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More Sex Assaults in Military Reported – New Policy Ensures Victims’ Privacy

By Christopher Lee, Washington Post Staff Writer

The number of reported sexual assaults in the U.S. military has gone up over the past year – and that is a good thing, Pentagon officials said yesterday.

The military received 2,374 reports of sexual assaults involving members of the armed forces in 2005, or 674 more than in the previous year, according to a Defense Department report out today.

The Pentagon attributed much of the increase to a new policy that allows victims to report attacks confidentially through “restricted reporting,” part of a department-wide restructuring last year in the way the military treats sexual assaults.

The policy, which took effect June 14, is intended to ensure the privacy of victims while encouraging them to pursue prosecution of their attackers. It allows victims to report assaults and receive counseling and other treatment anonymously, without automatically triggering a formal investigation. Previously, an investigation was required if a victim wanted to receive help. Investigations were not confidential, leaving accusers vulnerable to retaliation or ostracism. Of the sexual assault reports last year, 435 were restricted, although 108 of those accusers later decided to allow their cases to be investigated.

Air Force Brig. Gen. K.C. McClain, who led a joint task force on sexual assault prevention and response that developed the initiatives, said yesterday that the rising numbers were expected.

“It is an underreported crime,” McClain said. “We think we’re getting at some of that. When we started in 2004, we said our 2005 numbers will be higher because of all the increased emphasis and awareness and training and establishing a climate of confidence that our members understand that we want them to come forward. . . . Our sense is our numbers will probably continue to increase.”

The changes are a response to the widespread problem of such attacks – including reports of sexual assaults in Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan – and to a scathing Pentagon task force report in 2004 that the military was not doing enough to address the issue and punish offenders.

In the past year, the department established sexual assault program offices at every major military installation and trained more than 1 million service members on sexual assault prevention and response. It also trained more than 1,000 victim advocates and sexual assault response coordinators, as well as the lawyers and investigators who handle the cases.

The military's definition of sexual assault includes rape, nonconsensual sodomy, indecent assault and attempts to commit those offenses. It does not include sexual harassment.

The military had investigated 1,386 of the 2,047 "unrestricted" reports of sexual assault in 2005 by the end of December. Those 1,386 cases involved 1,474 alleged assailants, since some incidents involved more than one.

Commanders took punitive action against 274 offenders, imposing a court-martial for 79 of them, nonjudicial penalties for 91, and administrative sanctions and discharges for 104.

Among the rest, complaints against 641 of the subjects were found to be unsubstantiated, lacked sufficient evidence or the victim recanted; 352 accused assailants were awaiting final action; 163 were unidentified; and 44 were civilians or foreign nationals not subject to military justice.

"We think that the report in many ways validates our program," McClain said. "And we also know that it is just the beginning."

Staff writer Josh White contributed to this report.

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