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## VA Offers Aid After Sexual Trauma

By Philip Dine, Post-Dispatch Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — In the wake of a flood of reported rapes and sexual harassment of women in uniform, the Department of Veterans Affairs will open a treatment center next month that is dedicated solely to sexually traumatized female veterans.

Advocacy groups say the center is overdue, citing long wait lists at the few facilities that currently provide significant treatment for women who have been assaulted while serving in the military — nearly 3,000 last year alone.

“With the numbers that the Veterans Administration and the Pentagon have been seeing, you would have expected that there would have been development of these in-patient treatment trauma centers for females long ago,” says Anita Sanchez, spokeswoman for the Miles Foundation, based in Connecticut.

VA officials acknowledge that more female troops are facing not only combat stress but also sexual trauma; the officials say they’re ready to meet future demands for such treatment.

The efforts come after several consecutive years of what the Pentagon reports as sharp annual increases — sometimes more than 20 percent — in the number of such cases, though spokeswoman Cynthia O. Smith attributes the rise partly to new procedures that make it easier for women to come forward.

The Post-Dispatch reported in June on the growing problem of sexual assaults on women in the military, and the special regiments female soldiers in Iraq were adopting to lessen the chance of being raped by their male colleagues, including traveling in pairs to the restroom or shower or being in the company of at least three men when other women weren’t around.

### **‘FULL OF ANGER’**

Susan Church of Arkansas has lived through the problems caused by assault and subsequent hostility and inadequate treatment; and for her, any improvements can’t come fast enough for today’s female soldiers.

She was assaulted by a superior in May 2002 shortly after being shipped out to Germany, then raped 11 days later by the same officer. He was convicted in military

court of rape and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

“It turned into this really horrible situation,” she said Friday. “He confessed, but they didn’t consider him dangerous and so they didn’t put him in pre-trial confinement. It was a real small post. I had to see him every day, until we went to trial. He just gave those gawking, smirking, smiling looks.”

Even after the trial and his sentencing, his fellow officers continually taunted her, she says, telling her how “cute” he was on the witness stand or that if he was going to serve 15 years, she deserved at least a couple of black eyes from the incident.

As it became harder for her to carry out her duties, the military told her she didn’t have post-traumatic stress disorder, but rather a pre-existing condition.

“They tried to put me out on a personality disorder, instead of PTSD, which means you don’t get all your benefits,” Church said. “I was so full of anger from the way they were treating me that all I could do was spend my time in the library looking up policies and procedures. I had to know my rights and responsibilities.

“I had to work with the prosecuting lawyer to fight the rapist, then I had to get a defense attorney to fight the conditions he caused,” she said. Making the case that her problems stemmed from military sexual trauma, a type of post-traumatic stress disorder, she eventually secured a diagnosis of PTSD in 2004 and a medical discharge.

Now, five years after the attack, she still takes medications, sees a psychologist weekly and is unable to work, she says. Every day she feels compelled to check online the prison where her assailant is incarcerated, “to make sure he’s still there, that he hasn’t escaped, because of the threats.”

Having joined the military because of concern over the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, now at age 33, she says, “I live with my parents, because I can’t live alone.”

## **‘LONG OVERDUE’**

Sanchez said her foundation had been testifying to Congress since 2004 “about the escalating number of cases of military sexual trauma,” and urging “enhanced services and trained personnel, including therapists and clinicians.”

In 1992, after the first Gulf War, there was a small increase in reports of sexual assaults, “so you’re talking 15 years later,” she said, referring to the center for traumatized female victims scheduled to open late next month at a VA medical center in New Jersey. “It’s long overdue.”

The Pentagon’s Smith said defense officials had “made great progress in establishing a robust and effective program” that includes tracking of cases and training to deal with problems, to ensure “a consistent level of care and support for victims of sexual assault.”

“Sexual assault is the nation’s most underreported violent crime,” she said. “Since the military reflects the society it serves, this criminal offense confronts the (Defense) Department as well.”

But Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., a member of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, says stronger action is needed.

“We have a moral obligation to provide these victims with the support and care they need,” he said. “I will continue to fight to ensure the military and the VA have the resources available to treat female victims who are struggling to heal from combat and sexual traumas.”

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