

Army's sex crime database draws ire

Project aimed at service scandals

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An Army plan to develop a database of sexual assaults is meeting some resistance from members of Congress and an advocacy group who say it could violate victims' privacy.

In a letter to Army Secretary Francis J. Harvey, 15 members of Congress said the new system would deter sexual assault victims from reporting crimes and seeking treatment, and they asked him not to collect or store any personal information or medical records in the database.

The proposal comes in the wake of sexual assault scandals in the military and ongoing efforts by the Pentagon to respond to the problem. The U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado is still struggling to recover from complaints that dozens of female cadets were assaulted and then punished when they reported it.

And a recent survey by the Veterans Affairs Department showed that six in 10 women who served in the National Guard and Reserve say they were sexually harassed or assaulted.

"Victims of sexual assault experience traumatic, life-changing events," said Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney, New York Democrat. "We should work to protect their privacy, not compromise it."

The planned Army system would include the victim's name, Social Security number, date of birth, other demographic information, military service data, assault investigation and police reports, medical and other support records, and any actions taken against offenders.

A 30-day comment period on the plan concludes Friday, and no final decision has been made, according to Pentagon spokesman Hank Minitrez.

"Great care will be taken to ensure that both victim and alleged offender personal information and privacy are maintained," said Mr. Minitrez, adding that fewer than 10 individuals in the entire Army could have access to the personal identifying information. He said others would have access only to summary reports and nonpersonal identifying information.

The National Organization for Woman has called on its supporters to send e-mail to the Army asking that the program be delayed because documenting a "description of the incident and details of medical and mental health treatment is unconscionable and will bring the reporting of sexual violence and assault in the military to a standstill."

Meanwhile, the Pentagon has developed new policies for the awareness and prevention of sexual abuse in the military, with increased training and education as well as more stringent reporting and accountability.

Mr. Minitrez said the Army understands that this is a sensitive topic. Including some identifying information is necessary, he said, to ensure accurate data collection and to help determine whether victim advocacy programs as well as medical and investigative services are working.