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## Pentagon Criticized for Closed-Door Meeting on Sexual Misconduct

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A Pentagon conference called to determine future internal policy on sexual assault was conducted behind closed doors this week, as military leaders and Defense Department officials hashed out a response to an April report criticizing the treatment of victims.

Senior leaders of the military will release their conclusions during an early October summit that will follow up the conference's recommendations.

Christine Hansen, executive director of the Miles Foundation, a nonprofit group that provides services to victims of violence associated with the military, expressed concern about the closed-door nature of the meetings.

"We're talking about the use of public funds and we believe that it requires an open and forthright conversation, and we don't believe this conference represents an open and forthright conversation," Hansen said.

According to Hansen, the conference excluded many experts in sexual assault and attendees were mostly military personnel and Defense Department employees.

Pentagon officials released no information about the meetings and several phone calls and e-mails for comment went unanswered. But those familiar with the conference said it was in response to a 90-day review ordered by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld after more than 100 allegations of sexual assault and misconduct were reported in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait during an 18-month period.

The 114-page report concluded that the military lacks standardized training about sexual assault; victims have little or no access to support services; commanders were insensitive to victims' needs, and the military failed to track sexual assaults, which allowed for little accountability.

A conference brochure obtained by *Government Executive* shows that topics conferees addressed included:

- Developing a common definition and distinction between the terms "sexual harassment" and "sexual assault" and how they relate to crimes under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

- Establishing procedures to ensure privacy and confidentiality for sexual assault victims.
- Increasing transparency for the handling and disposition of reported sexual assault cases.
- Creating expert sexual assault response capability through the use of deployable sexual assault response teams.
- Establishing agreements with coalition partners that address the jurisdiction and responsibility for crimes committed by a citizen of another nation.

Congressional staff members were not invited to the meetings and the handpicked participants signed nondisclosure agreements about the discussions. Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-Calif., criticized the “secret conference” for not allowing outsiders in on the meetings. The lawmaker has followed this issue closely and said the Defense Department has completed numerous studies on sexual assault in the last year, but done little to fix the problem.

“Instead, they make people who attend sign secrecy agreements and they don’t let in laypeople who might suggest some of the strategies to work on this,” Sanchez said. “Supposedly Donald Rumsfeld is going to look at some of those recommendations and determine a course of action in the next 10 days, but we’re kind of out of the loop because they’re pretty hush-hush about what’s going on.”

On Wednesday, the Pentagon announced the creation of a task force charged with developing recommendations to help the Navy and Army prevent incidents of sexual assault at service academies and to make sure they have the right methods for dealing with assaults if they occur.

*This document is located at <http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0904/0924304dp1.htm>*