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Military Sex-Assault Reforms Slow in Advancing Efforts by Congress

***Pentagon to Address Problems Lack Bold Strokes, Some Say;
Defense Dept. Sets the Pace
Recommendations for a Year of Study Leave Some Victims without Protection,
Advocates Contend.***

By Miles Moffeit, *Denver Post* Staff Writer

[Washington, DC] – Multiple efforts to address sexual-assault problems in the military emerged on Capitol Hill last week, but the proposals disappointed victim rights advocates and some lawmakers who were craving more detailed and faster solutions.

Bold strokes were conspicuously absent from an internal investigative report released by top Pentagon officials, advocates say, as well as from congressional bills that gained early approval. Though broad procedural changes were recommended from both military officials and lawmakers, the mantra was the same: Another year of investigation, another year of meetings is needed before the changes can be made.

Delays in reforms are primarily rooted in deep philosophical tensions between the military culture and the civilian approaches proposed as key solutions, such as granting confidentiality reporting to victims, experts say. But they also stem from a rigid political protocol between congressional and military leaders that allows the Department of Defense to set the pace for change.

“These problems are stuck, and they need to become unstuck,” said Deborah Tucker, a civilian adviser to the military on sexual-abuse and domestic-abuse issues.

The secretary of defense’s office unveiled nine recommendations last week, calling for new policies and more accountability, partly through the creation of a new office to advise the secretary of defense on sexual-assault matters.

The proposals culminated three months of investigation by a task force ordered by Donald Rumsfeld in February. One of the more specific recommendations was to deploy sexual-assault response teams with troops. They would consist of medical, investigative and advocacy personnel.

Yet that recommendation and others were contingent on another year of study, a lengthy period that leaves victims overseas vulnerable, said Christine Hansen, executive director of the Miles Foundation, a civilian victim rights organization.

“We were seriously disappointed that there were no emergency provisions in the Pentagon’s report,” Hansen said. “Women are still seeking care outside the military because they don’t want to report to their chains of command.”

Before Department of Defense officials disclosed their report, armed services committees in both chambers of Congress approved legislation to study and improve the military’s handling of sex offenses and victim care – though those proposals lacked details and largely deferred to Pentagon officials to spell out procedures.

The Senate committee called for uniform policies, while the House committee expanded the scope of a task force adopted last year to examine the service academies, ordering it to tackle sexual-assault problems military-wide.

A glimpse into the often-stalemated processes for helping abused women in the military surfaced in a Congressional Women’s Caucus briefing Thursday. The hearing was held to discuss the progress the military has made in implementing 194 recommendations made by a congressionally formed 2001 task force to better handle domestic-violence cases in the military. Military officials acknowledged they had adopted only 65 of the proposals.

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