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John Aloysius Farrell, *Denver Post* Washington Bureau Chief

Pentagon Discusses Post Series Officials Deny Downplaying Sex Assaults but Concede Some Missteps

(Washington) - Pentagon officials used a Senate hearing Wednesday to give their fullest response yet to The Denver Post's coverage on sexual and domestic assaults in the military, acknowledging some shortcomings but insisting that they take the issue seriously and are winning the war against sexual violence.

Undersecretary of Defense David Chu and top commanders from the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps testified before a subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and said The Post was flat-out wrong to suggest, in news coverage and editorials, that military leaders ignore or belittle allegations of sexual assault.

'The notion that people get a free pass, or that things are swept under the rug is outrageous,' said Gen. T. Michael Moseley, vice chief of staff for the Air Force, referring to a Post article quoting sources who were skeptical lawmakers would vigorously investigate the military.

'These are our people, these are our airmen, these are our kids. And we take this seriously,' Moseley said. 'The impression that there are handshakes or agreements out there is not only not true, but a bit insulting because these are our kids. We take them as a national treasure.'

The Pentagon officials tried to bolster their case, discussing with the committee a comprehensive survey of sexual harassment and other sexual offenses in the armed forces. After surveying 20,000 members of the military, and comparing the results with a similar survey from 1995, the Defense Department reported significant reductions in reports of sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexist behavior and unwanted sexual attention.

For example, the percentage of women reporting that they had been sexually assaulted has dropped from 6 percent to 3 percent since 1995, according to the report, and the percentage of women reporting sexual harassment slid from 46 percent to 24 percent.

'The incidents of sexual assault in the military is down since 1995, approximately cut in half from the level that prevailed seven years ago,' Chu said. 'Our people believe that the training they receive is good.'

‘The majority of our people believe that commanders are willing to take action,’ Chu said. ‘The misconduct is concentrated in the most-junior ranks, the people who have most recently joined the military.’

That assertion contradicts what dozens of victims told the newspaper in its original investigation and what advocates later testified to the panel. Most of the women who talked with The Post late last year, who said they were sexually assaulted in the military, said they were discouraged from reporting or they were too scared to report their assaults and that commanding officers were often the culprits. Fifteen women said they were assaulted by a member of their command or a higher-ranking colleague.

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, a member of the committee, challenged a Post report about allegations of sexual assault at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas, and another article citing critics who believed that Congress and the military are in silent agreement not to press the issue.

‘There is no silent handshake or any other complicity on the part of anyone in the Congress or the military that this is going to be simply brushed under the rug or ignored,’ Cornyn said.

After The Post published its report about the Sheppard Air Force training base, Moseley said, the Pentagon sent 22 investigators to Texas to survey more than 5,000 base personnel. They found that nine out of 10 of those interviewed were confident that commanders there would take an accusation of sexual assault seriously, and handle it properly.

‘The students feel safe, they know how to report a sexual assault, they trust the base leadership,’ he said.

On the other hand, Chu and other military officials acknowledged that the armed forces face shortcomings when it comes to a major topic of The Post’s reporting: how victims of sexual assault are received and treated by the services.

‘Our initial review of procedures has led us to believe that we have some things to do here,’ said Gen. George Casey, vice chief of staff for the Army.

At one point in the hearing, Sen. Mark Pryor, D-Ark., read aloud from a Post editorial, confronting the panel with questions that the article raised about domestic and sexual violence in the armed services.

Chu responded for the military, saying that the editorial’s questions, drawn from a November investigative report, were based on false presumptions and unfounded allegations.

“It starts with an assumption I would fault,” he said of the editorial, and warned that “without a fact-based discussion we will never get to the policy improvements and the program strengthening that we need.”

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