May 30, 2006

Report: Defense Domestic Violence Data Incomplete

By Daniel Pulliam, dpulliam@govexec.com

The Defense Department’s system for collecting information on domestic violence is inadequate, according to a new report from the Government Accountability Office.

In the wake of a number of high-profile incidents in which soldiers killed their spouses, the 2000 defense authorization act mandated the creation of a central database of domestic violence incidents, within an existing criminal reporting system. But the data in the system is incomplete, GAO found.

The Defense Department lacks accurate numbers on incidents and on disciplinary actions taken, the report (GAO-06-540  http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06540.pdf) stated.

“Without complete information on reported incidents of domestic violence and the steps taken by commanders to address these incidents, DoD will not know the size and nature of the problems or be able to assess the effectiveness of its actions,” the report stated.

Furthermore, the department has not developed plans to address the system’s limitations, reviewers said.

In response, Pentagon officials said the systems that maintain the database are insufficient and underfunded.

Along with the database requirement, Congress also mandated the establishment of the Defense Task Force on Domestic Violence to assess the military services’ response to domestic violence incidents and suggest improvements.

Three reports from the task force contained 194 recommendations for improvement, and while the department has provided about $23 million to implement the proposals, no action has been taken on 40 the Pentagon disagreed with or deemed inapplicable. Actions on another 60 are pending, the GAO report stated.
The department lacks a framework for overseeing the task force’s recommendations, and a suggestion requiring monitoring of domestic violence prevention efforts has not been followed, the reviewers stated.

The department also faces a shortage of personnel in its Family Violence Policy Office, which oversees implementation of the recommendations, and poor communication has resulted in inconsistent practices and a lack of knowledge throughout the military, GAO said.

A new Pentagon policy, which took effect April 22, allows victims of domestic violence to report incidents confidentially to specified individuals, such as chaplains, without notifying an installation’s command.

But the department does not have data regarding which chaplains have completed training and cannot determine if the needed resources have been provided to assist victims, GAO found.

In a written response, David Chu, undersecretary of Defense for personnel and readiness, expressed concern that GAO attempted to prioritize the task force’s recommendations and thereby focused on “perceived deficiencies rather than progress.”

“GAO seeks to penalize the department for deviating from the narrowest reading of the individual recommendations,” Chu wrote. “The department must have the flexibility to implement policy that will support and serve its service members and their families.”