

Still Room for Improvement: How We Can Help Survivors of Sexual Assault in the Military

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Due to our location and membership, the JLNVB is in a unique position to support members of the military who have experienced sexual assault. Sexual assault has plagued the U.S. military throughout history, and this issue become especially visible since women joined the Armed Forces in 1948 when Congress passed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act. Numerically, male-on-male assaults are more prevalent in the military, but a greater proportion of females (1 in 4 women compared to 1 in 25 men, according to the cited USCCR report) in the military have been victims of sexual assault (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2013). For this reason, although many military sexual assaults are male-on-male, this article will focus on cases where women are the victims of assault. While sexual assault is always tragic and upsetting, sexual assault victims in the military face the unique challenges of battling the military justice system, standing up to reprisal, and maintaining their professional dignity and trust for their fellow soldiers, sailors, and marines. Women who serve in the military are prepared for hostile attacks from enemies, but are understandably shocked when they are assaulted by their own comrades. These attacks often have professional and personal ramifications, and cause the victims to be discharged from the military due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or other mental health reasons. Victims of sexual assault often suffer from feelings of fear, distrust, and guilt for years after their assault and are at a high risk for homelessness, unemployment, and addiction to drugs or alcohol (Dick, 2012).

In recent years, the number of reported sexual assaults has increased dramatically. Experts find it heartening that more victims are coming forward. In 2016, the Pentagon stated that 6,172 cases of sexual assault in the military had been reported, the highest number to date and an increase from the 6,082 cases reported in 2015 and a notable increase from only 3,374 cases reported in 2012 (Cronk, 2017) (Reuters, 2017). The Pentagon attributed the increased number of reports to an improved level of trust in the system (Reuters, 2017). Even with these impressive increases in reporting, a 2015 report from Human Rights Watch indicates that 62% of victims who reported their assaults experienced disciplinary, career, and social retaliation as a result of their report (Calvert, 2015).

One recent improvement in the military justice system has been the removal of Commanding Officer from the judicial process. In the past, a major problem with reporting and properly prosecuting sexual assault in the military was due to the fact that the Commanding Officer of a unit was responsible for acting (or declining to act) on sexual assault reports within his or her command. This often caused the case to be dismissed in order to protect the record of a Commanding Officer. If the case was pursued, it caused division and discord within the unit, as some members sided with the victim and others sided with the accused (Dao, 2012). For many people, especially those outside of the military, the incredible 2012 film, *The Invisible War* details the retaliation

that is commonly experienced by victims of military sexual assault. The film illustrates the injustice that victims suffer as their cases are dragged through the flawed military justice system. After viewing this film, former Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta moved the authority to prosecute sexual assault cases from unit commanders to senior officers outside of the concerned parties' chains of command. Secretary Panetta also mandated that new recruits be briefed on sexual assault policies within 14 days of reporting to basic training in order to heighten awareness of appropriate professional boundaries, and the rights and options of victims (Huval, 2013) (Dao, 2012).

This issue is particularly relevant to the Hampton Roads area because Hampton Roads is home to the largest Naval base in the world, and has a high concentration of military and former military members. Many of these individuals have either experienced or observed sexual assault during their time in the military. The JLNVB is in a distinctive position to assist our community members who have experienced sexual assault, and we can better serve the community by educating ourselves on the issue at hand. I highly recommend taking the time to watch *The Invisible War* in order to better understand the challenges that face the victims of sexual assault and their families. The JLNVB works with many local community partners, such as H.E.R. Shelter, and Union Mission, which support members of our community whose lives have been devastated by sexual assault. In addition, we should be aware that many of our members currently serve or have served in the military and may be sexual assault survivors. We should always be willing to listen to their stories, should they be ready to share, and be prepared to assist them in their journey to healing.

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