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Sex Assaults Underreported, Inquiry Into V.A. Concludes

By SEAN COLLINS WALSH

WASHINGTON — Veterans Affairs facilities that provide [mental health](#) treatment failed to properly report many sexual assaults from 2007 to 2010, according to an investigation by the [Government Accountability Office](#).

The [G.A.O.'s report](#), delivered this week to the House Veterans Affairs Committee, found that sexual assaults were underreported and, when they were reported, that officials often did not follow up through designated channels.

For instance, V.A. policy requires that accusations of [rape](#) be reported to the department's Office of the Inspector General. Yet the report, based on a three-year investigation at five facilities, found that nearly two-thirds of the 67 rape accusations never made it to the office.

In most of the nearly 300 total cases investigated by the G.A.O., the assaults were committed by other patients or unknown suspects and not V.A. employees. The report defined sexual assault as "any type of sexual contact or attempted sexual contact that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient."

The report noted that the department had made a point of making mental health treatment accessible to several specific groups — including women, young veterans from the military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and veterans facing legal issues. Serving these groups presents "unique challenges for V.A. both in providing and maintaining accessible care and keeping veterans and staff safe in V.A. medical facilities," the report said.

The report recommended establishing clearer definitions on what constitutes sexual assault and what to do if an assault is reported. It also said the department needed to increase oversight for these processes.

The department did not immediately respond to a phone call Wednesday seeking comment. But the report included a letter from the department's chief of staff, John Gingrich, with an annotated version of the G.A.O.'s recommendations to the report, detailing how the department will move forward.

