

Testimony by

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Survivor

House Armed Service Committee Hearing: Keeping our Service
Members and their Families Safe and Ready: The Military's
Prevention and Response to Domestic Violence

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I want to start by thanking you for the work you are doing around such a difficult but important issue. My desire in sharing my testimony with the committee is to show that this issue is not an isolated incident. High-ranking military individuals who deal with this issue may not be handling it in an unbiased manner. The bond of "brotherhood" and "battle buddies" in some cases is stronger than the truth that might be presented to them. I hope my experience can help shed light to this issue. My intent is to assist in evaluating the current system and address areas that need to be improved.

My purpose is not to hurt anyone in what I share. The instances I reference are to help better understand someone who has experienced abuse. My testimony also speaks to the indifference I experienced from different ranks and military departments. I am here seeking change.

I am the ex-spouse of a military soldier. I met him when he was an E8 in the United States Army. Before we got married he was promoted to E9. Shortly after our marriage, I became pregnant and we had a child together. A few months after our child was born, we moved to a new installation and he fulfilled his first E9 position. It was at this installation that I started to notice and experience sides to my ex-husband that alarmed me. Two years later, it was time to move again. With this move, things quickly got worse. In this new town, I realized that I was in an emotionally and verbally abusive marriage.

We never lived on base. What I knew of the military and how it worked was based on what he shared with me. I was not encouraged to take part in the spouse Family Readiness Group (FRG). This is important to share because many military spouses are isolated and do not fully know of the available resources, especially if one does not have a military background.

Several months after moving, things turned physical. One night my child was accidentally hurt. My ex-husband spoke down to our child for crying and when I stood up to him, I was spoken to quite harshly. After our child was asleep, I tried to talk to my ex-husband about it. He did not want to talk and charged at me. This was not the first time my ex-husband charged me out of our bedroom or locked me out. Trying to set boundaries, I told him I would need to leave if he continued to scare me and talk to us in this manner. He charged at me again, this time grabbing my shoulders and knee striking me in the leg. I was in shock and pain. He went and slept in our child's bedroom so I would not be able to leave with our child. He came to talk to me a bit later. Scared, I hit record on my cell phone before I opened the door. During this conversation, he discovered that I was recording. My ex-husband then completely shattered and destroyed my cell phone hitting it on the kitchen counters, over his knee and on the floor creating holes and dents from the impact. My phone could no longer be used, and the recording was gone. I was called a variety of names. He tried to get me to promise that I would not leave. He told me "I would rather go to prison then let you leave with our child". I took this as a verbal threat to my life.

Shortly after this, the police knocked on the door. They got a call about a noise disturbance. Immediately my ex-husband turned into the charming calm individual so many believed him to be. The two officers separated us. I could hear the male police officer and my ex-husband laughing and discussing life in the military and the police force. They were talking like friends while I was shaking, scared, distraught and limping as my leg had already begun to swell from the force of the impact. I was already not able to bend my knee. The male police officer came over to where the female police officer and I were talking. He went to radio something in and she stopped him, shook her head, and mouthed domestic abuse. Both officers then took me outside. The male police officer asked for my side and stated he was the one that was writing the report. He shared that my ex-husband told him that I broke my phone. I told him this was not true. They asked me if I felt safe. I did not but in the shock of the events, I did not know what to say. I did not know my options. I recall telling them no. They asked me if I wanted to leave. I expressed to them that I did not want to leave my child. They stated that I could leave with my child. However, if my ex-husband disagreed, they stated they could not do anything to enforce me taking my child with me. I had no idea where to go and I was scared of what my ex-husband might do if I tried to take our child. I chose to stay.

I got a case number from the female police officer and the next day while my ex-husband was at work, I went to the local city Magistrate's Office. In sharing my case number with the worker, I was told that based on what they saw on the police report, I would more than likely not be granted a restraining order. I do not remember anyone at any time telling me that I could file charges for domestic abuse. Honestly, at that time I don't know if I would have. I was a stay at home mom, in a new city, with no family nearby, and not a lot of friends. I did not know what to do.

