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Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel
Statement on Sexual Assault in the Military
Pentagon Press Briefing Room
Thursday, May 1, 2014

Last week, I visited DoD’s Safe Helpline for survivors of sexual assault, and I saw a wall of anonymous Post-It notes quoting what they had said to people staffing the hotline. While every quote was both sobering and uplifting, I was struck by one in particular. It read, “Thank you. All you did tonight was save my life.”

It was powerful evidence that sexual assault is one of the worst crimes a person can commit against another – and proof of why we have to keep doing whatever it takes to eliminate it from the military. Sexual assault is a clear threat to the lives and well-being of the women and men who serve our country in uniform. It destroys the bonds of trust and confidence that lie at the very heart of our armed forces.

Over the past year, I’ve issued 22 separate directives to strengthen how DoD prevents and responds to sexual assault in the military, how we support the victims of this despicable crime, how we educate and train our people, and how we hold both offenders and ourselves accountable. I also recently directed standardizing how we screen those in positions of trust throughout the force. These were important steps that we needed to take, but we must do more.

Today, I issued six new directives that will build on what we’ve already done. They include a department-wide review of institutional alcohol policies, which will be revised where necessary to address risks that alcohol poses to others, including the risk that alcohol is used as a weapon against victims in a predatory way.

They also require new methods to better encourage male victims to report assaults and seek assistance. With estimates that men comprise more than half the victims of sexual assault in the military, we have to fight the cultural stigmas that discourage reporting and be clear that sexual assault does not occur because a victim is weak, but rather because an offender disregards our values and the law. Input from male victims will be critical in developing these methods, and results will be closely monitored so we can make them more effective.

The best way to combat this crime is to prevent it. As a result, today we are issuing a substantially revised DoD Sexual Assault Prevention Strategy. While many of my directives this past year have focused on strengthening prevention, the prevention strategy hasn’t been updated since it was first drafted in 2008, and will now be updated every two years.

The updated strategy reflects the initiatives I’ve directed over the past year, and was put together in consultation with experts from the CDC, the FBI, law enforcement, and other organizations, as well as colleges and universities. By collaborating with people and institutions that also deal with this problem every day, we learned a lot about how to develop the most effective, evidence-based methods to prevent sexual assault. Now we will put them into practice.

We’re also releasing the 2013 annual report on sexual assault in the military, which underscores that we have a long way to go in solving this problem.

We believe victims are growing more confident in our system. Because these crimes are underreported, we took steps to increase reporting, and that’s what we’re seeing. Last year we had a 50% increase in sexual assault reports, which is unprecedented. We also had 492 service members – nearly four times more than ever before – come forward to report assaults that had
occurred before they joined the military, which meant we were able to get them the care and support they needed.

However, we also believe these crimes are still underreported, so we must keep up the pressure and intensify our efforts to improve victim confidence in our system as we work to prevent sexual assault in the military.

The 2013 report also shows that commanders were able to take stronger disciplinary action against alleged perpetrators and that they were doing so more frequently. Disciplinary actions in cases where the military had jurisdiction reached a high of 73% last year. When commanders took disciplinary action on sexual assault offenses, they moved to court-martial a record 71% of alleged perpetrators. These results indicate that our investments in training investigators and attorneys are continuing to make a difference in our ability to hold offenders accountable.

Major General Snow will provide more detail about both the strategy and the report, but let me close by saying that every single person in the military must take personal responsibility for helping stop sexual violence within our ranks – that includes both sexual assault and sexual harassment. Every one of us must hold ourselves and each other accountable, at every level of command, for living up to our values, meeting standards, and making sure that everyone – whether they’re in the military or not – is treated with dignity and respect.

To the victims and survivors of sexual assault in the military, know that DoD’s leaders and I are listening to you, and we will do everything we can to support you. So will our Commander-In-Chief. The recommendations announced on Tuesday by the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault underscore the President’s strong commitment to putting an end to this violence, wherever it occurs.

If you want to wear the uniform of the United States military, just understanding our core values isn’t enough – you have to live and enforce those values every single day. We must each be responsible for our own actions, but we must also step up and take action when we see something happening that undermines our values and puts one of our own at risk. The victims are not only human beings; they’re fellow soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines. We cannot let them down.

Thank you.

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