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Abuse Cases Test Trust at Academy

Adult Misconduct with Midshipman Seen as New Threat

By Bradley Olson and Josh Mitchell, Sun Reporters

After years of highly publicized incidents of midshipmen sexually abusing classmates, the Naval Academy appears to have turned a corner with a prevention and education program that has been held up as a model for other universities to emulate.

Studies, including one released Friday by the Defense Department, show that misconduct incidents have dropped at the academy and an insidious macho culture is giving way to more tolerance and self-policing.

But now the academy is reeling from a string of incidents that surfaced during the past year involving sexual misconduct by people in positions of authority – incidents that some fear could reverse the progress and leave midshipmen less willing to report abuse.

Moreover, abuse by ranking officers could prove more difficult to eliminate because of the hierarchical nature of military authority, within which absolute obedience is stressed.

In the most recent incident, an HIV-positive Navy chaplain pleaded guilty Thursday to exploiting his rank to have sex – forced and consensual – with two academy students. It follows revelations this year that a Navy doctor was secretly recording midshipmen having sex in his Annapolis home and that a former academy instructor and officer allegedly worked as an escort.

The chaplain, John Thomas Matthew Lee, 42, of Burke, Va., pleaded guilty to forcible sodomy, aggravated assault and other charges.

The cases have led to concerns that the attempts of academy officials to encourage midshipmen to report crimes – encouragement that often depends on the trust of adults – could be irreparably harmed.

Delilah Rumburg, executive director of the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, said her “greatest fear” is that cases such as the chaplain’s will make midshipmen more reluctant to report crimes to military and church leaders.

What's what happens every time you have a case like this: 'Oh, my gosh. Here's another example. I can't trust the system,'" said Rumburg, who co-chaired a Pentagon-sponsored panel in 2005 that investigated sexual violence at the service academies. "It really does shatter what we try to build, those you can trust."

Cmdr. Ricks Polk, who leads the Naval Academy's sexual assault education and prevention programs, acknowledged the possibility of damage to the school's "tremendous effort" to encourage midshipmen to report sexual misconduct.

"It does erode the very fabric of what we're trying to create in a mentor-trust relationship," he said, noting that he could not discuss specific allegations. "But I don't think it's unique to the academy."

The Defense Department report released Friday showed a major decline in the number of sexual-assault accusations at the Naval Academy for the 2006-2007 academic year.

Midshipmen reported five incidents of sexual assault, a legal term that includes rape, forcible sodomy, indecent assault and unwanted sexual contact. That compares with 12 the previous year and 17 the year before that. Since the 2001-2002 academic year, there have been 62 reported assaults at the Annapolis military college.

This year's total at the Naval Academy was one-third the total at either of the other two defense service academies. The U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., had 19 and U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y., had 16.

Academy officials and others have long pointed to the declining numbers as signs of marked improvement from just a few years ago, when the Air Force Academy was rocked by a sexual-assault scandal that led military officials to revamp policies across its vast bureaucracy.

But some longtime critics believe the recent cases involving officers expose a flaw in the academy's robust preventive efforts, one that assumes adults will always do what's right. For instance, Cmdr. Kevin Ronan, the Navy doctor convicted of surreptitiously recording midshipmen, hosted the students at his home through the school's "sponsor" program.

The Rev. Dorothy Mackey, a former Air Force officer who leads Survivors Take Action Against Abuse by Military Personnel, a victim advocacy organization, said cases involving authority figures who have abused cadets and midshipmen go back years and trace back to the military's inability to properly educate and hold accountable adults who commit crimes.

"They don't go after the rapists or officers who have been sexually assaulting cadets or their own or anyone else they come in contact with," she said. "They have gone after victims to maintain the rank structure of these officers."

Midshipmen and cadets are particularly vulnerable to abuse from officers because they are taught to obey them, and many fear repercussions of reporting incidents involving officers, said Anita Sanchez, a spokeswoman for the Miles Foundation, a victim advocacy group.

“These individuals are not just faculty members. They’re not even department chairmen. These are the ones where, when they walk the paths of the academy, these middies have to salute them and answer, ‘Yes sir,’ ‘No ma’am,’” Sanchez said.

Polk, the academy’s sexual assault response coordinator, acknowledged that the academy’s 2,000 military and civilian adult employees receive less training in assault prevention than the midshipmen.

The training generally lasts an hour for groups of 50 to 100 people and includes what constitutes assault and harassment, the warning signs of sexual misconduct and where to go with allegations.

“The midshipmen get a more detailed discussion because they’re in a more developmental stage of their life,” he said. “With adults, we don’t get into as much detail because of the expectation that they know what’s right based on their pay grade and experience and those types of things.”

That assumption could be part of the problem, critics say.

“Part of it may be just a feeling among some of these people that they can take these risks and get away with it,” said the Rev. Thomas Doyle, a priest and former Air Force chaplain who works with assault victims.

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