

Statement by Leah Olszewski, Survivor and Advocate

***For the House Armed Services Committee Hearing on Domestic Violence
September 18, 2019***

I am appearing as an individual and have provided, as requested, a copy of my curriculum vitae.

My name is Leah Olszewski. I am a Major (MAJ) in the US Army National Guard having worked in special operations over many years. I am a business owner, entrepreneur, daughter, sister, aunt and a one-time intimate partner to an active duty Air Force E8, SMSgt (RET) Erik Cardin, with whom I lived outside Travis AFB, California. I once was someone else - tough, on the move in every way, super loving, trusting. I had a magnificent spark in me, the world at my fingertips. That is, until I met and later moved in with SMSgt (RET) Cardin in April 2017.

The abuse started small in the Fall of 2016. He would tell me he loved me one minute and then explode in rage - privately and publicly - stating he was glad I didn't fight back (because he had been in physical altercations with women in the past), apologizing, then begging me not to leave him.

The nine months we dated exclusively between August 2016 and March 2017, I saw the beginnings of who SMSgt (RET) Cardin really is. But, that's not all that was going on. During this time, the SMSgt would also be fired and kicked out of his unit, the 571st Mobility Support Advisory Squadron (MSAS) at Travis Air Force Base (AFB), California (CA) after 3 significant incidents of violence (including on a LtCol/O5 and a MSgt/E7) and daily abuse on service members who, to this day, say "He's going to kill someone.", "He's going to come for you Leah", "You don't even have to tell me about all the abuse, he's capable of all of it" and "He has slipped through the cracks for years". I later learned this to be even more true than anyone could imagine. When I met SMSgt (RET) Cardin in June 2016 near Hurlburt Field, Florida, he led me to believe he was with Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). Little did I know then that AFSOC had fired and kicked him out 2 years prior, in 2014, for abuse on service members including - per SMSgt (RET) Cardin's own words - being emotionally involved in another service member's suicide. I also did not know that SMSgt (RET) Cardin had recently returned from a year in Afghanistan, during which his Commander (with whom I have spoken since) and his unit there experienced this same violence and abusive behavior under the SMSgt. The Air Force, once again, never directed him to counseling, nor reprimanded him. Instead, it rewarded SMSgt (RET) Cardin with a leadership role at Travis AFB, CA. While the SMSgt was en route to this new assignment in August 2016, another Air Force Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) at Travis AFB, who knew SMSgt (RET) Cardin from their time at AFSOC in similar roles, warned Travis Command of the SMSgt's violent history. Command said it knew and did nothing. This is the same thing they would do - nothing - regarding SMSgt (RET) Cardin and their own service members, even when service members complained of the SMSgt's behavior and of being afraid, between August 2016 and September 2018.

And, this is the same thing they would do - nothing - after learning in the Fall of 2017 that SMSgt (RET) Cardin had assaulted me 5 times, including strangulation in July of that year,

constantly threatened me, including to break neck (and only hadn't done so yet, according to the SMSgt "because God is with me", and bust my front teeth out for stepping to him like a man (which is on recording). The 571MSAS Commander said "We know he hurts people and will always blame others and not take responsibility." and "Leah, run away. He's doing you a favor". That's it. Their answer to his violence over many years on many people was to not send him to counseling, was to not court martial him, but to just push him off to be someone else's problem. That someone else was other service members - who the Air Force put at risk - and me.

In April 2017, SMSgt (RET) Cardin and I moved in together and the severe verbal and emotional abuse began. I was a slut, a whore, a hooker, cheating with Navy SEAL friends and Special Forces co-workers. Other women, especially female service members, were the same and "just want trains done on them". He isolated me, took my communication devices, left me in dangerous places at night, forced me into physically dangerous situations. He would tell me he loved me and wanted children with me already one minute and the next, become enraged because I walked wrong, needed water or asked a question. He said he would always win, I would always lose, and I was a woman, so should know my place. Then he would ask me not to abandon him as others had. My life with him was a roller coaster and terrorizing.

On October 11, 2017 SMSgt (RET) Cardin committed the worst assault on me yet. Knowing I was pregnant this evening he, among other things, pulled back both of his legs and kicked me with the full force of both of his feet in the abdomen, so hard I flew off our bed and into closet doors, knocking them off their tracks. He then grabbed and pulled my hair, not allowing me to leave, took my phone, and then grabbed and pushed me down at the top of stairs as he often did. And then, in his usual unremorseful way, he walked right over me as though nothing had happened. I called the police and, in doing so, he said I crossed the line and he left the house. Over the next three days I miscarried.

