

Ten years ago this June, the Air Force—along with the rest of the Department of Defense—stood up new offices focused on sexual assault. Ten years later, the service is leading DOD in its efforts to combat sexual assault.

About 800 fewer Active Duty airmen experienced some form of unwanted sexual contact in Fiscal 2014 compared to 2012. However, reports of sexual assaults across the Defense Department are on the rise, according to new data released by the Pentagon. “The increase in the reporting shows us that victims are more comfortable coming forward and believe they will get the services they need to recover from the trauma,” Maj. Gen. Gina M. Grosso,

the director of Air Force sexual assault prevention and response, said in December.

Even as reporting continues to increase, recent data show the Air Force has the fewest incidents of unwanted sexual contact across all DOD Active Duty components, with 2.9 percent of women and .29 percent of men reporting any type of sexual assault in the past year. This is significantly lower than the DOD average of 4.87 percent of women and .95 percent of men. Air Force officials cited a cultural shift across the service for the low numbers, noting that leadership is key in facilitating a culture of trust and support for victims.

“I think 10 years ago there was maybe a little pushback, but that culture has changed and evolved in a very positive way,” said

Cindy Graver, 2013 sexual assault response coordinator (SARC) of the year.

Graver, who has served as the SARC at the 78th Air Base Wing at Robins AFB, Ga., since 2005, said there is “absolutely” still more work to be done, “but leaders are taking sexual assault extremely, extremely seriously, and they are very supportive of anyone, male or female, who has been sexually assaulted.”

Women comprise just under one-fifth (18.9 percent) of the Active Duty Air Force, with a slightly higher representation among officers (19.9 percent). Despite a male-dominated environment, there is an overall culture of respect for female airmen; the Air Force is not a boys’ club, Graver said.

Brig. Gen. Dawne Deskins leads the Air National Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response program. Fewer airmen experienced unwanted sexual contact last year.



USAF photo by SSgt. Michelle Gonzalez

USAF is at the forefront of reducing military sexual assaults.

A Culture of Change

By Autumn A. Arnett, Associate Editor

“I think when you talk about culture, the big Air Force, I think we have a very healthy culture,” Grosso told *Air Force Magazine*. “But we know that there are some pockets of subcultures that exist, [but] we are the most integrated service of all the services. And we are the service that has the most positions open to women. ... There are definitely pockets. ... I’ve never experienced that. But I’m only one person.”

Despite all of the positive trends in the decline of the number of sexual assault incidents and the increase in reporting, sometimes assault happens.

Keny, who asked to be identified only by her first name, survived an incident in 2009 in which the husband of a fellow airman assaulted her. For her, the support of her commander during the process made all of the difference. Few in the Air Force seem to agree with the idea that commanders should be removed from the process.

Grosso said in December that a review of climate assessment data in the Survivor Experience Survey—the DOD-wide effort to measure effectiveness of the response to sexual assault incidents—shows airmen have “an incredibly strong confidence in their commanders. I was shocked at how confident, frankly, airmen feel in their commanders.”

Calling the proposal to strip commanders of authority in the sexual assault prosecution process “a terrible idea,” Grosso told *Air Force Magazine* in January that the key to eradicating the problem is “we have to change social norms and culture. ... And the people who do that in the military and in the Air Force are leaders, and they’re leaders across every level, but particularly commanders are specifically charged with the authority and the responsibility to make that happen.”

Of the countries that have made the decision to remove the commanders from the process—Germany, Canada, Israel, England, and Australia—Grosso said she is dismayed that the reasoning behind the change was concern for the rights of the accused, not the victims. “So I find that, one, very interesting. But, two, it has had no impact on reducing sexual assault in their force,” she said. “So we have real cases that have shown that removing the commander is not going to get you to the end state that you’re looking for.”

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) has been the most vocal proponent of removing military commanders from the chain of prosecutorial command. “I’m not interested in an innocent soldier going to jail any more than I’m interested in a guilty perpetrator going free,” Gillibrand said in a February 2014 interview on MSNBC. “We need an objective, trained prosecutor making these decisions about whether a case should go forward, not politics, not the discretion of a senior officer or a commander who may like the perpetrator or might like the victim, who may value the perpetrator more than the victim.”

COMMANDERS IN THE LOOP

Grosso said the idea that, first of all, the current process is not guided by trained prosecutors and, second, attorneys approach cases without their own implicit biases is just untrue. “This problem is very serious and the crime is very devastating. So people want an easy solution, and I understand that,” she said. “I also think that if you don’t understand a lot about the military, it’s very attractive [to suggest the commander should be removed from the process]. It’s hard to understand, if you’ve never spent a day in the military, ... why we have a trained legal system but

that the person who makes the ultimate decision is the commander.”

Graver agreed. “Commanders need to be in the process. This is a commander’s program. ... These are their people. They need to feel that they are responsible for their people, for their health and their welfare and their well-being, and I think that if they have a problem, if sexual assault is a problem, if one of their airmen has been hurt, either by another airman or someone downtown, a person who is totally not a part of the installation, their job and their role is to ensure that their airman is taken care of,” she said.

Grosso acknowledged the argument made by Gillibrand and others is “on the surface ... a really easy argument to make. Why would you not have a trained lawyer make that decision?” But the process utilizes trained legal professionals. “There’s no commander who’s not advised directly by an attorney. That attorney reports directly to that commander, [but] that attorney also has a direct line to the chief attorney in the Air Force, so there’re all types of checks and balances.” Further, if a commander makes a decision not to prosecute a case, it goes to a second level of review, which includes yet another attorney and an even higher commander.

