



May 12, 2006

Pentagon to Track Sexual Assault Responses

By Daniel Pulliam, dpulliam@govexec.com

The Defense Department is implementing a data management system for tracking instances in which supplies for administering health care or collecting evidence following suspected sexual assaults were inadequate.

The system will not store an alleged victim's health information, and personal identifying data will be available only to sexual assault response coordinators, Pentagon officials said. It is intended to be a management tool for response coordinators and is expected to be up and running in July.

The system is part of the Pentagon's effort to put into place a "robust sexual assault prevention and response program," according to an April 25 memorandum from David Chu, undersecretary of Defense for personnel and readiness, to House leaders.

It will be unusual in the military in that, because of a confidentiality policy implemented in June 2005, base commanders will not necessarily be able to "reach down from on high" and access the information it contains, said Roger Kaplan, spokesman for the Pentagon's Joint Task Force on Sexual Assault Prevention and Response.

The confidential reporting process will allow alleged victims to have the option of reporting an incident to designated individuals without automatically triggering an investigation. Leaders at military installations would have access to the data only if a victim chose to fully report the incident and go ahead with an investigation.

"For headquarters above the installation, all you need is aggregate information," Kaplan said. "You need to have a way of telling how many cases [there were where] treatment or prosecution was affected negatively due to a lack of supplies or timely access to a laboratory."

The new tracking system, which is being implemented in response to requirements in the fiscal 2006 defense authorization bill, will be part of the Defense Case Record Management System, which also will be used to follow how cases are resolved.

The system will record the number of confidentially reported sexual assaults, the medical and counseling services provided to alleged victims and the actions of victim advocates, health care providers and investigators. The system is intended to allow the military to assess trends to improve services and refine policies.

In his memo, Chu said the department is making “progress in eliminating sexual assault in the ranks of the military” due to the confidential reporting process, the training of more than 1 million personnel and new sexual assault programs at military installations.

In November 2005, the Army drew opposition from members of Congress and advocacy groups for its plan to track incidents in a central database.

Anita Sanchez, a spokeswoman for the Miles Foundation, a nonprofit group that assists military service members who are victims of sexual assault, said while the new system has a different scope than the Army database, she is still concerned that the military is tracking data from alleged victims and not alleged perpetrators.

She said a database recording the location of alleged assaults, the circumstances surrounding the incidents and a description of the alleged assailants would do a lot more to inform prevention efforts.

“They continue to focus on the alleged victims, but by not focusing on alleged offenders and perpetrators and those who have been convicted, the department isn’t fully informed,” Sanchez said.

In related news, Brig. Gen. K.C. McClain, commander of the Pentagon’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, has been reassigned after nearly two years working to develop the department’s sexual assault policies.

In her new position, McClain will serve as director of force management policy in the office of the Air Force’s deputy chief of staff for manpower and personnel.

Kaye Whitley, deputy director of the task force, will become acting director Monday.