And what was the Air Force answer when they learned of this? "He's doing you a favor".

Every Air Force entity on Travis AFB with a duty to hold SMSgt (RET) Cardin accountable failed me. Command never engaged me after learning of the physical abuse, except to ask when I was leaving. They never provided me one resource nor reported the abuse to law enforcement. They sent SMSgt (RET) Cardin on Temporary Duty (TDY), something he loved, instead of to the FAP Offender's course, they ignored my complaint of his financial retaliation on me, they supported his claims - a known offender turning the tables on the victim (as offenders often do) - at the Family Advocacy Program (FAP) Central Registry Board (CRB). This was just the beginning of their failures. Later, Command hesitated on a no contact order (even after other airmen said they believed SMSgt (RET) Cardin was going to show up at a classroom where I was teaching on Travis AFB and hurt me and students), they obstructed the service of court paperwork, they failed to maintain control or accountability of him while was reportedly restricted to the local area over the Summer of 2018 and more.

Not only did Command fail me, but Family Advocacy failed me. On FAP intake, the counselor said "SMSgt (RET) Cardin told me you were pregnant and miscarried." I said "Yes.". Yet, knowing this - and of the strangulation and threats - FAP CRB decided SMSgt (RET) Cardin did nothing wrong and then supported his retaliatory claim that I emotionally abused him (for which

he had no evidence). Air Mobility Command (AMC) IG investigated FAP and the CRB for wrong doing, the only true investigation into any entity, and found 5 of the 6 assertions I made in the IG complaint to be substantiated. But to this day, no decisions or information have been remedied, as far as anyone knows, and SMSgt (RET) Cardin uses the initial CRB results in court against me. It's no wonder that he laughs and smiles in court, has no remorse, continues to lie and blames others – the Air Force has fueled him and taught him well.

When I filed an Inspector General (IG) complaint with the Travis AFB IG office initially regarding FAP and CRB failures, the IG dismissed my claims of wrong doing. That IG office is led by the same person, the Vice Wing Commander, that leads the FAP CRB. Why would he sign off on anything that admitted to his own failures? The conflict of interest at Travis AFB is immense. When I later said to a Non-Commissioned Officer who had worked at the Travis AFB IG office the year prior that “Everyone is in bed together.”, he responded “Hell yes they are.” I would see this lack of impartiality and protection of self at all costs (to others) again and again at Travis AFB, Scott AFB and the Pentagon.

Neither Command nor Family Advocacy reported the physical abuse to or provided me information on Security Forces or the Office of Special Investigations (OSI). In January 2018, when I did learn, through my own efforts, to report to the two entities, they both swept the miscarriage under the carpet - along with the other violence and his history of deceit and abuse (which, according to the Air Force itself, are national security issues). Even after indicating via email and phone calls with me and other Air Force organizations, that they (Security Force Investigators) were investigating, no investigation took place. No witnesses were contacted, no evidence was collected, nothing.

In April 2018, on hearing Security Forces never conducted an investigation, I contacted the Secretary of the Air Force's (SECAF) office, asked for help from (former) Secretary Heather Wilson and provided evidence of SMSgt (RET) Cardin's history and his abuse on me. Only then did someone at SECAF contact OSI to speak with me. Seven months after SMSgt (RET) Cardin kicked me in the stomach, OSI told me “Everyone has had their hands on your stuff and no one has done anything so we're going to be challenged from the start.” I found that to be the case - OSI never contacted witnesses, missed evidence and more. As with the Legal team at Travis AFB, Travis OSI made promises they didn't keep. For safety, for every reason, I had a right to now, yet I was always last to know. This, after the agent at Travis AFB had brushed aside the miscarriage in January 2018.

In the Spring 2018, I was in touch [again, due to my own efforts to have SMSgt (RET) Cardin held responsible] with the Travis Legal office. A number of Legal personnel sent me in circles, delayed responses, took back several promises, conflicted themselves and couldn't keep track of dates and evidence. I later learned that the Staff Judge Advocate on base was known to not be well versed or effective in dealing with criminal evidence and cases.

At the same time, because the 821st Contingency Response Support Squadron (CRSS) Commander was not holding SMSgt (RET) Cardin responsible and was enabling him further, as the 571st MSAS Commander had, I also asked for help from the higher Command at Joint Base McGuire Dix Lakehurst, NJ. When those requests fell on deaf ears, I directly asked the AMC

Commander, a 3-Star General, and several others at AMC, including Security Forces and Staff Judge Advocate Commanders, for help. They did nothing and would later say that Travis AFB Commanders should make the decision on the SMSgt. These are the same Commanders who had let SMSgt (RET) Cardin go for every act of violence before.

