

Associated Press

June 21, 2007

Naval Academy Stepping Up Sexual Harassment Education

ANNAPOLIS, Maryland (AP) – Next week, the Class of 2011 will be sworn in at the U.S. Naval Academy – a new batch of midshipmen and a fresh chance for the institution after a tough several months.

The academy's athletes have been accused of sexual misconduct, a former medical officer was charged with taping midshipmen having sex, a link was made between an instructor and a prostitution ring, and a group of midshipmen was blamed for raunchy behavior on a spring break cruise.

Critics say the academy is struggling to get recommendations aimed at addressing sexual harassment through to students in their late teens and early twenties.

Supporters, including women who graduated this spring, say the bad publicity indicates the academy is pushing forward to make changes at the 162-year-old institution.

Debby Tucker, executive director of the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, said she hopes an academy program beginning this fall – including peer training – will do more to bring the message home.

“That’s been shown to make a difference, so they are starting to experiment, so I’m optimistic on that level,” said Tucker, who chaired a Pentagon task force on domestic violence from 2000 to 2003. “There is stuff happening. I just think we all want it to happen faster.”

Former Superintendent Vice Admiral Rodney P. Rempt said he’s also hopeful the program, which will span all four years of the academy curriculum, will raise awareness further.

“We’re pretty excited about this,” Rempt said at a recent Board of Visitors meeting. “We think this is going to be a lasting thing that can stay here for many years and be updated as we learn more.”

The academy has struggled with its image since women were first admitted more than 30 years ago, suffering other periods of unwanted attention over incidents such as the handcuffing of a female midshipman to a urinal. Women make up just 20 percent of the 4,000-strong student body.

Among the recent cases, a former medical officer who let midshipmen relax at his home is charged with videotaping them having sex. The so-called D.C. Madam revealed that one of the women who worked for her was an academy instructor. And several of 37 midshipmen on a commercial cruise to the Caribbean prompted a complaint from a passenger, who informed academy officials she was “felt up.”

Anita Sanchez, a spokeswoman for a victim advocacy group called the Miles Foundation that focuses on sexual assault in the military, said the incidents are worrisome, indicating that academy culture has yet to fully accept female midshipmen as equals.

“I think the military is still learning, and regrettably I think we’re still on the slow ascent on that learning curve,” Sanchez said.

A development that brought praise from advocates for women was the appointment last year of Captain Margaret Klein as the academy’s first female commandant, the second-highest position at the school. Vice Admiral Jeffrey Fowler, a submarine commander, has taken the helm as the academy’s 60th superintendent.

Recent female graduates say they have seen changes in recent years, with more communication and increased sensitivity among students.

Rebecca Phelps, who just graduated, said she believes conditions for women have improved since her older brother attended the academy. She said more open discussions about the issue have “really improved the situation.” Once, when a male midshipman made a “snide remark” about her during a lecture, Phelps said another male midshipman spoke up for her before she could turn around to respond.

“That, to me, said more than anything, and I was so proud, and I would say that that represents the academy now more,” said Phelps, of Santa Cruz, California.

The April expulsion of former football star Lamar Owens, acquitted of raping a fellow midshipman but convicted of conduct unbecoming an officer, is cited by supporters of academy policy as evidence that the institution is refusing to look the other way.

Supporters also point to the April conviction of another former football player, Kenny Ray Morrison, for sexually assaulting a fellow midshipman. Morrison was sentenced to two years in the brig.

Rempt mentioned the “high-visibility” cases last week at the change-of-command ceremony that marked his departure. Rempt said the academy has “greatly raised the understanding and sensitivity on sexual harassment, misconduct and assault within the entire Naval Academy family.”

Copyright © 2007 The Associated Press.