I felt powerless as it felt like I did not have enough evidence to prove my case. My ex-husband had damaged the audio proof on my cell phone. He also deleted the home recording from the camera he insisted we have for "security reasons". This camera captured his conversation with the police, his verbal threat toward me and him damaging my cell phone. He had erased the majority of the proof I could have shown the system and then I was told I would not likely be able to get a restraining order based on the police report.

I share this information with the committee because after I did bring these allegations of domestic abuse to the military's attention, they seemed to focus on the fact that I did not file charges of domestic abuse or get a restraining order from the civil court system. Because of the lies on the police report told by my ex-husband, I was advised that I would be denied that protection.

I stayed not knowing what else to do. In those few days after the physical abuse, I was told by my ex-husband I just needed to stretch my bruised and swollen leg out. I was told the exact name of the maneuver that he did and the exact muscle that he hit. Trained in martial arts since high school and a multiple graduate of the Army's S.E.R.E School, I was told that he has had this done to him lots of times. Several days later,

hearing the justification and minimizing of what happened from my ex-husband, I knew I needed space to fully process everything. While he was at work, I went with our child to a women's safe shelter. Within hours of being there, my ex-husband tracked my location and arrived stating he would not leave until he saw our child. The police came, gave him a warning, and he was asked to leave. I share this information with the committee because the police were called three times regarding my ex-husband and it is my understanding that the Army base was never notified.

Shortly after my time at the shelter, I found out that a friend's spouse who is a CW5 in the United States Army reached out to my ex-husband's Brigade Commander and command partner - a Colonel. He shared his concerns about potential domestic abuse by my ex-husband with the Colonel. Nervous about the backlash that I might receive from my ex-husband, I called his Brigade Commander. Scared and afraid I did not admit or deny that any physical abuse had happened. He did tell me that if it was physical that I should report it. I could tell from the conversation that the Colonel did not believe what the CW5 had shared. He advised me that my ex-husband and I should go to marriage counseling. Some research states that marriage counseling is not recommended in cases of domestic abuse. Counseling should be separate. He told me that he had never seen someone so loving toward their family. I knew because of their close working relationship and by what my ex-husband was sharing with him, the Colonel would not believe me. I was not given any other support or resources on this call.

Sometime after speaking with the Colonel, I received a call from the Family Advocacy Program. They had gotten a call from a counselor that my ex-husband agreed to see. This counselor concerned about my safety, called the hotline to report my ex-husband and her concerns. That was the first time I spoke with the Family Advocacy hotline and found out about this resource. I did share with them what had happened. I was still too afraid to bring anything forward. One of the reasons was I was being told by my ex-husband that he could lose his job. Living in fear, I relied on him for support.

I did get enough courage to file for a divorce and was granted a Pendente Lite Order which granted me some protection. During this process, the Brigade Military and Family Life Counselor (MFLAC) who worked with my ex-husband got involved. She attended a joint meeting with my ex-husband and my counselor where I shared about the physical abuse. During this meeting, she advised me that everyone has a choice to work on a relationship or not. She shared the struggles she had with her husband with PTSD. I expressed to her that PTSD is horrible, and I am sorry for all who have to deal with it. However, PTSD and abuse are two different things. This MFLAC then attended every court hearing we had and even testified on behalf of my ex-husband at our divorce hearing. I share this with the committee as this is a third person who heard of the physical abuse that was in the military and yet higher command was still not notified of the situation. It is also my understanding that an MFLAC can go and support a soldier however they are supposed to remain impartial and are not supposed to go into the courtroom or testify.

It wasn't until after my divorce hearing and before we were officially divorced, that I gained the strength to come forward to the military and realized I was not alone. I came forward after I was able to connect with some of my ex-husband's previous relationships. It was at this time that I heard their alleged claims of emotional, verbal, and physical abuse with some heart-breaking similarities. I realized four things. One, my ex-husband had allegedly abused multiple individuals throughout a span of over twenty years. Two, none of us had fully come forward to the military because of fear of what he would do. One contacted a commanding officer with her concerns but never brought forth any charges. Three, the extent of abuse of other alleged victims. Four, if he hasn't stopped yet, I was concerned for my child's safety. I contacted the Family Advocate hotline and proceeded with bringing things forward.