On September 1, 2018, the Air Force honorably retired SMSgt (RET) Cardin - no demotion, no reprimand, no court martial. For anything.

A 2018 Tennessee Air National Guard hand puppet re-enlistment gets a leader demoted and immediately retired. But years of workplace violence and domestic violence are rewarded over several years and ultimately through an honorable retirement. Instead of doing the right thing, Commanders got rid of him and place the burden further on me and the community in which SMSgt (RET) Cardin lives.

Eligible for numerous UCMJ articles over many years, I did not know of the Air Force's decision to not hold him accountable until 3 days after SMSgt (RET) Cardin was discharged from the service. By then, it was too late. And then, it was not until September 12, 2018 that I knew the Air Force had not just retired him on September 1st, but had *honorably* retired him.

An NCO at Travis AFB with whom I am friends - one of many who deserve so much more from the Air Force – provided me email addresses for Air Force Chief of Staff General David Goldfein, Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Kaleth Wright and the (former) Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson. The Secretary of the Air Force had been aware of SMSgt (RET) Cardin's behavior and Command and other system failures since April 2018. Still, on learning SMSgt (RET) Cardin slipped through the cracks, again, and was rewarded for his behavior, again, I immediately emailed CMSAF Wright, General Goldfein and (former) Secretary Wilson directly, providing evidence of abuse, his history and stating that the Air Force had just let a violent man go with no consequences. I never received a response from any of them. As the Air Force wished, the SMSgt was not its problem anymore.

SMSgt (RET) Cardin took my child. He depleted my mental and emotional health and I temporarily lost the will to live. My business, which had received funding in March 2017, fell apart. And money I did have was spent on getting away from him and court travel to acquire and maintain a protective order. My opportunity at a TV show was squandered by the trauma. My status with my own unit - which had groomed me for big things prior to my life with SMSgt (RET) Cardin - faded away. To this day, my relationship with the Alabama Army National Guard remains strained and uncomfortable, as I have received no support from them and particularly as they have allowed for SMSgt (RET) Cardin to retaliate again and file an IG report on me in which he claims conduct unbecoming, failure to maintain good order and discipline because I was a MAJ/O4, an Officer, while he was a SMSgt/E8, Enlisted, while we were dating and living together.

This is my life today.

While I've struggled, the Air Force has taken the easy road and through enabling and emboldening SMSgt (RET) Cardin since at least 2013 and outright support of him later, further

violated and traumatized me in the process. SECAF found no time to talk to me after SMSgt (RET) Cardin was retired and, in the few minutes the office gave me, specifically stated that, in order to get him relooked, I would have to show all of the Air Force failures. To address this, I then filed multiple Inspector General (IG) complaints including one that focused on Commanders pre-2016, Commanders at Travis AFB and those up through the chain of command at JBMDL, NJ, Scott AFB, IL and the Pentagon [to include those I had reached out to directly for help – Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, Kaleth Wright, Air Force Chief of Staff, General David Goldfein, and the (former) Secretary of the Air Force, Secretary Heather Wilson]. In October 2018, SMSgt (RET) Cardin’s former Afghanistan Commander, knowing how violent the SMSgt is through personal experience and concerned for my safety, spoke to the Secretary of the Air Force Inspector General (SAFIG), MG Harris, on my behalf. The SAFIG stated then that she knew the system was not perfect. Yet, not long after I filed my Command complaint in February 2019, she rejected it. The OSI complaint was never addressed and the Security Forces complaint was sent to a Travis AFB Commander, where – per many stationed at Travis – conflict of interest is rampant. The Travis AFB Commander, not surprisingly, decided there was no wrong doing on the part of Security Forces.

To this day, you will find no shortage of airmen and others who know SMSgt (RET) Cardin to be violent, retaliatory, unremorseful, and have volunteered to speak honestly about his mishandling, the “most epic failure they’ve seen in the Air Force”, because he is just that dangerous. Then and still.

Now, communities remain at risk and I remain at high risk.

SMSgt (RET) Cardin continues to threaten me, retaliate, and follow me with no consequence while I continue to live in fear and spend time, money and energy to stay safe and get away from him.

