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Army adding lawyers to prosecute sex crimes

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The Army said Monday it is expanding its attention to sexual abuse cases by adding prosecutors, rearranging its criminal investigative unit and stepping up training to change behavior.

The moves, which will include sexual assault prevention training from commanders on down through the ranks, are aimed at stemming crimes that Army Secretary Pete Geren called "repugnant to the core values" of the military service.

"We see the crime of sexual assault as a crime that goes beyond just the criminal act," Geren told reporters at the Pentagon. "We see it as a crime that destroys unit cohesion."

Last year, an estimated 15 percent of about 9,000 Army investigations involved sexual assault allegations, said Brig. Gen. Rodney Johnson. However, only 137 cases went to trial, with many cases involving inappropriate comments or other offenses that were punished by internal disciplinary action instead of criminal charges.

Reports of sexual assaults had jumped by about 24 percent in 2006 and nearly 40 percent in 2005. Officials attributed the increases partly to more aggressive efforts to encourage victims to come forward.

But critics have said they worry that too few perpetrators are being brought to justice and not all victims are being helped.

Geren approved the hiring of 15 new prosecutors and five prosecutor trainers for the Army's Judge Advocate General Corps (JAG). The JAG also will hire seven experts in sexual assault litigation training to help prosecutors and train Army lawyers around the world.

The Army Criminal Investigation Command is looking to hire 30 special investigators to focus on sexual assault and harassment cases. Most of the new hires will be assigned to military bases that have the largest number of cases.

Next month, Army commanders will also begin receiving sexual assault prevention kits — with DVDs, posters, an information guide and so on — to make them and soldiers aware of the problem.

A report earlier this year showed that a third of women in the military and 6 percent of men reported that were sexually harassed. The figure for women was worse than the previous finding several years ago, but better than a similar survey taken in 1995. The Defense Manpower Data Center said it compiled the data from a survey of 24,000 people in 2006.

A separate report on sexual assaults showed that fewer cases were reported among military personnel in 2007 after years of significant increases. There were 2,688 sexual assaults reported in 2007 by people in uniform, down about 9 percent from the 2,947 reported the year before.

Officials said changes in the method of reporting data made it difficult to compare numbers year to year. In 2005, about 2,400 sexual assaults were reported.

The year 2007 was the fourth year the military compiled detailed statistics on sexual assaults. And reporting methods were changed each year, complicating efforts to evaluate progress or to determine whether it is the actual assaults or the reporting that is going up or down.

According to Pentagon figures, 1,516 reports involved the Army; 565 the Air Force; 394 the Navy; and 213 the Marines. The active duty Army, by far the largest service with about 518,000 soldiers, also saw the highest rate of reported sexual assaults.

The Army had 2.6 reports per 1,000 soldiers; the Air Force's rate was 1.6 reports per 1,000; the Marines' rate was 1.1 per 1,000; and the Navy's rate was 1 per 1,000 sailors. The average was 1.8 sexual assaults reported per 1,000 military members.

On the Net:

Defense Department Sexual Assault and Prevention: <http://www.sapr.mil/>



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