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Changes to Pentagon Sexual Misconduct Policy Draw Mixed Reaction

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A broad proposal from sexual misconduct advocacy groups, calling for sweeping measures to change the Pentagon's sexual harassment and assault policy, received mixed reaction this week as some House legislators conceded that the legislation would be duplicating the military's recent efforts to handle sexual harassment and assault.

The Miles Foundation, an advocacy group that led the initiative and provides services to victims of violence associated with the military, expects Rep. Louise M. Slaughter, D-N.Y., to introduce the bill in October. With the support of other lawmakers in the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, Miles Foundation officials anticipate the measure passing by the end of fiscal 2005.

The Training, Assessment, Prevention and Services to Address Sexual and Domestic Violence in the U.S. Armed Forces Act, or TAPS Act, would change the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which sets forth rules for addressing sex assault crimes for military personnel, and creates standardized policies, including a wider definition of sexual conduct, throughout the armed forces.

Slaughter said in a news release that the Caucus hopes to put through a bill that would make significant changes in the military to end violence against women, but some members of the Caucus were not as supportive. A spokesman for Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., said the legislation might not be necessary because the Defense Department is moving forward to change its policies on sexual harassment and assault.

Recent efforts by the Pentagon, including [last week's closed door conference](#) on handling sexual harassment and assault and the recent creation of the Joint Task Force on Sexual Assault Prevention and Response shows Capito that the military is making progress toward fixing this problem, according to the spokesman.

“[Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld] has made some good steps forward in developing a comprehensive sexual assault strategy for the U.S. Military,” Capito said. “Members of the Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues will be ready to move forward with a strong policy that protects women in uniform if the Department of Defense slows its pace in addressing this serious issue.”

An announcement from senior Pentagon leadership on the final policy decisions from the McClain task force is expected Oct. 6.

The TAPS proposal, announced Tuesday, focuses on a vast array of issues dealing with sexual assault, including law and policy, victim services and system accountability. The 140-page draft bill calls for funds to improve law enforcement and military justice response to sexual assault and harassment. If enacted, the proposal would create two senior executive offices, including the Director of Special Investigations and the Office of the Victims' Advocate, and provide support for sexual assault and domestic violence response teams.

Anita Sanchez, Miles' director of communications, said the bill covers many areas that the Pentagon has not looked at, including modifying the UCM J and standardizing policies on responding to sexual misconduct claims. The nonprofit organization, founded in 1996, has been working on this proposal since January.

"[The Pentagon is] having conversations and holding conferences, but to date, they have not fully implemented a variety of things," Sanchez said. "There's a great deal of detail within the proposal and it is attempting to craft an appropriate and timely response for victims and survivors."

Terri Spahr Nelson, a psychotherapist specializing in sexual violence trauma and a former member of the Army, said the proposal is too long, not reasonable and most likely will not gain support in Congress if the Pentagon implements reforms discussed during last week's closed door conference, which she attended.

"Overwhelming is the word that comes to my mind," Nelson said. "It's very comprehensive, almost to a fault. While there are some very good points in the proposal, I think it's unrealistic in terms of looking at available resources and the finances it's going to entail."

According to Nelson, a civilian organization should not be writing defense legislation and the most effective policies will be written with the Defense Department. Nelson is author of the book, *For Love of Country: Confronting Rape and Sexual Harassment in the U.S. Military* (The Haworth Press Inc., 2002).

"I definitely think that the Department of Defense is moving in the right direction under the new leadership of Gen. McClain and the impute of Ellen Embrey and her team," Nelson said