

House Armed Services Committee
Subcommittee on Military Personnel Hearing
The Findings and Recommendations of the Independent Review Commission on
Sexual Assault in the Military
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July 20, 2021
Word Count: 906

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Speier, Ranking Member Gallagher, and Committee Members. I am here today to describe Department of Defense efforts “to counter the scourge of sexual assault and sexual harassment in our military.”

Sexual assault and sexual harassment remain serious problems in our force, with lethal consequences for our service members and harmful effects on our combat readiness.

This Administration has placed a high, even unprecedented, priority on this challenge set. As a longtime leader in this space, President Biden has vowed action on this issue. As a nominee, Secretary Austin met virtually with survivors of sexual assault and sexual harassment. And while I led the Presidential Transition Agency Review Team for the Pentagon, we laid the groundwork to move out quickly. And we have moved quickly and deliberately.

One day after being sworn in, Secretary Austin issued a memorandum to senior DoD leadership. It tasked them with reporting data pertaining to sexual assault and sexual harassment.

With the information in hand from this initial tasking, on February 26, Secretary Austin detailed three immediate actions. He directed the Secretaries of the Military Departments to ensure full compliance with existing sexual assault and sexual harassment policies. He directed a series of on-site installation evaluations. He required quarterly reports on installations and units of greatest concerns as well as those that show promise. Finally, he required the Secretaries of the Military Departments to identify and resource dedicated personnel for “prevention of interpersonal violence and self-harm.”

On that same day, at President Biden’s direction, Secretary Austin also established the 90-day Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the Military (IRC). The IRC interviewed a broad set of experts, victims, former prosecutors, as well as our military and Department leadership.

On June 21, the IRC provided its findings and recommendations to Secretary Austin. Its report was comprehensive, evidence-based, stakeholder-informed, and solution-oriented. Its 82 recommendations spanning four lines of effort: accountability; prevention; climate and culture; and victim care and support.

On July 2 – less than six months after stating his intent to lead DoD in countering sexual assault and sexual harassment, Secretary Austin directed an implementation way ahead.

Regarding accountability, the Secretary is seeking legislation where needed and directing Departmental action on others items within its purview. First, the Secretary is seeking reforms to the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Of note, we request removing sexual assault and related crimes from the military chain of command and adding sexual harassment as an offense. Given the uniqueness of each Service, we seek to establish Special Prosecutors within each Military Department, reporting directly to its Secretary. The Secretary of Defense would set standards that govern the prosecutor framework. In our legislative proposal, we also seek a “fail safe” provision that would allow the Secretary to centralize oversight in OSD, should the Military Departments fail to meet the requisite milestones.

Secretary Austin has also directed several accountability reforms that do not require legislation. These include standardizing non-judicial punishments across all Services, establishing a process to initiate separation for Service members against whom there are substantiated sexual harassment claims, and professionalizing career tracks for lawyers and investigators in sexual assault and harassment cases.

Solving this problem requires not just greater accountability, but also significant and enduring changes to our approach to prevention, climate and culture, and victim care and support. Secretary Austin directed me to develop an implementation roadmap for his review across all lines of effort by the end of summer.

I am taking a phased approach to developing comprehensive implementation plans across all recommendations. Although we are on a fast timeline, this approach is methodical and deliberate. The Department of Defense is the largest enterprise in the United States, with approximately 2.9 million service members and civilians spread out across 4,800 sites in over 160 countries. This issue set will require substantial leadership, at all levels, to ensure changes that challenge culture, resources, and time are effective and enduring. We have no intention of rushing to failure and risking the loss of faith and trust from another generation of Service members.

The initial phase of our implementation plan is nearly complete. It involves examining each recommendation and identifying the office of primary, and collateral, responsibility within DoD. Working with those offices, OSD will develop a rough implementation timeline. It will estimate the resources and staffing requirements needed. However, significantly more work will be required to determine the specifics of these allocations. And we will determine whether a recommendation requires legislative changes to implement. Of course the way we will implement will not be as simple as a line-by-line exercise. Rather, we will need to synchronize all efforts to ensure maximum effectiveness and efficiency.

Once Secretary Austin reviews and approves my proposed roadmap, we will get to work.

These efforts will be consistently monitored by me and the Department’s senior-most leadership via the Deputy’s Workforce Council. I am committed to ensuring sustained attention

from the Department's most senior leadership to drive these changes as effectively and expeditiously as possible.

The President and the Secretary have prioritized countering sexual assault and sexual harassment, acted quickly and decisively, and have a plan of action for effective implementation of needed reforms. And we will see to it that every corner of the Department implements these changes in letter and in spirit. Our service members deserve no less, and our combat effectiveness depends on our success.