Column: Congress will hold military to account on sexual assaults

By C.W. Bill Young, special to the Times

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The Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program was established eight years ago by the Defense Department and fully funded by the Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense that I chair.

This fiscal year alone, our committee has appropriated more than $117 million of hard-earned taxpayer money toward strengthening this program. However, it has become obvious that this program has failed in its primary mission of educating and safeguarding our service men and women.

The mission of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program (SAPR) is built upon five stated priorities:

• Institutionalize prevention strategies in the military community.

• Increase the climate of victim confidence associated with reporting.

• Improve sexual assault response.

• Improve system accountability.

• Improve stakeholder knowledge and understanding of SAPR.

Thus far, the Defense Department is failing to meet these stated objectives, and instead of showing improvement, there has been a marked decline in performance. The Defense Department has selected, trained and certified senior commissioned and noncommissioned officers to carry out this program.

Recently we have seen in a number of the cases these trusted individuals have been the attackers themselves. In my view at this time there is no confidence within the ranks of service members that this program is working, and the department’s own 2012 annual report on sexual assault in the military included a survey that found only 16 percent of the women and 25 percent of the men who responded believed that "sexual assault in the military is less of a problem today than four years ago."

Even the Army chief of staff has admitted a lack of confidence in their efforts, saying, "The Army is failing in its efforts to combat sexual assault and sexual harassment." What message does this send to the young patriots and their families who have yet to serve our great nation?

With the funds provided by our committee, the Defense Department has trained some 18,000 response coordinators and victim advocates. Yet the number of men and women who reported being the victims of sexual assault rose 35 percent over the past two years. The 2012 annual assessment says that there were 3,374 sexual assaults reported within the department last year. However, the same report includes a survey estimating that 26,000 service members may have had "unwanted sexual contact" of one form or another.

Let me be perfectly clear: Sexual assault is a crime, and this program is broken. Clearly the funds we are investing in this program are not helping to solve this deplorable problem.

That is why I asked the leadership of the secretary of defense’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office — Major Gen. Gary Patton, the director; Col. Alan Metzler, the deputy director of strategy and policy; and Dr. Nathan Galbreath, deputy director of accountability and assessment — to immediately brief the members of our
subcommittee on defense to tell us what is wrong with this program and the military culture and what we can do to fix it.

Our committee has provided $117 million in the current fiscal year for sexual assault training and prevention programs at the Defense Department and across all the services. This is a 34.5 percent increase over the amount we provided in fiscal year 2012. We asked the senior leaders to come and meet with us immediately because we are in the process of preparing our fiscal year 2014 Defense Appropriations Bill and the Defense Department has requested $156.5 million, or another 33.6 percent increase, in funding for these programs.

Mark my words. Our committee will provide whatever funds are required to address this intolerable problem.

But we want to know what the Defense Department and each of the services will do to make sure that these funds are spent effectively to prevent sexual assaults within the ranks of the military. The goal of these programs is the elimination of sexual assaults.

Obviously, that is not the case today and my committee wants to know why not and what can be done about it.

U.S. Rep. C.W. Bill Young, R-Indian Shores, represents the 13th Congressional District of Florida and is the chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense. He wrote this exclusively for the Tampa Bay Times.

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