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Air Force Urged To Put Priority On Aid To Victim

By Beverly Creamer, Advertiser Education Writer

In looking at how to deal with the victims of sexual assault, Pacific Air Forces has consulted with a Hawaii expert on sexual violence who advocated a system where victims' needs are put ahead of legal action.

Adriana Ramelli, executive director of the civilian Sex Abuse Treatment Center, urged officials three months ago to put victims first, offer 24-hour hot line services "so a person can call someone immediately," and make sure crisis teams have specialized training and are skilled in handling sexual assault and victim needs.

"If you're looking at a victim-oriented system, the victim's needs come first and the legal system is second," Ramelli told Air Force officials in December.

"The message you want to give to the community is that 'We are here and when this happens, we've got trained people. We know how to respond, and you can call us anytime because we're there to assist you.'"

Earlier this week, Pacific Air Forces released a comprehensive review of sexual assault on 12 bases stretching from Alaska and Hawaii to Guam, Japan, Singapore and South Korea. In a two-year period between 2001 and 2003, there were 92 rape allegations, 11 of them at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii.

As a result of the review, the Pacific Air Forces command has indicated it will strengthen support for victims and educate personnel on the issue of sexual assault.

New rules for young dorm residents - including increased supervision, curfews and limits on alcohol use - are among the suggestions for improvements at Hickam.

"Although coed dorms are a fact of Air Force life, we owe our young men and women a safe place to retreat from the occasional pressures of work and a coed environment," Gen. William J. Begert, the Hickam-based commander of Pacific Air Forces, who ordered the study of sexual assault statistics and response.

"That place should be their dorm room."

Because alcohol use was a factor in about 60 percent of the cases studied, Begert also asked Air Force commanders to consider ways to limit drinking in the dorms.

He noted that Elemendorf Air Force Base in Alaska banned drinking in its dorms in 2002. Ramelli, however, said coed dorms should not be a factor affecting assaults. Rape is a crime of violence, not availability, she said.

“That’s possibly why you have young women hesitant to report,” she said. “She thinks they’re going to ask, ‘What did you do to create this situation?’ But it’s about who is this person who took advantage of you - not about drinking, taking risks, leaving doors open. It’s not about the woman’s behavior at all.”

Meanwhile, the Army has its own study under way to assess the situation on its bases and to look at procedures for handling sexual assault and its victims.

But that study is just beginning, and no data or numbers are yet available, according to Mary Markovinovic, chief of the news division for U.S. Army Pacific.

However, five years ago, the Pacific division started a 24-hour victim witness liaison program at the battalion level that has become a model for bases throughout the country.

“It sets in place procedures to get the person the best help they can, and also record any evidence as well,” said Maj. Thomas Hill, assistant chief of the department of social work at Tripler Army Medical Center.

“When a person is sexually assaulted, they weren’t in control, so we want their feelings of control to be supported as much as we possibly can.”

Victim witness liaisons work one-on-one with victims all the way through the process, including accompanying them to court for procedures that may ensue.

The Marine Corps and Navy have also embraced advocate programs, with one-on-one support for victims.

“When an assault occurs, protecting the victim is our top priority,” said Navy Lt. David Benham, media officer for the Pacific Fleet.

Of the 500 hot line calls handled annually by the Sex Abuse Treatment Center based at Kapi’olani Medical Center for Women and Children, a small percentage come from military personnel, said Ramelli. She believes that those women come for help because of the strict confidentiality offered.

“That is often the biggest barrier (to reporting,)” she said. “For any victim of assault, that’s a critical component. It also involves ‘Do I have a choice in reporting this?’ The victims need to know they have that choice to press a charge or make a report.”

Ramelli said that when a victim discovers the military standing of her assailant there may be hesitation to report.

It's the crisis worker who discusses options, including going through medical evidence collection and talking about a police report. Some victims may not wish to press charges at first, but may change their minds later. That's why it's important to collect evidence within the first 72 hours, she said.

“Probably one of the best statements you can give to someone who has been assaulted is ‘We care about you,’” she said. “After that, let's find out about the legal system. Oftentimes, if they've heard you're supportive and you'll be with them, they will change their mind and go through it (a trial.) What you'll find, most times, is they want justice. They truly want justice.”

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