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Pentagon Seeks to Explain Rise in Sexual Assault Reports

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Defense Department officials are touting a jump in reports of sexual assaults in the military as a sign that new victim confidentiality policies are working, and as an indication that more victims are coming forward for medical treatment and counseling.

But outside experts are more skeptical of the 40 percent increase in incidents reported in 2005. They say more time is needed to show that the military's cultural attitude toward sexual abuse is truly shifting.

The second annual report mandated by Congress on the Pentagon's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response program, released earlier this week, found that in 2005, there were 2,374 reports of sexual assault involving a service member as a victim or perpetrator, up from 1,700 in 2004.

These numbers illustrate progress "in establishing a robust and effective sexual assault prevention program," the Pentagon said in a statement. The military services have implemented aggressive training programs intended to build a climate of confidence as a result of a March 2005 policy allowing "restricted reporting."

The new reporting option, which took effect in June 2005, allows sexual assault victims to disclose incidents in secret to a sexual assault response coordinator, a health care provider or a chaplain, without triggering an investigation. Victims are then assigned an advocate and are allowed to decide later whether or not to go forward with the investigative process.

The Pentagon developed the new policy based on studies that found victims are less likely to seek out support services if an investigation – often considered to be invasive – could ensue. In 2005, 435 sexual assaults were reported on a restricted basis. But a quarter of those who chose restricted reporting later decided to go ahead with an investigation and switched to unrestricted reporting, the report stated.

Anita Sanchez, a spokeswoman for the Newtown, Conn.-based Miles Foundation, a nonprofit group that assists military service members who are victims of sexual assault, questioned why some opted to switch from restricted to unrestricted reporting.

“We have serious concerns about who is ultimately making these decisions and if victims are being provided accurate information,” Sanchez said.

It’s too early to know for sure whether the restricted reporting policy is changing the military’s attitude towards sexual assault victims because the policy was only in effect for half of the year, said Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-Calif., the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee.

“It is going to take about a year to see how these women are treated,” Sanchez said. “Hopefully the confidentiality issue is working. If the reporting is up, maybe it indicates the new steps put in place are working.”

Sanchez said that if sexual assault victims stop reporting incidents and the number of reports go back down, it would mean it is “business as usual” in the armed services. But she said she is optimistic that the new policy will succeed.

“Hopefully this is beginning to take seed,” Sanchez said.

Debby Tucker, executive director of the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence in Austin, Texas, said that the new policy appears to be effective in stepping up prosecution of assailants, but it is nearly impossible to stop a sexual predator before an incident occurs.

“It may give people with a conscience a second thought, but nothing stops a predator except getting caught,” Tucker said. “With sexual violence, the predator will persist until he is actually stopped.”

By Dec. 31, 2005, criminal investigations had been completed for 1,386 of the alleged assault incidents in that year, involving 1,474 alleged offenders. Of those, action was not taken against 641 because the allegations were judged to be unfounded or lacking sufficient evidence. Another 163 offenders went unidentified, and 44 involved civilians or foreign nationals, over whom the military does not have jurisdiction.

The 2006 report will detail the status of the 661 pending investigations and actions taken for 352 offenders awaiting final action, such as court martial or discharge.

In related news, the Joint Task Force for Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, commanded by Air Force Brig. Gen. K.C. McClain, has moved to a permanent office under David S. C. Chu, Defense undersecretary for personnel and readiness.

The task force was created in October 2004 to give the Pentagon a single point of accountability for the department’s sexual assault policies.

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