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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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Subcommittee Urges VA to Update Military Sexual Trauma Adjudication Regulations

WASHINGTON, D.C. —Today, the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs held an oversight hearing entitled, “Invisible Wounds: Examining the Disability Compensation Benefits Process for Victims of Military Sexual Trauma.” The hearing focused on urging the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide consistent review of military sexual assault claims and appropriate care for those who have endured military sexual assault.

“Women are the fastest growing population among veterans, making up 8 percent of the Armed Forces. However, the Department of Defense estimates that one in four women who join the armed services will be raped or assaulted, but that only about 10 percent of such incidents are ever reported,” stated Rep. Jon Runyan, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs. “Even more alarming is that of those few who did report incidents of military sexual trauma, over 75 percent stated that they would not make the same decision about reporting the incident again, due to the consequences it had on their military career.”

VA estimates that more than half a million men and women have been assaulted during their service in the military. Most veterans seeking treatment and compensation for military sexual assault lack evidence, mainly due to victims’ low reporting of incidents for fear of retaliation, to support their disability compensation claims resulting in 20 percent fewer claims for Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) being approved by VA when compared to combat-related PTS claims.

“This process took me 23 years to resolve, and I am one of the fortunate ones. It should not be this way,” stated Ruth Moore, a Navy veteran, who testified before the Subcommittee regarding the impact of repeated sexual assaults upon her in 1987 while stationed overseas. “If I had been treated promptly and received benefits in a timely manner, back at the time of my discharge, my life would have been much different.”

At the moment, standards for those filing claims for PTS as a result of military sexual assault are different than standards applied to PTS claims for combat-related claims. Furthermore, VA demands collaboration of evidence for military sexual assault, putting the burden of proof on the victim, which in a majority of cases, does not exist.

“There must be zero-tolerance for this behavior in the military, and VA must recognize the immediate trauma inflicted on these men and women,” said Runyan. “This is a system that needs major reform and I am calling on VA to treat these victims with the compassion they deserve and ensure they receive the benefits they are due from their government.

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