

Opening Statement
Chairwoman Jackie Speier
Subcommittee on Military Personnel
Shattered Families, Shattered Service: Taking Military Domestic Violence
Out of the Shadows September 18, 2019

Video link to the hearing here: <https://youtu.be/wZBNdq0GyVg>

The hearing will now come to order. I want to welcome everyone to this hearing of the Military Personnel subcommittee on domestic violence in the military.

We are here today because domestic violence has become a forgotten crisis in our military. It has been 15 years since a DOD task force analyzed domestic violence within the military, yet we have seen unsettling warning signs since. Within the last few months, DOD reports have highlighted concerning failures in our services' domestic violence systems. The DOD has not responded urgently.

Today, we will hear from three survivors of domestic violence in the military who are bravely coming forward to share their experiences in the hope that others may be helped. Because we lack data that is recent, plentiful, or granular, we must rely on survivors, advocates and experts to help us understand the unique challenges of dealing with this crisis within the military.

Major Leah Olszewski is still on the run from a violent abuser. Air Force officials at every level refused to help her, despite knowing of past incidents. Kate Ranta found justice in the civilian—not military—system, but only after her violent ex-husband—who was allowed to go free and retire by the Air Force—shot her and her father. Rohini Hughes and her son Jay were verbally and physically abused by her husband, who as a JAG used his knowledge of the system against her. These incidents impact families, communities, and have sidetracked the victims' careers.

The DOD must learn to believe survivors and take action based on their claims and evidence. Favoritism and a complex bureaucracy cannot shield dangerous perpetrators.

Domestic violence is not unique to the military. According to the CDC, one in four women and nearly one in ten men have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetimes. And, as with civilian domestic violence, there is no “typical” military domestic violence case.

That means policy must account for and address a wide range of potential aggravating factors. Adverse childhood experiences may create a propensity for domestic violence. Poor role models can make it hard to peacefully resolve conflicts. Law enforcement, providing access to child care and early education, military leadership, Congress, and the criminal justice process all have roles to play.

But we must also mitigate the factors of military life that can exacerbate the risks of domestic violence. Families cope with new responsibilities, frequent moves, and tough challenges. Servicemembers may be consumed by military duties – and struggling with post-traumatic or other stresses and a thirst for high-risk behaviors after multiple deployments. Military spouses are often isolated, underemployed and struggling to make ends meet, living far from friends or family and unfamiliar with local resources. It's unfortunately easy to see how these conditions can make domestic violence possible, more dangerous, and persistent.

When young men and women join the military, they become our responsibility as one of our nation's most precious resources. We are equally responsible for military families, who sacrifice along with their servicemember. And we are responsible for military children—because exposure to domestic violence has long-term effects and because military children are disproportionately likely to join the military themselves.

I believe that the military takes this problem seriously, but it's clear that leadership needs to address this threat with renewed urgency. Commanders, at every level, need to make combatting domestic violence a personal priority.

In recent years, Congress has added a UCMJ domestic violence criminal article, required new reporting on DOD's prevention and response systems, and explored expanding special victim attorneys to cover domestic violence. There is far more to be done, however, and I hope to learn about some options today.

Today we will be joined by two panels. The first will consist of military domestic violence survivors and experts. On the second, we'll have DOD officials responsible for designing and implementing relevant policies.

We will focus on three main questions during today's hearing:

First, why does domestic violence in the military matter? Who does it affect and what happens to them?

Second, how should we prevent domestic violence, reach out to and care for survivors, and deal with perpetrators?

Third, what do current DOD programs look like? What are their strengths and how can we further improve them?

Before I introduce our first panel, let me offer Ranking Member Kelly an opportunity to make any opening remarks.

[Following Ranking Member Kelly's Remarks]

Thank you, Mr. Kelly.

Each witness will have the opportunity to present his or her testimony, and each Member will have an opportunity to question the witnesses for five minutes. We respectfully ask the witnesses to summarize their testimony in five minutes or less. Your written comments and statements will be made part of the hearing record.

Ms. Kate Ranta: Survivor and Advocate

Ms. Leah Olszewski: Survivor

Mrs. Rohini Hughes: Survivor and Advocate

Ms. Arlene Vassell: Vice President of Programs, Prevention & Social Change;
National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

Mr. David S. Lee: Director of Prevention Services; PreventConnect

Mr. Brian Clubb: Coordinator, Military & Veterans Advocacy Program Battered Women's Justice Program

[Following the first Panel]

We will now switch to our second panel. I would like to Welcome

Mrs. A.T. Johnston: Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, Department of Defense

Mr. Kenneth Noyes: Associate Director, DOD Family Advocacy Program (Military Family Readiness Policy), Department of Defense

Mrs. Johnston, I understand you have provided 1 statement for the department. Please proceed.