I went to the Family Advocate office and shared all that had happened. I brought police reports, pictures, released doctor notes and requested to receive a Military Protection Order (MPO). I was afraid of how my ex-husband might react when he found out I came forward. After contacting the Family Advocate Program, there was no additional investigation. I was not contacted by any other military office. I also was not granted an MPO. The Case Review Committee (CRC) met and determined that my case met the criteria for emotional and physical abuse. The Colonel who led the committee was my ex-husband's command partner. It is my understanding that the Colonel did not feel that my ex-husband needed any treatment. It is my understanding that the CRC was aware that a previous wife had brought forth allegations of domestic abuse regarding my ex-husband. My ex-husband stayed in command during that time including after the CRC ruling.

After the CRC ruling, I filed a report with the Inspector General's Office (IG) on base. I felt that the Colonel was biased and did not handle the situation appropriately. I also did not believe the MFLAC acted appropriately by testifying at our divorce hearing.

Once again, I shared my story. I was left alone to fill out paperwork and write what action I would like them to do. As a civilian, I was only married into the military for four years and was isolated from base. I did not and do not fully know all the Army rules and regulations. I went to their office believing that they are an unbiased organization. I assumed because they know the Army regulations that from what I shared, they would assess what they felt was not handled properly. Instead, I had to fill out a form and write specifically what I wanted them to do. Leaving, I felt confused, unheard and unsupported. I remember one individual telling me, "It is our job to make sure this doesn't end up on CNN." I was told potential reasons why I had not gotten an MPO and why the MFLAC might have been in court. The Colonel was out of town and it depends on what the MFLAC's contract stated. I felt that in stating these potential reasons before looking into my allegations, they already had their mind made up.

After several confusing emails with military lingo that seemed contradictory, I received a letter from the IG Department. They "determined that the chain of command can best address the matters presented." I was shocked. The IG Department that is supposed to be unbiased, took my complaint straight to the person my complaint was against. When

I questioned the IG Department, I was told that because of how I stated my request on the form, they did not have to take this matter above him. I was told that the Colonel "will send a letter to me stating that he received and has actioned the inquiry." I have yet to receive that letter. This Colonel went on to oversee this exact IG Department.

Shocked and confused, I proceeded to file a Congressional Inquiry and reached out to one of my state senators. From this inquiry, the Commanding Major General started a 15-6 investigation. He appointed a different Commander who did not know my ex-husband or the Colonel to lead this investigation. I did not hear the full outcome of this investigation. I have talked with the Lt. Colonel over the legal investigation. He told me the case is closed and action was taken. Because I am on the "outside" the results would not be able to be shared with me. He stated that my Congressional Inquiry regarding the IG investigation was referred to the DOD to assess.

For the third time, I was told that action was taken but I would not be able to know the full extent of action. The higher command would not have known about this situation if I did not bring it forward. I potentially put myself at risk in coming forward. I shared my personal information and still, I am considered on the outside and didn't get to hear the full outcome.

Since this call, I have received a redacted statement regarding the 15-6 investigation. It provides some insight into how my situation was handled. However, it does not give the whole clear picture. I do not know what was discovered by the DOD regarding the IG investigation and what changes if any have been made.

Throughout the CRC, the IG investigation, and the 15-6 Investigation it seems that the deciding factor to the seriousness of the abuse I received was based on the fact of what I did and did not do. I did not file charges of domestic abuse immediately after the incident. I did not get a civilian protection order. I currently have a standing and permanent no-contact order. It seems that all three investigations questioned the validity of my complaint based on what I did not do instead of what was done to me.

