

# Sexual Assault Task Forces Urges More Oversight

By Lisa Daniel  
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WASHINGTON, Feb. 4, 2010 - The Defense Department office that oversees sexual assault prevention and response in the military needs a higher level of oversight and funding to continue on its path of progress, a task force created to assess the program told Congress members yesterday.

The department and the services have made significant improvements in how they handle sexual assault prevention and response, but more needs to be done, the co-chairs of the Defense Task Force on Sexual Assault in the Military Services told the House Armed Services Committee's military personnel subcommittee. The task force issued its findings to Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates on Dec. 1.

The department "overall has made notable progress in addressing sexual assault" since the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office was created in 2005, Louis Iasiello, co-chair of the task force, told the subcommittee. "At the same time, we found many opportunities for improvement."

Military leaders' emphasis on prevention and the subsequent increased awareness of sexual assaults, combined with better funding for the prevention and response office, have been key to improvements, Iasiello said. Still, he added, there needs to be more focus on the problem.

The task force's report, Iasiello said, highlights the need for substantial institutional emphasis on preventing sexual assault. "Doing so is not only a moral imperative, but is critical to military readiness," he said.

The task force recommends that the prevention and response office be elevated to placement under the Office of the Deputy Secretary of Defense for "at least one year or until the program is meeting established institutional goals," Iasiello and Air Force Brig. Gen. Sharon K.G. Dunbar, also a task force co-chair, said in their joint statement to the subcommittee.

The two noted that such organizational structure would be "unconventional," but said the office's current placement "has limited its visibility and ability to effectively address integral cross-cutting issues."

"After 2005, each of the services took off in their own direction trying to confront this issue in the best way possible," Iasiello said. "We applaud that initiative, but we really would like to see a strategic leadership role taken" by the oversight office. "Someone needs to take the lead on that and liaison and partner with ... the civilian society," he said.

"We believe that higher level oversight will ensure appropriate funding and focus on a program that is at a critical junction," Iasiello added.

Beginning in August 2008, the 10-member task force visited 60 military locations worldwide and met with more than 3,500 people, Iasiello said. Both military members and civilians at all levels reported inconsistent and insufficient funding, he said, adding that research and collaboration with the civilian sector for prevention strategies and incidence metrics was particularly affected.

The task force called for more consistency and standardization to sexual assault prevention, response, training and accountability across the services, and Dunbar said a clear strategy would drive such improvements.

"Leadership sets the tone" for sexual assault awareness, prevention and response, Dunbar said, and the program is most effective in places where leaders are involved in things such as community discussions.

"Leadership clearly has a profound influence on the prevention of sexual assault, from strategy development and execution to continued focused and open discussion of the issue," the prepared statement said.

"Commanders and leaders must take an active role in addressing the issue and modeling correct behavior."

Prevention must be the primary goal of the program, and training is key, the Dunbar said. Training needs to be more tailored for leadership and maturity levels, and should focus on risky behaviors as well as myths. And, she added, current training is too narrowly focused around women, "which makes it all the more difficult for male victims to come forward."

The department and services have made notable progress in improving victim assistance, especially by permitting victims to obtain immediate care and counseling without engaging law enforcement or their command authority, the task force reported. It recommended the services go further by allowing privileged communication between victims and their advocates, which cannot be obtained by the alleged assailant's attorneys.

The task force further recommended that military victim advocates receive formal certification, and that the new Article 120 of the Uniformed Code of Military Justice be amended to be more clear and easier to adjudicate.

In its field interviews, the task force was told that the law, as written, is "cumbersome, complicated and confusing," making it difficult juries to come to a conclusion, Dunbar said.

The task force met with courts-martial convening authorities at every location, Iasiello said, and "We saw a desire to aggressively pursue cases wherever they thought it was possible. So, the intent is there" to prosecute sexual assault cases in the military.

In the department's most recent anonymous "Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members," 6.8 percent of women and 1.8 percent of men reported unwanted sexual contact in the past 12 months, the report said.