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Caucus Opens Hearing Today on Sexual Assaults in Military

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WASHINGTON - Punctuating today's scheduled testimony during a congressional hearing on the military's handling of sexual assault cases will be calls to give troops the same rights and protections afforded civilian rape victims.

That is the common subplot, hearing organizers say, to what is expected to be stirring testimony from experts and at least one of more than 100 female soldiers who have returned from war duty overseas and reported assaults by fellow troops.

Among the witnesses testifying at the Congressional Women's Caucus hearing will be Jennifer Machmer, an Army captain who told The Denver Post in February that she was raped in Kuwait but believed her attacker, a master sergeant, was not prosecuted. She contends she did not receive counseling, was threatened with charges of fraternization and had to continue working in the same area with her attacker. Military officials have declined to discuss her case.

Experts are expected to testify that the military must do a better job of giving victims protection after assaults, as well as assistance commonly available to civilians.

The Department of Defense does not grant confidentiality protections to military personnel who seek counseling and other services. It also does not provide advocates to all sexual-assault victims. Testimony is expected from experts urging the military adopt such reforms quickly, in part so victims will feel empowered to pursue prosecution of their attackers.

'If there's one message I would like to send during this hearing, that is it,' said Scott Berkowitz, president and founder of Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network.

Providing advocates to victims also can help prevent soldiers such as Machmer from facing penalties or pressures after they report, according to Christine Hansen, executive director of the Miles Foundation advocacy organization. She also will testify.

The armed services have handled sex-assault and domestic-violence offenders with widespread leniency, The Post found in an investigation of the military justice system, while victims have been deprived of advocacy and counseling services.

Anita Blair, deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for personnel programs, who has led studies on military gender issues, is expected to testify on behalf of the military. In a recent Senate hearing, Department of Defense leaders acknowledged they are exploring ways to improve response to rape allegations.

Among the problems reported by sexual-assault victims in recent months: A lack of counseling and confidentiality after they report, poor medical treatment/evidence handling, and commanders' disregard of their complaints.

Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y., co-chairwoman of the caucus, and other caucus leaders have assailed the military's record over the years in allowing an oppressive environment for women, urging House and Senate leaders to conduct full investigations.

'There's something about the culture that allows these crimes to continue,' Slaughter said.

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