DOD to Revise Sexual Assault Prevention Training

By Claudette Roulo, American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Sept. 25, 2012 ~ Calling sexual assault "an affront to basic human values," Pentagon Press Secretary George Little announced today that the Defense Department is revising its sexual assault prevention and response training requirements.

In a Pentagon news conference, Little said Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta repeatedly has stated that there is no place for sexual assault in the military or in the department. "[Sexual assault] is a crime that hurts survivors, their families, their friends and their units," he added. "In turn, sexual assault reduces overall military readiness."

The defense secretary has taken numerous steps to ensure the department is doing all it can not only to prevent sexual assaults, Little said, but also to ensure a climate that supports victims' ability and desire to report the crime and to hold perpetrators accountable.

Some of those steps include:

- Elevating disposition authority for the most serious sexual assault offenses;
- Working with Congress to establish "special victims unit" capabilities in each of the services so specially trained investigators and prosecutors can assist when necessary;
- Implementing an integrated data system called the Defense Sexual Assault Incident Database for tracking sexual assault reports and managing cases while protecting victim confidentiality;
- Establishing a new policy giving service members who report a sexual assault an option to quickly transfer from their unit or installation as a way to protect them from possible harassment and to remove them from proximity to the alleged perpetrator;
- Establishing a credentialing and certification program aligned with national standards to enhance the quality of support from sexual assault victims' advocates;
- Issuing a new policy requiring the retention of sexual assault records for 50 years; and
- Enhancing training for investigators and attorneys in evidence collection, interviewing and interacting with sexual assault survivors.
"The goal of this department is to establish a culture free from the crime of sexual assault," Little said, "and one that deters potential perpetrators and supports survivors."

The Defense Department has a zero tolerance policy for sexual assault, Little said, noting that the health of the force is a major priority for Panetta. "We must hold perpetrators accountable, and we must do everything we can to prevent [sexual assault] in the first place," he added.

"The focus is on ensuring that we do everything that we can to provide complete and comprehensive training, that we create a safe environment for our service members, especially when they enter the force, ... and on ensuring accountability," Little said.

And accountability is most appropriately delivered through the chain of command, he added.

"One very important part of that process is ensuring that commanders and senior enlisted leaders are properly trained to set the right tone in their units and respond appropriately to any instances of sexual assault within their commands and organizations," the press secretary said.

In January, Panetta directed a review across all services of pre-command sexual assault prevention and response training, Little said. The defense secretary received the results of the report earlier this year, and based on those results is now directing further action, he said.

Each of the service secretaries and the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness were directed to develop and implement standardized requirements and learning objectives for sexual assault prevention and response training, Little said. The intent is to improve the awareness and response of prospective commanders and senior enlisted leaders, he explained.

"At the same time, it is clear that the department must continue to do more to prevent sexual assault, especially in initial military training environments," Little said. "Our newest service members are the most vulnerable and most likely to experience a sexual assault."

With this in mind, Panetta today also directed a thorough review of the policies and procedures related to all military training of enlisted personnel and commissioned officers, Little said.

"That review will assess initial training in several areas," he told reporters, including the selection, training and oversight of instructors and leaders who directly supervise trainees and officer candidates; the ratio of instructors to students; and the ratio of leaders in the chain of command to instructors.
The review, scheduled to be completed by February, also will assess potential benefits of increasing the number of female instructors conducting initial military training.

"All members of the military and this department must have an environment that is free from sexual assault," Little said. "The department remains strongly committed to providing that environment and ensuring the safety and security of those entrusted in our care."

Related Sites:
Defense Department Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office
Special Report: Sexual Assault Prevention and Response