



## Troops seek help for military sexual trauma

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By Cathryn Creno, The Arizona Republic

Gilbert resident JoAnn White says she was wounded while serving with the Air Force during the [Vietnam War](#) and has not been able to work since.

Her injuries were not inflicted by a foreign enemy. She said she was raped and sexually assaulted during her military career by men who were supposed to be on her side.

White says her pain is as emotional as it was physical, and was exacerbated by a system that shrugged off her reports without investigating them.

So White has looked on with satisfaction recently as a group of 16 men and women who were raped and assaulted during active service filed a lawsuit against the Pentagon and as legislation was introduced in Congress to expand legal rights and protections for such victims.

"What I had to deal with in the Air Force just about destroyed me," White told [The Arizona Republic](#). "I hope telling what happened to me will help other women. I am fed up and tired. I want the word out there."

Last year, 3,158 sexual assaults were reported by men and women serving in all branches of the Armed Forces, according to the Department of Defense's Annual Report

on Sexual Assault in the Military. But the department estimates that last year's number reflects only about 13.5 percent of the total number of assaults on men and women in active duty last year.

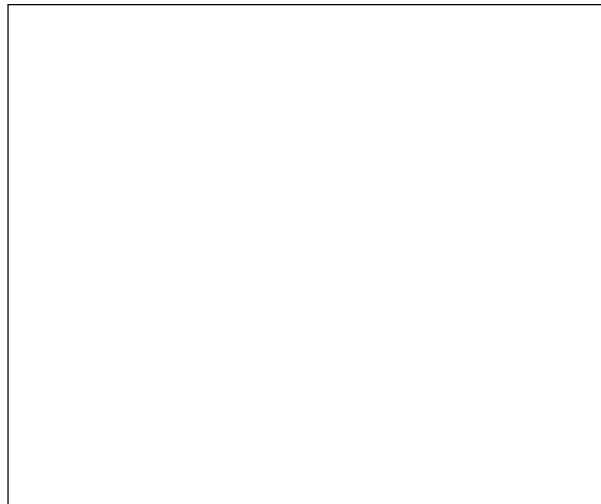
Advocates like Panayiota Bertzikis, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Military Rape Crisis Center, said those victims often fail to report attacks for various reasons, including pressure from supervisors and peers.

Bertzikis is a plaintiff in the February lawsuit, which accuses the military of allowing a culture that fails to prosecute sex offenders and instead punishes victims who come forward.

Bertzikis said she was accused of lying by a commanding officer when she reported being raped by a Coast Guard shipmate in 2006. She said a Coast Guard-appointed advocate also cautioned her not to pursue having her attacker disciplined because she might be viewed as a troublemaker.

Some victims feel trapped in a system

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designed not to protect victims but the military's reputation, she said, noting, "When you enlist ... your entire support system is the military."

Others victims fear forced transfers from jobs they like and have worked hard to get, Bertzikis said.

That's what White says happened to her after an officer groped her breast and another co-worker raped her while she was serving as a fuel systems mechanic at McChord Air Force Base in Washington during the 1970s.

Her complaints were recorded, but the men who attacked her were not punished, she said. The [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) declined to discuss the specifics of her case.

Soon after she first filed her complaint, White said, she was transferred to a low-level job.

Ultimately, White say, she came to see the problem as one that is less about sex and more about power.

"Your superiors have so much power over you when you are in the military," she said. "It blew me away that these complaints could be in my records, but there was no policy in place to address it."

White said that after leaving the service, she tried working in civilian jobs, but mental health problems and a debilitating eating disorder prevented her from succeeding. She receives disability benefits from the VA, but it was not until four years ago that she realized the military has an official name for the anger, anxiety and depression she had suffered from being attacked while in the service: military sexual trauma.

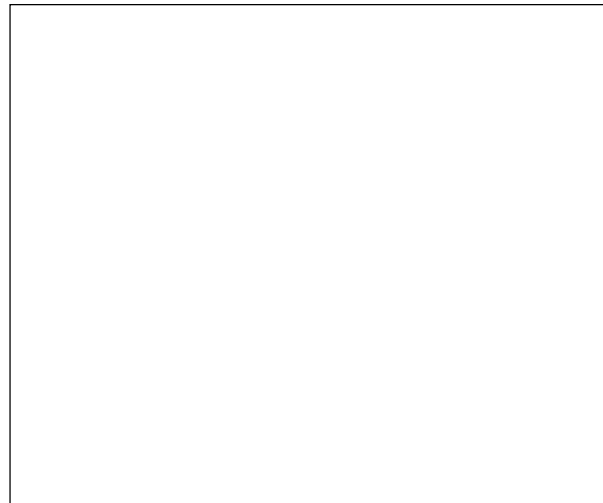
The problem is so large that the Phoenix VA Medical Center has hired a full-time social worker who does nothing but provide individual counseling and support groups for sexual trauma victims.

