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## VA issues guidelines for handling sexual trauma

By [Patricia Kime](#) - Staff writer

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In light of a Veterans Affairs Department study showing that one-third of female Iraq and Afghanistan veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder report being raped, sexually assaulted or harassed, and one in 100 military men say they've experienced unwanted sexual contact, VA issued guidelines to regional offices Dec. 2 on assessing claims for PTSD caused by military sexual trauma.

Most VA disability claims require a statement from the veteran, along with objective documentation such as a doctor's statement or evidence of a traumatic event, a diagnosis or participation in combat for supporting a claim.

The sexual trauma guidelines encourage examiners to look for evidence that an assault or harassment occurred, including requests for reassignment, pregnancy tests, seeking treatment for depression and other signs that something happened in addition to considering statements from the veteran.

"VA is aware that, because of the personal and sensitive nature of the [military sexual trauma] stressors in these cases, it is often difficult for the victim to report or document the event when it occurs," the guidelines state.

The information also outlines tactics for investigating and rating claims and encourages VA investigators to weigh evidence in a "light most favorable to the veteran."

VA reiterates, though, that the final decision for determining a service connection for PTSD lies with the Veterans Benefits Administration raters and not with Veterans Health Administration medical examiners.

But "in those cases where the evidence for and against service connection is approximately equal, the benefit of doubt must be resolved in favor of the veteran and service connection granted," the guidelines state.

In September, Shira Maguen, a San Francisco VA Medical Center psychologist, published a study online in *Women's Health Issues* that found female veterans reporting military sexual trauma were four times more likely to develop PTSD than those who had not been sexually traumatized.

The study, composed of a review of military health records, also noted that 31 percent of female veterans from the current conflicts diagnosed with PTSD reported experiencing a military sexual trauma.

VA defines military sexual trauma as threatening, harassment or physical assault of a sexual nature that occurs when the victim is in the military.

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee members said Wednesday they welcome the changes.

“These efforts are long overdue, and more work remains to be done. Far too many service members, both men and women, are returning home from service carrying the devastating wounds that result” from military sexual trauma, wrote committee chairwoman Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., and Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., in a letter to Allison Hickey, the VA undersecretary for benefits.

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