



Brass Call for More Accountability to Stop Sexual Assault at Military Academies

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U.S. Military Academy Class of 2022 conducted a 12-mile road march as family and former graduates cheered them on, concluding six weeks of Cadet Basic Training on Aug. 13, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by Matthew Moeller)

Holding [more cadets accountable](#) for misconduct in the ranks is the only way the service academies will "move the needle" on stopping a troubling sexual assault trend, top school officials testified Wednesday.



Academy superintendents agreed during a House Armed Services subcommittee on military personnel hearing that combating sexual assault has been a major challenge, with some leaders "disgusted" with the climb in assault rates.

But the problem isn't something additional funding or resources alone can solve.

"We are developing a multifaceted plan," said Vice Adm. Walter E. Carter Jr., the Naval Academy superintendent.

Testifying alongside Carter were Lt. Gen. Darryl Williams, head of the United States Military Academy at West Point; Lt. Gen. Jay Silveria, superintendent of the Air Force Academy; and Dr. Elizabeth Van Winkle, the executive director for Force Resiliency at the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

"I don't know that I need to ask for more resources or more capability in terms of us owning it, which is what we need to do. That's what you are hearing from us today. I have been a superintendent for five years and testified in front of this committee before," he said.

Carter continued, "I am frustrated. I think we can't educate our way out or train our way out, the accountability is going to move the needle on this. I'm committed to getting that part better and more right."

Earlier in the hearing, Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Calif., said it was time to put the academies on notice for the enduring crisis.

"I guess my message really is quite simple: I'm putting the academies on notice," Speier said in her opening remarks. "This isn't a blip, a 'Me Too' bump or some accident. It's time for us to recognize that this is a crisis, and I intend to watch it like a hawk."



Speier said her conversations with school leaders had convinced her there's no "one formula" that can end the problem of harassment and assaults. But, she said, there needs to be more transparency between the military and Capitol Hill if any progress is to be made.

In the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act, Speier was responsible for nearly a dozen amendments aimed at improving and expanding the military justice system's provisions applying to victims of sexual trauma.

Wednesday's hearing was one of a handful in recent weeks following the Jan. 31 release of a biennial survey from Defense Department's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office on sexual misconduct at the service academies.

According to the congressionally mandated survey, 747 students reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact during the 2017-2018 academic year, compared with 507 in the 2015-16 school year -- a 47 percent rise since 2016.

Previously, Defense Department officials have said an uptick in cases was due to an increase in reported incidents, which would mean more victims felt comfortable enough to come forward to their superiors. Officials did not offer the same explanation for the latest report; instead, they tied the statistics to causes such as an abundance of drinking at the institutions.

Even after years of military efforts to crack down on sexual assaults, Speier insisted that "that is the message that is being sent. Because they are more likely to face consequences than their perpetrators."

"Victims report at their own peril," Speier said.

According to the survey results, an estimated 50 percent of female students and 16 percent of males experienced sexual harassment during the survey period:



- At West Point, sexual harassment incidence rates remained relatively unchanged for women: 48 percent in 2017-18 vs. 46 percent in 2015-2016. But incidents increased for men to 17 percent, up from 13 percent.
- At the Naval Academy, rates of sexual harassment increased for both men and women. Fifty-six percent of women reported sexual harassment in 2017-2018, up from 51 percent; and for men, 17 percent reported incidents, up from 12 percent.
- The Air Force Academy saw no statistically significant change, remaining at around 47 percent for women and 13 percent for men.

Responding to the numbers, Van Winkle acknowledged the overall "approach must change."

"What we have done in the past has often brought about short-term results, but has not shown sustained progress," Van Winkle said. "Therefore, we are looking at the entire life cycle of our cadets and midshipmen, from acceptance into the academy, to entry into the active force...in order to select strategies with the greatest promise."

"I am very heartened to hear you say we are not going to be able to train ourselves out of this problem," Speier said in her closing remarks.

"We have to recognize that there is something more needs to be done."

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