

**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 IV: Are We Making Progress?”

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Good afternoon. Today, the Subcommittee continues its oversight of the Department of Defense’s response to sexual assault in the military. Thank you all for being here to discuss this important topic.

In any context, sexual assaults destroy lives. But sexual assault in the military has additional facets that make it of particular concern for this Subcommittee.

First, it is the unquestioned duty of this body and the U.S. government as a whole to protect our military servicemembers. As I have said many times, the last thing our men and women in uniform should fear when putting their lives on the line to defend this country is being attacked by one of their own.

Second, sexual assaults in the military threaten military readiness in an acute way. When bonds of trust are broken, when unit cohesion is threatened, and when our soldiers are forced to cope with the heavy emotional and psychological burden of a sexual attack, our armed forces are weakened. It is not only individual servicemembers who are hurt by these crimes, but our military as a whole.

This is our fourth hearing on this critically important subject over the last two years. The focus of our oversight has been the Department of Defense’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, or SAPRO. SAPRO was created to be the “single point of accountability and oversight” for sexual assault policy within the Department, and we have been carefully monitoring its progress.

At our first hearing in July 2008, we heard from two victims of sexual assault. Ms. Ingrid Torres, a manager for the American Red Cross who was raped while working at Kunsan Air Base in South Korea, told us that “the process of investigating and prosecuting the crime was just as traumatizing as the crime itself.” Mrs. Mary Lauterbach, whose daughter, Lance Corporal Maria Lauterbach, was murdered at Camp Lejeune after reporting a rape, testified about the warning signs indicating Maria needed protection after reporting the crime that had been missed by the Marines, and how her daughter “regretted reporting the rape.” I note that today we will hear testimony from Mrs. Lauterbach’s attorney, who will provide us with further insight into his experience working with the military in the aftermath of Lance Corporal Lauterbach’s death.

The traumatic experiences of victims, and their first-hand experiences with the military's sexual assault response programs provide invaluable insight into the challenges facing SAPRO and highlight the areas that the office needs to better address.

During our earlier hearings, we also heard from the Government Accountability Office on its findings and recommendations for SAPRO to improve its training, response, accountability, and oversight programs. GAO reported that despite some DOD progress on sexual assault response, significant problems remained that could "discourage or prevent some servicemembers from using the programs when needed." Today, we welcome GAO back to give us the details of a new report, released today, that follows up on those original recommendations.

Today we will hear from a distinguished panel of experts who will answer the fundamental question of this hearing: Are we making the progress necessary to effectively address the problem of sexual assaults in the military?

Along with GAO, we welcome representatives of the Defense Task Force on Sexual Assault in the Military Services. This congressionally mandated Task Force just completed a 16-month review of all matters related to sexual assault in the military. The Task Force report contains extensive recommendations for the Secretary of Defense, the Service Secretaries, SAPRO, Congress, and others. Representatives of the Department of Defense will be on hand to report on related efforts over the last several years, as well as plans for continued efforts to eliminate sexual assaults from the military.

Our society must ensure that we do a better job of preventing these terrible crimes, providing care for victims, and ensuring that perpetrators are brought to justice. The military context – where we consciously create a separate society designed to ensure our national defense – only magnifies our obligation to prevent sexual assault. We hope to hear today that DOD has made significant progress in correcting the problems that we heard about two years ago.

It should be crystal clear to the Department by now that Congress is watching. We will continue to monitor the progress being made. We all share a responsibility to our men and women in uniform to do everything necessary to protect them from these crimes. We will continue that work today.