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May 9, 2005

Reports of Sexual Assaults Rise in the Military

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Sexual assault allegations by members of the military increased in 2004, and the Defense Department expects the number to continue rising as victims become more comfortable coming forward, according to a new report.

Reports of sexual assaults in 2004 totaled 1,700. That number includes reports of intentional sexual contact, characterized by force, physical threats and abuse of authority when the victim could not consent. Actions include rape, nonconsensual sodomy, indecent assault and attempts to commit these actions.

In 2004, there were 1,275 reports of sexual assaults in which the victims were military service members, up from 1,012 in 2003 and 901 in 2002. They fell into the following categories:

- Service member allegedly assaulting another service member: 880
- Civilian allegedly assaulting a service member: 99
- Unidentified person assaulting a service member: 296

Another 425 cases involved allegations of assaults by service members on civilians. The Pentagon's previous reports of sexual assault have not included allegations of assaults involving civilians.

Investigations of 1,232 of the 1,700 cases reported in 2004 were completed as of Dec. 31.

Punishments were given to 342 alleged offenders, including 113 courts martial, 132 nonjudicial punishments, 42 discharges and 55 other administrative actions.

Of the cases investigated, 351 were dismissed because they lacked evidence or were deemed to be unfounded, and another 278 cases resulted in no punishment by the military, some due to civilian punishments or actions by foreign authorities.

Brig. Gen. K.C. McClain, commander of the Pentagon's Joint Task Force on Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, told *Government Executive* that the emphasis placed on sexual assault in the military throughout 2004 is one of the reasons for the increase.

While the emphasis revolved around mostly conferences, commissions, reports and the establishment of McClain's task force, recent policy directives are changing the military's methods for responding to and preventing sexual assaults.

"We are trying to move this highly underreported crime into the light so that we can begin to get a feel for the scope in the military," McClain said. "It'll be a while, maybe a couple of years, before we will be able to state that the numbers of actual sexual assaults are going up or going down."

A limited confidentiality policy, which will be fully implemented in the middle of June, is intended to give victims the ability to report incidents without automatically prompting an investigation.

Anita Sanchez, spokeswoman for the Miles Foundation, a nonprofit group that assists victims of sexual assault in the military, said she was not surprised by the increase. According to her, it is due to the number of young women in the military serving at the "lower echelons," and the abuse of power by their commanders.

"They're told, 'Boys will be boys, men will be men,'" Sanchez said. "They've put in additional lighting around the latrines, and they've also enforced the buddy system, but look at how the sexual assaults are continuing to occur."

The military culture does not view sexual assault as a crime, Sanchez argues, but as simply inappropriate behavior. She said the military should place greater emphasis on the behavior of sex offenders in its prevention efforts, and focus on how to keep victims out of dangerous situations.