

Statement of John F. Tierney  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
U.S. House of Representatives

“Sexual Assault in the Military Part 3: Context and Causes”

As Prepared for Delivery

June 25, 2009

Good afternoon and thank you all for being here. Today, we continue our oversight into sexual assault in the military.

Last summer, this Subcommittee began its examination of this serious problem by focusing on the military’s sexual assault prevention and response programs. Later this summer, we expect a new Strategic Plan from the Department of Defense’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, or SAPRO, as well as a report from the Defense Task Force on Sexual Assault in the Military Services.

In the spirit of constructive oversight, and in order to prepare for those forthcoming reports, today we take a step back to examine the underlying dynamics of this crime. Our witnesses will provide insight into the nature of sexual assault and what factors might contribute to sexual violence within the military. Our goal here is simple: to become better informed about the causes of these vicious crimes that have plagued countless men and women both in the military and society at large.

Unfortunately, rape is one of the most underreported crimes in the United States, within both the military and civilian populations. Consequently, there is little ability to know for certain if sexual assaults are more prevalent in the military or if they occur at the same rate as those in the general population.

What we do know is that 2,908 sexual assaults were reported within the military this past year. It has been estimated that as many as 80% of sexual assaults go unreported. If so, the true total is much higher.

But even one is too many. While most physical wounds can heal, psychological wounds persist. Each incident has untold consequences that tear the essential fabric of a civilized society: shattered trust and broken dreams, not to mention the incalculable strains on families, friendships, and careers.

Sexual assault in the military presents a unique challenge to our society. It is our unwavering duty to protect the men and women that serve in the U.S. military. Unlike civilian society, we in government have a much stronger ability to control the environment and culture in which we place our soldiers. If there are elements of this

environment that can be changed to better protect the men and women who serve our country, then it is our duty to make the necessary changes.

While progress has been made in the past year towards improving prevention and response programs within the Armed Forces, sexual assault is still a grave concern and we still have a very long way to go. This is not solely a women's issue, nor is it simply an internal military problem. This is a matter of national security, something that we all, as citizens who benefit from the protection that our troops provide, must address.

The last thing our sons and daughters should fear when putting their lives on the line to defend this country is being attacked by one of their own. If we can better understand the contributing factors that lead to sexual assault then we will be better able to create policies and programs to effectively prevent these crimes. Our goal must be nothing short of the elimination of this pernicious crime from our Armed Forces.

I thank our witnesses for coming here today and offering their expertise on this important issue.