

Testimony of Suzanne Brown-McBride
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Before the
House of Representatives
House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel
on
Sexual Assault in the Military: Victim Support and Advocacy
January 26, 2009

Chairwoman Davis, Ranking Member Wilson and other members of the Subcommittee on Military Personnel

Thank you for the privilege of providing testimony to this subcommittee about the essential services that victims of sexual violence, particularly those who have been victimized during the course of their military service, should be able to access to promote healing and offender accountability.

My name is Suzanne Brown-McBride and I have been a sexual assault victim advocate for the last 17 years. It is also my honor to serve as the Executive Director of the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault (CALCASA), one of the largest and oldest associations of sexual assault crisis programs in the nation.

Over 35 years ago, the first few sexual assault crisis programs began to offer services, advocacy and solace for victims of sexual violence in California. Last year, 84 rape crisis programs provided advocacy services for over 26,000 victims as well as prevention and educational programming for over 350,000 participants in every jurisdiction of our state. California is also the home to 27 active military installations, each of which benefit from some level of collaboration with their local sexual assault crisis program.

As you have already heard this morning, the experience of sexual assault can have profound and long lasting effects on both victims and those who are committed to supporting them through crisis and beyond. Of immediate concern for many victims is the threat of physical injury, disease and pregnancy. Over the long term, the lingering effects of sexual trauma manifests itself through disturbances in mental and physical health, disruptions of productivity and an undermining of one's most basic faith in their own safety.

Over the course of the last three decades victims, advocates, clinicians, medical providers, criminal justice practitioners and public safety officials have assisted in refining an array of essential services that we believe can significantly assist victims of sexual assault heal from their trauma, exercise their rights, achieve justice, and promote offender accountability:

Crisis intervention, 24 hours per day, seven days per week.

Followup counseling services.

In-person counseling, including group counseling.

Accompaniment services.

Advocacy services.

Information and referrals to victims and the general public.

Community education presentations.

Rape prevention presentations and self-defense programs.

Our experience of working with hundreds of thousands of victims has taught us that services are most effective when they are easily accessible, victim directed, culturally appropriate and long lasting. Here is what we mean by that:

Accessible: victims are most likely to access services when they are available to the victim, when the victim desires to access them: hence 9 to 5 services are generally not enough. This is particularly true in deployment situations where soldiers are likely to have non-traditional duty schedules. Similarly, victims decide to access services when they perceive them to be safe. Making the choice to report a sex crime while in service is doubly complicated by its implications on a soldier's life, and career. Practices like restricted reporting come a long way in providing the space for victims to make informed choices about accessing services and reporting their experience. Sadly, in California, the effectiveness of restricted reporting is undermined by our civilian adult mandated reporting statutes.

Victim Directed: victims are more likely to benefit from services that offer an array of options and allow for the victim to make the choices that best suit her or his circumstances: mandating victim options, or forcing them to pursue a certain course of action will only discourage reporting and further isolate victims from the very services that we are attempting to promote. Victims are more aware than anyone about the the threat that a perpetrator of sexual violence presents to their fellow soldiers, contractors and civilians, but the best access to services is unique to that victim's experience and may not begin with reporting (even though it could likely end there).

Culturally appropriate: victims are whole people who, in addition to the military culture that they are a part of, also have a constellation of beliefs, life experiences and history that can assist (or hinder) their recovery process. Services that are not tailored to these historical, cultural or philosophical realities miss opportunities to find meaningful options that can promote a victims recovery and participation in investigatory proceedings.

Victims who are not adequately supported are more likely to suffer from unresolved trauma and more likely to be unable or unwilling to participate in the often lengthy investigation and adjudication process.

Long lasting: the trauma of sexual violence can often last far longer than the duration the time that one is enlisted. Trauma, thought to be long resolved, can be triggered by memories, routine situations or even innocuous triggers like smell or sound. It is essential that victims receive informed, competent crisis services but it is also absolutely necessary that long-term services are available for victims throughout their course of military services and when they rejoin civilian life.

It is equally essential that civilian and military victim services coordinate in a frequent and meaningful fashion. It is our experience that military service personnel and their families do not live their entire lives on base - even when deployed. Incidents of sexual violence often involve complex, multi-jurisdictional issues which can be made even more complex by territorial bickering and a lack of communication. Conversely, collaborative ties between civilian and military victim service providers can provide a powerful array of support and comfort for victims as they attempt to pursue justice.

Sadly, sexual violence is present in every part of our culture -- even in the military. I am heartened that there have been important steps taken to address this issue within our armed services. I am also aware of much more to do to intervene when an assault occurs as well as prevent these crimes in the first place.

Chairman Davis, and Ranking Member Wilson I thank you for your attention to this issue and hope that I, and CALCASA, can be of assistance as you consider your next steps.

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