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Combatting Sexual Assault in the Military

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I want to first thank NOVA for its strong leadership and service in supporting those harmed by crime and crisis. I continue to be inspired by their critical work and the tremendously positive impact the organization has on survivors and those who support them. I want to thank you all for your service in this important effort. It is a great honor to be here – to address the military’s mission to eliminate sexual assault from our armed forces. On that note, I see some uniforms out in the audience. Let me ask our Service members both in and out of uniform to stand and be recognized.

I have been in my job now for fourteen and a half months as the Department of Defense’s Director of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office. It is my job to oversee the Department’s comprehensive approach to fighting this crime.

In other words, I am the point man for Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel on the military sexual assault prevention and response program. I can assure you Secretary Hagel is committed to the mission. I was in his office twice during his first week on the job talking about the issue of sexual assault. In the past three months, I’ve been in his office every week, where he leads a meeting with the Department’s most senior leaders, holding them accountable for progress and results. Ours is not a static program. We are continuously assessing ourselves and our performance to make our program more effective; to do more in prevention and training, victim advocacy, and in promoting a climate of dignity and respect – all critical to stopping this crime.

So this morning, I want to tell you what we are doing about it – the actions we are taking right now to prevent the crime from occurring in the first place; and when a crime does occur, pursuing justice and ensuring that survivors are afforded privacy, offered a wide range of professional support, and provided access to safe and confidential health care and support services.

Underpinning our entire program is the need for culture change – where every troop – from new recruit to General Officer – is assured of living and performing in an

environment of trust, dignity, and respect, free from the threat of sexual assault. A culture where all allegations of inappropriate behavior are treated with the utmost seriousness; a culture where victim privacy is protected and victims are treated with sensitivity; a culture where bystanders are motivated to intervene; and a culture where offenders know they will be held appropriately accountable.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am no stranger to leading culture change. My recent background includes helping to de-stigmatize mental health care for our combat veterans, more fully integrating women into the armed forces, and managing the Department's successful repeal of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell.' The common denominator in all these complex institutional challenges has been an unequivocal commitment to mission success, the readiness of the force, and the welfare of our men and women in uniform. These efforts succeeded, in part, because we established clear standards of behavior and held people at all levels responsible and accountable to these standards. And it is no different with our mission to rid the force of sexual assault.

Solutions on tough issues demand a clear understanding of the problem; and we know that sexual assault is a problem in our society as well as our military. But we must hold ourselves in the military to a higher standard.

Last year, based on a Department-wide survey, we estimated that about 6.1% of active duty military women and 1.2% of active duty military men were victims of unwanted sexual contact – which encompasses a wide range of conduct from rape to groping. When you compare this estimate with the number of actual reports we received, just over 3,000, it is clear that sexual assault is an underreported crime in our military, just as it is in our civilian society. It is a crime that is an affront to values our military defends and erodes the cohesion our military units demand.

So what are we doing about it? We are listening to victims and survivors to learn from those most closely impacted. We are studying practices of other institutions across the country to assess what works for them and what doesn't. We are looking internally and externally – engaging professionals, stakeholders, and advocacy groups across the DoD and across the country, assessing best practices and making them common practices in our Services, the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps.

Most important, we are constantly assessing our prevention and response programs. As I said earlier, this is not a static program; the program of last year is not the one of today – nor the one of tomorrow – it is one we strive to continuously improve and make more effective.

To this end, we revised our overarching Department-wide Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Strategy in May, delivering coherence and unity of effort across the Department and in the Services. In the past four months, the Secretary of Defense has

directed sixteen new measures – designed to gain greater consistency, to enhance victim support, investigative quality, and oversight – and to drive real change. We are taking action, and while we have made some progress, we know we must do more. Let me take a few minutes to describe some of these changes.

First of all, we will do more to protect and support sexual assault victims. We are establishing a special victim counsel program in each military service that will provide legal advice and representation to victims of sexual assault throughout the justice process. In plain language, the military will now provide an attorney – a legal advocate in their corner with an attorney-client relationship – to represent victims in the legal process. First established in January as a pilot program in the Air Force, their Special Victims Counsel Program made such a positive difference for hundreds of victims; the Secretary ordered that each Service implement a similar program by January of next year. This program has profound potential to instill greater confidence and support for victims across the military.

As a further support measure, we are implementing a new policy that allows commanders to reassign alleged sexual assault offenders from the local environment. This adds balance and flexibility to our existing transfer program, which since December 2011 has allowed victims to request an expedited reassignment from their unit and location.