He decided to apply to and attend a university with which I am very heavily engaged. The moment his lease was up in California, knowing I was in the Washington D.C. area, he broke federal stalking laws, skipped over 48 other states and the rest of the world to move down the street from me, to the last town in which I lived, with no job here, no clearance, no family here, no friends here. On April 30, 2019, he violated the California restraining order currently on him by appearing within 100 yards of me at an event. He also is now trying to destroy what’s left of my military career by filing an Army IG complaint as noted above. I cannot run down the Mt. Vernon trail or even walk to work in peace. He continues to threaten me and I live in fear every day.

The Air Force is ultimately responsible for my losses and allowing SMSgt (RET) Cardin to continue as he has, in my life and anyone else’s, for so many years.

It is well known that violent offenders, if not held responsible, will expand their limits, what few they have, as SMSgt (RET) Cardin continues to do. *If he’s already comfortable with killing his own child, lying and not taking responsibility, laughing at what he’s done and my suffering, and continuing to terrorize me as he follows me from state to state, **exactly what does it take for the Air Force to take domestic violence seriously?***

Highlights:

1. I am not a spouse. I am an intimate partner (shared lease/shared bank accounts) and an Army Officer. If the Air Force will do this to me - as an honorable and honest person and Officer – the Air Force do it to everyone and anyone.
2. Prior to my abuse, SMSgt (Ret) Cardin had a long history of violence in the Air Force with no consequences. In fact, the Air Force often actively supported and rewarded him for his behavior. Air Force Commanders and other Air Force entities could have mitigated or completely prevented his violence on me and are responsible for what SMSgt (RET) Cardin did to and took from me.
3. After my abuse, Commanders all the way up to the Secretary of the Air Force knew of his violence. Yet, there were still no consequences and this has enabled and emboldened him to continue threatening me, retaliating against me and following me to this day.

My Goals/Desires:

1. Immediate safety
2. Court martial SMSgt (RET) Erik Cardin
3. Reprimand those with a duty to protect and support service members and victims, investigate, discipline offenders, and properly handle cases of violence:
 - a. Air Force Commanders from SMSgt Cardin's time in service between 2013-2017
 - b. Air Force Commanders/Leaders, Security Force Investigators, Office of Special Investigation, Legal, and Family Advocacy Program from SMSgt Cardin's time in service between 2017-2018
 - c. Army entities who have provided no support to me and a voice for SMSgt (RET) Cardin
4. Change policy, legislation:
 - a. Create an organization focused on violence (workplace, domestic) detached from Air Force Commanders, IG, FAP, Security Forces, OSI, Legal with access, ability, authority to review processes/procedures, investigate system failures, report failures, implement immediate changes (baseline being current legislation with the goal being more meaningful legislation) and receive immediate and timely support from higher.
 - b. Repeal Feres Doctrine: Domestic (and workplace) violence victims who are service members (or former service members) who are placed at risk (of being a victim of a criminal/offender) or are physically harmed and failed through negligence, violations in Air Force policy/instructions, failures to use UCMJ, or mishandling of violent personnel by Commanders, Legal, Law Enforcement, and those Entities such as Family Advocacy should be permitted to file tort suits against the military.
 - c. Create and enforce policy that requires Commanders utilize UCMJ on service members who commit violence
 - d. If victim is service member, he/she should not be penalized by their commands (reprimanded for taking care of themselves physically, emotionally, financially; released from the unit/service; the recipient of bad evaluations, etc.) for speaking up and being a victim

- e. Domestic violence offenders should not be permitted the space/time/attention by a military unit or other organization working in support of the military to retaliate on victims and turn the tables on their victims [by filing complaints (ie: IG), reports (ie: to FAP), requests for no contact orders, etc.]
- f. Violent service members should be immediately restricted and directed to intense, long term counseling
- g. Domestic violence victims should be permitted Special Victims Counsel as Sexual Assault victims are
- h. Where domestic violence is the topic, Family Advocacy Central Registry Board should only be made up of domestic violence experts (not Commanders who took a one day class or others who have done computer based training, for example)
- i. Victims, if service members, should be permitted their own Command representation at a CRB and any benefits also offered to the offender
- j. No Contact orders should be enduring for the life of service (not just one week, one month)
- k. Weapons should be taken from the service member while he or she undergoes investigations by the military or civilian law enforcement, even if there is no standing protective order
- l. Service members should not be permitted to go on Temporary Duty or Terminal Leave while under investigation by civilian or military law enforcement or other entities
- m. There should be significant reprimands for Commanders and military law enforcement personnel who do not follow AFI 1-1 (in the case of the Air Force) or proper procedures and processes in supporting victims and reporting, investigating, managing violent offenders and cases of violence (in the case of all branches).

I sincerely thank you for your time and for caring about domestic violence in the military.

Respectfully,

Leah Olszewski

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