Sexual Assault in the U.S. Military

Sexual assault in the military is an epidemic that has destroyed the lives of victims, both men and women, for decades. According to a recently released survey by the Department of Defense, there were 26,000 incidents of unwanted sexual contact in the military in 2012 alone, compared to 19,000 incidents in 2010. The percentage of victims who actually reported these crimes in 2012 was only 9.8%, and a mere 302 incidents were prosecuted. Of the victims who chose not to report, 47% indicated fear of retaliation as a reason for not reporting. An alarming 62% of victims who reported an incident experienced some form of social, administrative or professional retaliation within their unit.

More than 20 years after the Talihook scandal, when Navy and Marine Corps officers allegedly assaulted more than 80 women and men during the Talihook convention in Las Vegas, it remains clear that the military justice system is plagued by conflicts of interest, biases and inefficiencies. Fundamental reform is needed for victims of sexual assault to finally achieve justice.

The Military Justice Improvement Act (S. 967) is a piece of legislation introduced by Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) that has over 35 bipartisan co-sponsors. This bill would reform the military justice system by authorizing professional military prosecutors to make decisions about which cases should proceed to trial. Under the current system, commanding officers, not trained legal experts, have the sole authority to decide whether a case is brought to trial.

This bill is supported by JWI, the National Task Force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, the Service Women’s Action Network, and Protect Our Defenders, among many other groups.

In the coming weeks, the Military Justice Improvement Act will be offered as an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) on the Senate floor. Please urge your Senators to co-sponsor and vote for this critical piece of legislation on the Senate floor.