WASHINGTON – Acknowledging serious flaws in how it has dealt with sexual assaults within the military, the Pentagon announced steps on Tuesday to prevent the crimes, investigate them more thoroughly when they occur and treat victims with more consideration.

Defense Department officials said that from now on there would be one set of definitions of what constitutes sexual assault for all services, and at every base within each service. There will also be uniform procedures for dealing with accusers and the accused, the officials said.

“The department understands that our traditional system does not afford sexual-assault victims the care and support they need across the board, and we are moving aggressively to put new systems in place to address this shortcoming,” David S.C. Chu, under secretary of defense for personnel and readiness, said at a Pentagon briefing.

Under the old system, every military branch has had its own programs to deal with sexual assault, said Brig. Gen. K.C. McClain of the Air Force, who was named last September to the newly created post of policy chief for sexual assault prevention and response.

To a surprising degree, Mr. Chu said, victims and offenders may not fully understand what constitutes sexual assault, as opposed to, say, sexual harassment.

“Sexual assault is a crime,” Mr. Chu said, “defined as intentional sexual conduct characterized by use of force, physical threat or abuse of authority, or when the victim does not or cannot consent.”

A major component of the new policy is the appointment of a sexual assault response coordinator at every American military installation in the world. The coordinator will follow a case from accusation through resolution, with particular attention to helping the victim, Mr. Chu said.

Mr. Chu said a typical coordinator might be a colonel or other high-ranking officer, “someone who’s got clout” and can deal effectively with a base commander. He said military people would be educated on the new procedures up and down the chain of command, with commanders having ultimate responsibility.

Under the new system, a coordinator will know the identity of a person making a complaint and the accused, but a commander will not, at least in the early stages. “We are still working out
exactly who needs to know what,” Mr. Chu said. “This is a need-to-know kind of thing.”

The new procedures, which Mr. Chu said would be put into effect as soon as possible, arose from numerous incidents. Last February, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld ordered an investigation into more than 100 instances of suspected sexual assault or misconduct over 18 months within the United States Central Command area, which includes Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait.

And last month the Pentagon inspector general, Joseph E. Schmitz, reported that successive commanders at the Air Force Academy failed over the course of a decade to recognize the seriousness of sexual assault and harassment there. Mr. Chu said the new procedures would apply to members of the service academies as well as those on active duty. The officials said many victims of sexual assault had been afraid to come forward for fear of lack of privacy, embarrassment, intimidation and damage to their reputations.

The Pentagon inquiry into sexual assault cases in the Central Command Area noted how difficult it could be to make changes within the military culture, which until relatively recently was overwhelmingly male. Mr. Chu and General McClain said education on the new procedures would continue throughout the careers of every person in the service.

“We will start with basic training,” Mr. Chu said.