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Pentagon Offers New Policy on Sex Abuse

Panel Skeptical After Past Failures

By Andrew Mollison, Cox Washington Bureau

[Washington] – Pentagon officials told Congress on Thursday that their latest plan to reduce and respond to sexual assaults within the military will work better than the previous 17.

Openly skeptical members of a House Armed Forces subcommittee peppered the officials with questions about how and when the services will make the nine policy changes recommended in May by the Department of Defense's task force on care for victims of sexual assault.

"I think we're in real danger of losing the faith and trust of the female contingent of the military, and that would be a catastrophe," said Rep. John McHugh (R-N.Y.), the panel's chairman. "How do we assure them we're sincere this time? After 18 studies in 15 years, for whatever reason, it hasn't happened."

The latest set of proposed changes was crafted in 90 days by a task force directed by Ellen Embrey, a deputy assistant secretary of defense.

"I don't doubt that they did a good job with the information they had," said Rep. Loretta Sanchez (D-Calif.). "But the study didn't tell me that much more than we knew from the earlier studies."

Embrey's task force called on the department's military and civilian leaders to join outside experts at a "summit" on sexual assault. In a few days of concentrated effort, they would revamp the department's enforcement policies, find better ways to protect the privacy of victims, create a more open system for disposing of sexual assault cases and set the stage for establishing "an expert, full-spectrum sexual assault response capability" in each service.

The Pentagon has begun implementing the report, according to David Chu, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld endorsed the report, an office on sexual assaults will open in the Pentagon within a few weeks, the summit will be held this summer and most of the department's new system for collecting data on sexual assaults will be in place by the end of September, Chu told the subcommittee.

Victims' advocates, who testified after the Pentagon witnesses, generally agreed with the report's recommendations, but offered more of their own.

"The report was valid for what it did, but it lacked the perspective of the victim," who is too often afraid to report or seek treatment, said Juliet Walters, training director for the Austin, Texas-based National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence. Somehow, she said, the Defense Department will have to start "changing a culture that tolerates sexual violence to one that condemns it."

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