Opposition to Army sexual assault database grows

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Members of Congress and advocacy groups are lining up in opposition to an Army plan to track sexual assault incidents in a centralized database.

The Sexual Assault Data Management System Files – an electronic system that would store data related to incidents in the Army – still is under development, said Hank Minitrez, an Army spokesman.

Before launching the database, the Army is waiting for more feedback from legal channels, Minitrez said. The Defense Department also is preparing to publish a response to the thousands of comments it received in response to an Oct. 25 Federal Register notice announcing the system, he said.

"We are not sure when they intend to do this ... perhaps a couple of weeks at best guess," Minitrez said.

Since the October announcement, the database has drawn criticism from lawmakers.

"We strongly urge you to refrain from collecting and storing any personal identifying information or medical treatment records as part of this database," 15 members of Congress wrote in a Nov. 22 letter to Army Secretary Francis Harvey.

The letter said proposed exemptions from the system – published the same day in the Federal Register – could allow an alleged assailant with a higher rank or security clearance than the victim to prevent information from being added to the database.

The Army "should work to protect [victims'] privacy, not compromise it," said Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., a signatory of the letter, in a statement.
"The last thing they should have to worry about is having their Social Security numbers, birth dates and medical information put into a database," Maloney said. "What they need is for the assailant to be investigated."

Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y., said that collecting and storing personal information about sexual assault victims, will deter service members from reporting attacks and seeking medical treatment and counseling.

The 30-day comment period on the Federal Register notice ended Friday.

According to the Miles Foundation, a Newtown, Conn.-based nonprofit group that assists military service members who are victims of sexual assault, more than 4,700 responded to calls to send letters of opposition to the Pentagon.

In a letter submitted to the Army, the Miles Foundation said that the database is inconsistent with a congressionally mandated confidentiality policy for sexual assault victims released in March, and with a Pentagon policy that establishes protocols giving victims options when reporting incidents.

"The [system] would amount to the reporting of any allegations of sexual assault without regard for the consent of the victim," the letter stated.

Opponents of the proposed database are asking the military to focus on finishing the Pentagon’s Defense Incident Based Reporting System, which will collect data on a wide variety of crimes, including sexual assault, without including personal information.

Terri Spahr Nelson, an Army veteran and a psychotherapist specializing in sexual violence trauma, said that while tremendous strides have been made in the past year by the Defense Department to produce a comprehensive sexual assault policy, the latest proposal raises significant concerns.

"I understand the reasons and need for a database to track cases, but surely there must be a way to do so that would not deter victims from coming forward," said Nelson, who was one of the civilians who provided input for the Pentagon’s confidentiality policy. "Trust is often an underlying issue for many victims, and this database could undermine trust in the system for some victims, resulting in fewer people willing to come forward for help."

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