We will do more to enhance and ensure the quality of criminal and pre-trial investigations and the administration of military justice. As part of our effort to improve the quality of investigations, we are expanding our evaluations of closed sexual assault cases. Last year, the Department's Office of Violent Crime in the Inspector General's Office conducted a review of over 500 closed adult sexual assault cases, determining which ones met standards and which ones required further investigation. The Inspector General is now developing a plan to repeat this assessment in 2014, ensuring continued investigative oversight and accountability.

By December of this year, we will make changes to our investigative process to enhance pre-trial investigations. As part of a DoD-wide standardized approach, military lawyers, as opposed to appointed line officers, will now conduct all pretrial investigative hearings, known as Article 32 hearings, for sexual assault-related cases.

We are doing more to assess our military justice system, by supporting the work of an independent panel of national experts, appointed by Congress and the Secretary. The panel, known as the Response System's Panel, is conducting an independent review of how the military investigates, prosecutes, and adjudicates sexual assaults. I have appeared before this panel and they are meeting with commanders, victim advocates, prosecutors and investigators in their efforts, with a report due in June 2014.

We are doing more to improve overall command climate and command accountability. Essentially, building checks and balances into the system to ensure first responders, advocates, medical professionals, and commanders at all levels perform as expected.

Ensuring that we have a climate of dignity and respect is central to our approach. To enhance accountability and improve insight into subordinate command climates, effective this past July, we are requiring that the results of annual command climate surveys be provided to senior commanders the next level up in the chain of command. This will provide expanded visibility and ultimately great accountability in holding commanders directly accountable for the climates in their units, especially ones that may condone or tolerate sexist behavior, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.

We are also doing more to engage the entire force on the issue. Anything we do that is Department-wide gets a lot of attention. And that's exactly why Secretary Hagel ordered a Department-wide stand-down in June of this year to address sexual assault prevention and response. Every unit around the world, in every Service at every base took dedicated time to communicate the specific standards and responsibilities to every Soldier, Sailor, Airman and Marine on how they are to treat everyone with respect.

Our Service members take care of each other on the battlefield better than any other military in the world – it is time we apply this same ethos of care, this same trust, in combatting sexual assault in our ranks. The stand-down included extensive background reviews, credential checks, and refresher training for all recruiters, victim advocates and sexual assault response coordinators. This stand-down in June was combined with a DoD-wide climate inspection in July to ensure every workplace in our military is free from offensive or degrading materials. This unprecedented action sent a message across the force that we are serious about making lasting culture change.

Let me close by reporting out on a few upcoming milestones. Through the Defense Sexual Assault Advocate Certification Program (D-SAACP), which we operate through a contract with NOVA, we will have over 20,000 certified first responders by October 1st. These professionally trained Sexual Assault Response Coordinators and Victim Advocates are a critical first line of support for sexual assault victims. We would not have achieved this milestone without the tremendous work of Will's team at NOVA. So thank you all for what you have done.

We are also approaching a major milestone in our effort to provide consistent training across the workforce. By October 1st, we will have implemented a standardized baseline of core competencies and learning objectives for sexual assault training programs DoD-wide, ensuring that Service members at every level receive the necessary knowledge and training about sexual assault prevention and response.

This year, we also did more with one of our best advocacy tools, the DoD Safe Helpline, expanding its capability to provide peer-to-peer support in a secure environment called the Safe HelpRoom. The Safe HelpRoom is a ground-breaking online service that allows victims to connect with one another in a moderated and secure online environment at SafeHelpline.org. Collectively, the Safe Helpline and HelpRoom have helped over 14,000 people since first launched in 2011.

If there is one thing I hope you take from today's message, it is that the Department of Defense is taking aggressive action to affect real change. Action, not words, is the critical difference.

As I head back to the Pentagon, my next focus is on developing measurements that will allow us to determine the impact of these actions I have outlined for you today. Our Service members deserve it; the American people expect it; and we will deliver.

At the conclusion of this plenary session, I'll be hosting a meeting for Sexual Assault Response Coordinators and Victim Advocates in the Clark Room.

Let me conclude by saying that I am proud of our military. Just as our military is known for its remarkable ability to fight our nation's battles, let me assure you we are equally committed to winning our battle against sexual assault. When we get this right – and we will – we will serve as an example for the rest of our great nation in combatting this terrible crime.