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Pentagon Confronts Enemy Within: Sexual Assault

By Cory Reiss, Sun Washington Bureau

Often ashamed and carrying their burden for years, about 150 victims of sexual assault in the military have sought counseling at an outpatient clinic that opened six months ago at the VA's Bay Pines Medical Center.

The numbers continue to grow at the Center for Sexual Trauma Services in St. Petersburg, also home to an 18-bed residential program, underscoring a problem that has plagued the military for decades, and the evolving government reaction.

"The response is greater than even I expected it to be," said Carol O'Brien, the center's director and a psychologist. "It's kind of one of those things – if you build it they will come."

Many veterans battle psychological stress from bombs and bullets, but others leave the military with mental scars inflicted by their comrades.

The Pentagon last month released data showing that 2,374 men and women reported sexual assaults and rapes involving soldiers in 2005. Some, but not all, will seek help when they leave the military at hospitals in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

After decades of foot-dragging, a series of scandals in the 1990s and cases emanating from Iraq and Afghanistan, the Pentagon is engaged in its strongest offensive yet against sexual assault and harassment. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld began policy reviews and revisions in the last two years, but Congress, dissatisfied with the pace and scope, has issued its own orders.

The Pentagon is working to comply with congressional orders that took effect last year, including for new support programs for sexual assault victims on bases and among deployed units in war zones. The military also is adjusting to a rewrite of military law that Congress tucked into a defense bill late last year in an effort to increase prosecutions.

The data last month showed a 40 percent increase in sexual assault reports compared to 2004. The military says the increase is due to a policy begun in June 2005 allowing victims to report crimes anonymously and without investigation.

Debby Tucker, executive director of the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, called the military's attitude adjustment "absolutely phenomenal."

"Overcoming the denial has taken years and years," she said.

Slow Awareness

Carole Turner, director of the women veterans health program at the VA, said the department began screening new patients in 2002 for military sexual trauma, which includes sexual harassment, assault and rape. Since then, 17,000 women – or 20 percent – have reported being victims.

A much smaller percentage of screened male patients, 2 percent, reported being victims, but the number, about 25,000, is larger because veterans and the armed forces are predominantly male. Cases involving women, who have grown to about 15 percent of the armed services, tend to receive the most attention.

Experts on sexual assault say how military commanders and prosecutors handle cases can have deep psychological effects.

“Our society is changing and certainly the military is changing in trying to promote better knowledge and accountability,” said Linda Feldthausen, a clinical psychologist who is the military sexual trauma coordinator at the Malcom Randall VA Medical Center in Gainesville. “So we may see people reporting sooner as a result of that.”

She coordinates services for two hospitals and nine outpatient clinics in the VA network covering North Florida and South Georgia.

Most victims inside and outside the military don’t report assaults until years later, if at all. Vietnam-era nurses are among the most likely to be stepping forward at VA hospitals now, several experts said.

Vietnam Veterans of America last month asked Congress for stricter enforcement of sex crimes in the military. Rick Weidman, legislative director for the group, said younger women would only add to the demand as their ranks grow.

“The shape of the veterans population of the future will continue to shift,” he said.

Experts disagree about whether sexual assault increases during deployments.

Christine Hansen, executive director of the Miles Foundation, which assists military sexual assault and domestic violence victims, said reports spiked at the end of the first Gulf War, leading to military policy shifts. Congress also established programs in 1992 at major VA facilities to address sexual assault.

Hansen said reports to the foundation of domestic abuse have skyrocketed since Sept. 11, 2001, often involving soldiers returning home from combat. The foundation also is involved in 430 sexual assault cases from Iraq, Afghanistan and the rest of the combat zone, she said.

“This has not been dealt with,” said Rep. Christopher Shays of Connecticut, chairman of a subcommittee with jurisdiction over the military that will investigate.

Case Dismissed

Roger Kaplan, spokesman for the Pentagon's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, which was formed in 2004, said the military could respond anywhere in the world to assault reports after training 1,000 victim advocates and coordinators last year. He said like society, the military has come to realize sexual assault is more common than thought.

People involved in the issue expect reported incidents to grow before leveling off.

"Whatever shortcomings we have had in the past," Kaplan said, "we are absolutely dedicated to eradicating sexual assault in our ranks."

Many critics blame low rates of prosecutions and convictions on the state of military law. The current military statute on rape and carnal knowledge of a minor consists of about 100 words, but Congress last year wrote new detailed statutes of about 3,500 words meant to equalize the Uniform Code of Military Justice with federal civilian law. Stalking was made an explicit offense for the first time.

Most of the changes take effect next year to give the Pentagon time to overhaul its manual for courts-martial. "We're hoping this will make it easier to prosecute these cases," Hansen said.

A Pentagon official downplayed the changes, saying military case law and rules already allow prosecution of all sex-related cases with enough evidence, including stalking.

Of the sexual assault and rape reports last year, investigators disposed of cases involving 1,474 alleged offenders by the end of 2005. Commanders disciplined 274 of them: 79 by court-martial, 91 by nonjudicial penalties and 104 with discharges and administrative punishments.

Of the rest, 641 were dismissed for lack of evidence or were unsubstantiated and 207 involved offenders who could not be identified or would be subject to civilian or foreign authorities. The military will report on the roughly 1,000 unfinished cases next year.

Victim advocates say the military has a long way to go to match civilian law, although sex-related charges are tough to prove in civilian courts. The Miles Foundation gave a briefing last week for lawmakers and congressional aides to urge more action on sexual assault and domestic violence.

"The military is lagging behind," Hansen said.

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