

To: House Armed Services Committee

Date: Wednesday, April 10, 2024

From: The Honorable Sylvia R. Garcia (D-TX-29)

Re: Member Testimony for HASC Member Day on Thursday, April 11, 2024

Thank you, Mr. Chair, Ranking Member, and Committee Members for the opportunity to provide written testimony to the House Armed Services Committee as part of today's Member Day.

This is a critical opportunity for Members of the House of Representatives to help shape the priorities of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2025.

Our service members represent the best of our country.

As members of Congress, it is our duty to ensure Americans who have served, are currently serving, and will serve our nation in the future as part of the military, are kept safe and honored for their service.

It is why throughout my time in Congress I have been laser-focused on tackling sexual violence in the U.S. military – one of the biggest challenges facing our women and men in uniform.

I have done so in honor of my constituent Vanessa Guillen, a 20-year-old Latina soldier who was the victim of sexual harassment in the Army and was violently murdered by a fellow soldier in 2020 in an armory at Fort Cavazos, formerly named Fort Hood.

Her story and legacy, which has been bravely carried forward by her loving family, inspired the #IAmVanessaGuillen movement – a clarion call to change how cases of sexual violence are adjudicated in the military.

Because of Vanessa's story and her family's tenacity, this body joined several of my colleagues and I in legislating and overseeing improvements to protect our servicemembers and prevent sexual assault and abuse, namely removing the adjudication of sexual assault and harassment cases out of the chain of command.

However, many of our kids who aspire to one day join the military are still at risk.

In July 2022, the New York Times released an article that uncovered the sexual abuse of teens in the Military's Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) program and reported 33 JROTC instructors had been criminally charged.

The U.S. Department of Defense then acknowledge an unprecedented 58 instances of sexual abuse within the JROTC program since 2017.

Let that number sink in.

Cadets enrolled in JROTC programs face the unique challenges of a particularly uneven power dynamic, with their adult instructors also serving as their "commanding officers.

As a result, predators can leverage these power dynamics to coerce young victims and commit acts of sexual violence.

According to the Child Molestation Research and Prevention Institute, 95% of sexual abuse is preventable through education.

That means direct access to sexual abuse prevention training is the most effective method to help address this problem and help protect our cadets who dream of nothing more than serving our nation in the military.

As Members of Congress, we have the power to help put an end to this abuse and to help protect our kids. We owe them to do everything we can to help protect them.

As we undergo this year's process for the Fiscal Year 2025 NDAA, I look forward to working with members of this esteemed committee to ensure my bipartisan bill H.R. 2711, the Shielding America's Youth From Exploitation (SAYFE) Act, is included as a provision in the final package that both chambers of Congress ultimately pass.

My bill would require the U.S. Department of Defense to provide annual, age-appropriate, sexual assault and abuse prevention trainings to JROTC cadets. Further, it ensures that the JROTC instructor cannot also provide the annual training.

The lack of protection for these young women and men is not only a moral failing, but it also undermines our military readiness at a time when the United States is already suffering from a recruitment crisis across the Armed Forces.

Our nation cannot afford to see a program as important as JROTC undermined and disgraced by growing accounts of sexual abuse.

Congress has a fundamental duty to protect these kids, and my bill will help do just that.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share this critical priority for the committee's consideration, and I encourage all members of this committee to work with me to ensure we address this glaring problem in this year's NDAA.

Thank you.