Social worker Judith Orosz said anger, anxiety, depression and an inability to hold a job are typical among those who seek help.

"What is really troubling is that the sexual assaults are done by people who are supposed to have their back. People they are supposed to be able to trust," she said. "It's usually done by someone who knows them, someone in their unit and maybe even in a position of authority. They leave the military with a lot of trauma, a lot of anger and they feel like they can't trust anyone. It makes it very hard for them to hold a job."

One 47-year-old Avondale woman, who asked that she not be identified, told The Republic she is still in counseling at the Phoenix VA Health Care System more than a decade after her sexual assault by an Army supervisor.

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The former Army staff sergeant said she abandoned her dream of further officer training because her assailant, a major, convinced her no one would believe her version of the story over his.

"What happens in the military is that you are separated from your family and loved ones -- you are all alone," the former sergeant said.

"The military is very political. It's a good old boy system," she said. "They stick up for each other and protect each other."

Bertzikis said women fighting in current wars are finding a way around that system through social networking. Her Military Rape Crisis Center has a Facebook page and website with emergency phone numbers.

She said both sites help victims feel less alone, share stories and work together to support legislation, such as the Defense Sexual Trauma Response, Oversight and Good Governance -- or Defense STRONG -- Act, which was introduced in Congress last month.

If passed, it would give military sexual assault victims the right to legal counsel and to transfer to another base after making a complaint. The bill also would mandate increased training on bases to prevent sex assaults.

Many believe that the best way to get at the root problem of sexual violence is through training early in a military career.

"Correcting the culture within the military is being done in a very pointed way," said Joice Jones, a civilian social worker who coordinates [Luke Air Force Base's](#) sexual

assault prevention and response program and helps run prevention workshops.

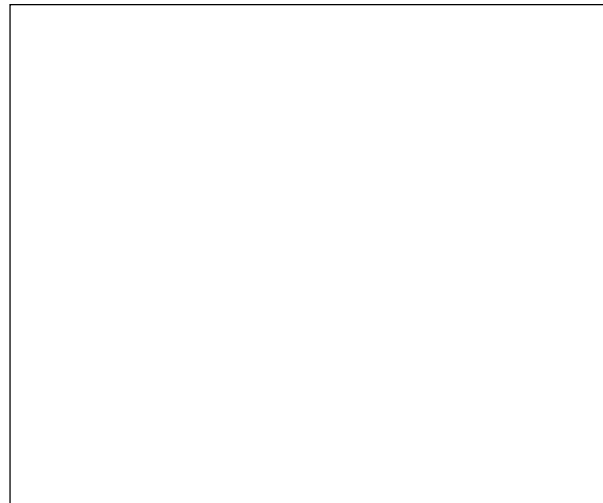
Jones compares many of the airmen and airwomen stationed at Luke to first-year college students: They are away from home for the first time and need information about date rape prevention as well as how to intervene if they see someone on base being sexually harassed or assaulted.

"It's the same age group and the same dynamic as first-year college students," Jones said. "If they are a bystander and they see a fellow wingman who might be taking advantage of someone, they need to know how to respond."

Michelle Wilmot, a Tucson Army veteran featured in a 2008 documentary film about women in combat called "Lioness," agrees that peer support is a key to eliminating sex assault in the military.

She said a man serving in the Marines intervened when a soldier attempted to sexually assault her in 2002, when they were serving in Ramadi, Iraq.

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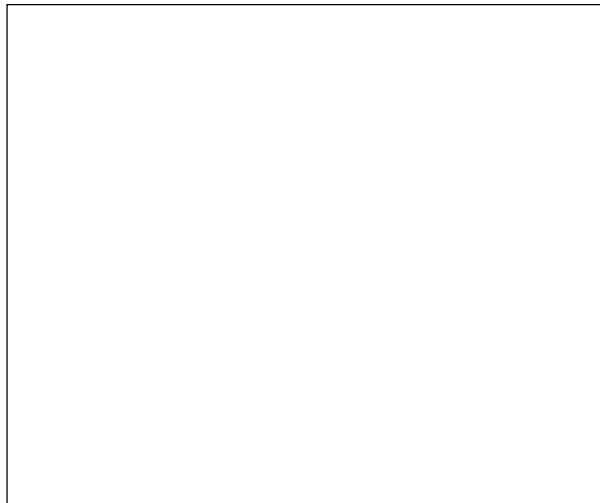
"Luckily the Marine stepped forward -- he was a lot bigger and was someone who was respected," Wilmot said. "I was able to run in another room and lock the door."

Like White, Wilmot believes military sexual assault "is all about power."

"Some men think women shouldn't be in the military," she said. "They can't stand the idea that I'm 5-foot-3, a girl and a combat veteran. That issue doesn't get addressed much at all."

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