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DoD, VA 'Are Lagging' in Efforts to Address Military Sexual Trauma

WASHINGTON, May 20 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- In written testimony submitted to Congress today, Denise Williams of The American Legion informed a joint session of two House subcommittees that DoD and VA "are lagging" in their efforts to address the worsening problem of military sexual trauma among servicemembers and veterans.

Williams, assistant director of health policy for The American Legion, told the House subcommittees on disability assistance and memorial affairs, and on health, that sexual assault in the U.S. military is increasing. DoD reported 2,688 sexual assaults among its ranks in fiscal 2007, and 2,908 assaults in fiscal 2008.

According to VA statistics, more than 90,000 veterans screened positive for military sexual trauma (MST) in fiscal 2008 alone (about 48,000 women and about 44,000 men).

"These numbers are alarming and The American Legion urges Congress, DoD and VA to act now to eliminate this disturbing trend," Williams told the joint session, chaired by Rep. John Hall, D-N.Y.

The American Legion is concerned that VA may be deficient in its attention to female veterans who have been sexually assaulted. A recent GAO report found that only two of nine VA medical centers visited had specialized residential treatment programs for women with MST.

"Although VA has taken steps to inform staff about their various programs offering MST treatment and counseling, this information is only available internally, and VA has not provided this information on their external website – where it can be easily accessed by veterans," Williams said in her written testimony.

The American Legion wants VA to do a much better job at providing veterans with information on MST treatment and counseling – and to make better use of the Legion and other veterans service organizations to get the job done.

For its part, Williams told the subcommittees, The American Legion has been training its own professional service officers – located in every state – to use proper sensitivity in handling MST issues.

"These service officers can assist veterans and their families in filing a claim for benefits and gaining access to VA health care," Williams said. American Legion service officers "are trained to recognize and handle benefits issues, claims and discharge upgrades for women veterans."

The recent GAO study on VA health care (published in March) also took the organization to task over an

apparent lack of uniformity in training its mental-health professionals.

"VA policy on mental-health (MH) professional training is ambiguous, and does not detail the necessary training for MH professionals who treat/counsel victims of MST or other sexual trauma," Williams noted. The American Legion wants VA Secretary Eric Shinseki to intervene in the situation, and amend policy so that it clearly defines professional requirements for MH staff that treat and counsel MST patients.

In her testimony, Williams wrote that certain aspects of military culture may discourage some MST victims from reporting their assaults. Perpetrators are usually other servicemembers, according to the American Journal of Public Health, and victims often must continue to live and work with their assailants. This increases the risk for distress and subsequent victimization.

"The American Legion believes that, in order to combat this appalling issue, there needs to be more involvement from top leadership within the Dept. of Defense," Williams wrote.

Another problematic issue that Williams mentioned is that veterans who suffer from MST often encounter barriers when they file a claim for disability compensation through the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).

Williams noted that veterans "are left with the burden to prove that they are eligible to receive compensation, even though they have a diagnosis of military sexual trauma from the Veterans Health Administration."


Reminding the joint session that American Legion service officers are being trained to handle MST cases with proper sensitivity, Williams wrote "it is incumbent on all of us – DoD, VA and the veterans' advocacy community – to make sustained efforts to deal with this growing problem, or it will continue to fester."

SOURCE The American Legion

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