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Defense Department Works to End Domestic Violence

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 7, 2009 - The Defense Department is committed to providing a safe and healthy environment for military families, the director of the department's Family Advocacy Program said in observance of Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

When domestic violence does occur within the military community, however, there are places to turn, David Lloyd said.

"Domestic violence is always an issue in the military because military people come into the service with all the issues that are present in the civilian sector," he said. "We don't want victims to suffer in silence."

In 2006, the department passed the Restricted Reporting Policy, Lloyd said. Restricted reporting allows victims who are unaware of the support and resources available for them to get that information, get an assessment of their safety and receive help with safety planning.

All of this is done without notifying military law enforcement or the military commander, which means that if the alleged abuser is a servicemember, the incident won't end up on a permanent record.

The other option is unrestricted reporting, which is the option used when a victim wants to get law enforcement or the command involved, Lloyd said.

"In that situation, the law enforcement ... personnel would investigate the allegations of what had happened and of course would present it to the commander," he said. "The commander would be able to take steps, including issuing a military protective order."

Commanders also have the authority to move the servicemember into the barracks to separate the couple, as well as make them surrender any personal firearms to reduce the immediate risk of lethality, Lloyd said.

These are just two of the tools and resources available to victims of domestic violence in the military community.

Victim advocates and military life consultants also are available to help a victim through

the process, no matter which report they choose to file. Should a victim want to seek shelter, the advocate or a Family Advocacy Program clinician would help her get to a shelter off the military installation, Lloyd said.

"The ... advocate also would go with her to a civilian court, ... to get a civilian protective order ... [which] must be enforced on a military installation just as if it was in the outside, civilian world," he said. "If it's a servicemember who's the alleged abuser - which it is in about 60 percent of the cases – the commander can order that abuser to meet with a [Family Advocacy Program] person, get an assessment, [and] come up with a treatment to correct his behavior."

The commander also could order the servicemember into Family Advocacy Program or other counseling, as appropriate, Lloyd said, or may call for disciplinary measures.

There's another scenario as well.

"If the servicemember wants to come forward as a voluntary self-referral to the Family Advocacy Program to get help, or to go to a family center or to Military OneSource, or to the military family life consultants for nonmedical counseling, that's confidential and it wouldn't show up in their record," Lloyd said. "But when the commander hears about it, and [takes action against] the servicemember, it is going to show up in their record."

The realization that many victims are afraid to come forward because they feel reliant upon their abuser has not been lost on the department.

If a commander finds cause to discharge a servicemember over abuse allegations or has the servicemember court-martialed and a guilty verdict is returned, and pay and allowances must be forfeited, the victim isn't left high and dry.

Defense Department policy authorizes commanders to pay for the victim's transportation to a safe place and the shipping of household goods provided there's an agreement between the spouses or the court has divided the property.

"The commander can also authorize the victim to receive up to 36 months of transitional compensation based on the servicemember's pay to help the victim get a new start," Lloyd said. "In addition to the compensation, the victim would be eligible for medical and dental benefits ... and for exchange and commissary benefits for the same period of time.

"We want the victim not to feel that she's so dependent on the servicemember's pay that she has to suffer in silence," he added.

The time period for which those benefits are extended is dependent upon the amount of time left on the servicemember's enlistment contract, he said.

It's often taken for granted that all victims of domestic abuse are women, but Lloyd said that's not the case. About a third of the cases reported each year are reported by men.

"The good news is that we can work with them as well, our Family Advocacy Program people and our victim advocates," he said. "Also, the [male] victims tend not to have significant physical injuries. Women, because of their smaller body size and body mass, if they do get hit with violence, they tend to suffer more significant injuries than the men do."

But not all domestic violence is physical. Sometimes it's psychologically coercive, controlling behavior, he said.

How the reported domestic violence cases compare with the same demographic in the civilian population is unknown as there's no annual data collection system, Lloyd said. The department has contributed to the new National Intimate Partner Violence, Stalking and Sexual Violence Surveillance System, being developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"So for the first time, by the end of 2011, we should have some comparative data," he said.

The department keeps tabs on the number of cases reported throughout the military, however, and Lloyd said the trend since 2000 is a bit surprising.

"Despite the heavy stresses we've had from two wars, both the number of reports and the number of reports that meet [Family Advocacy Program] criteria, and the rate of such reports per 1,000 married couples, has declined rather steadily since the year 2000," he said. "We're always keeping an eye on it, because we're very mindful of the long-term effects of repeated long-term deployments. [They] can really wreak havoc on marriages and other relationships.

"We're not pleased, because we don't want to have any, but we think that the proactive stance the department is taking to try and support couples and families, and seriously dating couples ... is maybe having a payoff," he added.

Numbers from the civilian population also show an overall decline, too, he said.

The department's efforts don't stop with adults; officials also have taken measures to address teen dating violence as well. Tool kits have gone out to Defense Department schools, defense youth programs and Family Advocacy Programs to help teens develop relationships that are nonviolent, Lloyd said.

Tommy T. Thomas, deputy undersecretary of defense for military community and family policy, reinforced the department's commitment to ending domestic violence.

"The Department of Defense and the military services are committed to providing strong family programs to prevent, identify, report, treat and follow-up cases of domestic abuse," he said. "As the nation observes Domestic Violence Awareness Month, we will continue our work to ensure that every home in the military community is a safe home."

Biographies:

Tommy T. Thomas (<http://www.defenselink.mil/bios/biographydetail.aspx?biographyid=211>)

Related Sites:

Military Family and Community Policy (<http://www.defenselink.mil/prhome/mcfc.html>)

Military OneSource

(<http://www.militaryonesource.com/skins/MOS/home.aspx?partner=google&gclid=COKI-PTUq50CFVVj2godijjprw>)

Military Homefront (<http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil/>)