directly with the Department of Veterans' Affairs. During last two years, our office has visited twenty VA facilities to provide education on our program. These sessions have been well attended by administrators, providers, and even patients. We have also provided educational briefings to the VA's Military Sexual Trauma coordinators, training hundreds on the specific elements of our program relevant to their mission.

Just last month, we also augmented the DoD Safe Helpline for Transitioning Service Member. This tool recognizes the special needs of victims of sexual assault and helps smooth the transition to the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Despite these many efforts, we have much more to do. Secretary Panetta and our uniformed leaders are committed to creating a climate of mutual trust, respect, and dignity.

We are committed to creating a climate in which victims feel confident that they will be believed, that their reports will be taken seriously, and there will be no fear of retaliation.

We are committed to creating a climate in which bystanders act to intervene to prevent assaults.

We are committed to providing the full range of services to all victims of sexual assault.

We are committed to continuing our work with the Department of Veterans' Affairs to further improve victims' transition from active duty to veteran status.

Most important, we are committed to ensuring that discretion over how to report and decisions regarding treatment and support services rest entirely with the victim.

Through this approach, we aim to create a culture that is intolerant of sexual assault, one that cares for our victims, one that inspires trust and confidence, one that encourages reporting, and one that enables our military justice system to hold offenders accountable.

We appreciate the committee's attention to this important issue and we look forward to your questions.