The Military, Commanders, Colonels, IG Departments, Generals and anyone who oversees these types of cases need to understand one important aspect of anyone who experiences domestic abuse. Fear. Fear keeps you trapped. Fear keeps you trapped because you are isolated. Emotional abuse makes you question yourself and every move you make. I still deal with that damage today. It is hard to explain how and why until you experience it yourself. Physical abuse makes you vulnerable. You see and experience what someone can do to you and you constantly live in a state of trying to ensure that everything is "just right" in hopes that you can keep the abusive actions at bay. You love this person and even though they hurt you, you do not want to hurt them. You just want to be safe and keep your children safe. You incur legal costs. You don't have a job. You don't know where you will live. Your family healthcare falls under your spouse. You don't know how you will support yourself and your child. All of these factors play a part in every decision that a victim makes or does not make. I encourage everyone to keep that in mind.

I share my testimony to help open the doors of communication regarding this issue and to try to bring about change. My story is not just my story. It represents so many other stories of people who have experienced worse and who are too afraid to come forward. It represents spouses who feel that their story will not be heard or believed. It represents individuals who were never given the opportunity to share their story. It represents individuals who are trying to help domestic violence victims in the military and who become exhausted by all of the roadblocks they keep on hitting. I hope that today this testimony can be a voice for all of them too.

Since my experience, I have tried to learn more about domestic abuse. I would like to share some suggestions for the committee to consider.

Recommendations:

1. **Commanders and Colonels who directly work with someone who is accused of domestic violence should not oversee any investigation or committee regarding this issue.** These same Commanders and Colonels should not have the power to decide what actions need to take place. They do not allow for an unbiased process. This was discovered firsthand in my experience where individuals of the CRC committee “felt somewhat intimidated” by the Colonel because of his rank and position.
2. **Soldiers who commit acts of domestic violence do not need anger management treatment.** They do not have an anger issue. They have a control and abuse issue.
3. **Any treatment plan or investigation done needs to include talking with both sides.** Individuals who are controlling and abusive use techniques of manipulation, lies, deceit, avoidance, triangulation, gaslighting, deflecting and redirecting. To get an accurate assessment, both sides of the story need to be involved.
4. **When communicating with a civilian military spouse, I recommend someone be present who can better explain and communicate the military process and what it all means.** Many spouses do not understand or know the military lingo, terms, rules, and regulations. These individuals need to be more sensitive to this fact.
5. **Commanders and Colonels need to understand that regardless of how they feel about the soldier or how the soldier acts while at work, they have no idea what happens behind closed doors at home.** A controlling and abusive person can act one way at home and a completely different way at the office. They are masters of lies and manipulation.

6. **Commanders, Colonels and Military Personnel need to properly report all allegations and conduct proper investigations.** If this is not done, future Commanders and Colonels of the alleged abuser will then have no idea that this same individual has been accused of these actions before.
7. **I encourage individuals in the military responsible for decisions regarding domestic abuse to learn more about physical, emotional and verbal abuse.** Please learn from resources taught by individuals who study and work only with abusers and domestic violence victims. The truth is it is rarely ever an isolated incident. When physical abuse is present, it is also very rare that just one form of abuse is being used. Emotional or verbal abuse is typically always present along with physical abuse.

I also want to state that there are several positives to my experience in dealing with domestic abuse and the military. I can honestly say that my Family Advocacy Program Advocate was the biggest help throughout this entire process. This individual understood about all of the different aspects of abuse as well as the military process. I am thankful that my ex-husband's counselor was brave enough to contact this program which in turn led them to me.

I am thankful for the Family Advocacy Lt. Colonel who was placed on the job after the CRC hearing. This individual was able to correct some issues in communication that happened with me during this process.

I am also thankful for the Commanding Major General who received my congressional letter and requested a 15-6 investigation. Even though I still do not know the full results of this investigation, I am thankful that he took my letter seriously and assigned an unbiased Commander to oversee the investigation.

I thank you for your time and efforts in looking into the issue of domestic violence in the military. I know this is an issue across all branches and at every rank. I hope and pray that what I shared with my testimony can help assist you so that other victims of domestic violence don't have to face these same issues. My desire is for domestic abuse victims to receive better support and assistance and feel safe in doing so.