“People are biased, period,” said Grosso. “So I don’t buy the discussion that an attorney will make a less biased decision than a non-attorney.”

The key is trusting the process to do what it was set up to do, rather than leaving these decisions to any one layer of review.

The process, by some accounts, has come a long way. “Just in the past five years, I’ve seen it grow tremendously,” Keny said of SAPR efforts. She said that when the investigation into her case



DOD photo by Casper Maniangit

Then-Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel delivers closing remarks at the January conference on sexual assault prevention.

was taking place in 2009, there were no Special Victims Council representatives. The SVCs are Air Force lawyers trained to advise sexual assault victims and help them navigate the criminal justice system. The SVC Program started in 2013.

“I didn’t have somebody to stand on my side and tell me, ‘Oh, yeah, you can answer that,’ or ‘No, don’t answer that because it’s not pertinent to the investigation,’” Keny said. “That can hinder you. I had that challenge.” She also didn’t have a victim advocate, but this does not hinder her passion in her work as a victim advocate today. Some questioned her credibility in the absence of an advisor to guide her in the investigation. Despite all the obstacles she faced, the process did exactly what it was intended to do. Keny’s attacker was eventually convicted and sentenced to five years in prison. He was dishonorably discharged, demoted to

an E-1, and stripped of all rights to pay and benefits.

Today, Keny said, SARCs, victim advocates, and SVCs are extremely supportive of the victims and helpful in the process. Several years ago, sexual assault response coordinators were not as supportive a resource. “I don’t think SARCs were as—I don’t want to say present, because they’ve always been here, but I don’t think they were as attuned to” the needs of the victims, she said.

“My SARC came in after [the Air Force Office of Special Investigations] was called, about two, three hours later, so I obviously was not her priority.” Keny said that in the last several years, “I’ve seen that change a lot. The people who are in the SARC positions, the ones ... I’ve come in contact with at least, love their job. They love what they’re doing, and they know that they’re helping people. And they’re pulling victim advocates in and they’re training them, and the VAs are following in the SARCs’ footsteps—they’re great.”

To Keny’s point, SAPR has added several more full-time SARCs, bringing the total to 121. There are now 91 victim advocates in the department, meaning “every installation now has at least one SARC and at least one victim advocate. Some have more than just one,” Grosso said.

VICTIM BLAMING

Since the 2013 reorganization of the Air Force Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office—which took it from a four-person program to a staff of 32



USAF photo by Scott M. Ash

At the conference, USAF Secretary Deborah Lee James underscored a drive toward the goal of zero sexual assaults.

reporting directly to Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Larry O. Spencer—it has been able to direct “a lot more bandwidth and a lot more depth of experience and a lot of different people working together towards this problem,” Grosso said in the January interview.

Graver, the SARC, said airmen know the do’s and don’ts, the rules, and expectations. When she goes in to provide sexual assault prevention and response training, “the first thing they say is, ‘We know this.’ So our test to them is, ‘OK, then you teach it to us.’ And they do. And they’re accurate and they’re right.”

Keny said she believes the Air Force has made great headway in the response component of its efforts; the work to be done now is in prevention. Of particular importance, she said, is to cut down on victim blaming by realizing the perpetrator is the problem.

Vice Chief of Staff Spencer agreed, citing recent reports showing that the Air Force’s anti-sexual assault education and victim response efforts are paying off. The “next push that we’re taking on now is prevention,” he said in a December



USAF photo by SrA. Armando A. Schwier-Morales

During an awareness day, airmen walk past helmets, representing the sexual assaults reported—and probably unreported—over a 10-year period at Kunsan AB, South Korea. Below: Maj. Gen. Gina Grosso, director of USAF’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, speaks to wing commanders in 2014.



ANG photo by MSgt. Marvin R. Preston

One Victim's Long Road to Recovery

In 1993, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was instituted as Pentagon policy, a change that allowed homosexual troops to quietly serve. The Department of Defense was just starting to attempt to deal with sexual assault. In March 1994, Deputy Secretary of Defense John M. Deutch directed the establishment of a task force on discrimination and sexual harassment to review complaints, and he conducted a DOD-wide survey on sexual harassment, the first since 1988.

Still, in 1994, there was relatively little support for victims of sexual assault, and it certainly wasn't a prominent discussion topic, as it is today.

For male survivors, there was even less support.

Rape victim Dean, who asked to be identified only by first name, said in a January interview with *Air Force Magazine*, "There wasn't any" support for him when he was attacked by two men in 1994.

Not only was there no support, Dean, who was an enlisted man in the Navy at the time, said people were extremely rude, accused him of being a homosexual, and blamed him for his own attack. Following the attack, he sought help at the naval hospital, but was told to clean himself up and leave.

"The physician who was supposed to help me called me a faggot and told me I must like it rough," he recalled. Dean said after that incident, he was too embarrassed to tell anyone else about the assault. He went into a really "dark place" and contemplated suicide often.

In August 2002, Dean left the Navy to join the Air Force, and while stationed at Minot AFB, N.D., he found himself

battling depression over the attack that had taken place years earlier.

He found "things were starting to dim again. I started to go back into that dark place." One day, while having dinner at a friend's home, he learned about the Air Force's new Special Assault Response Coordinator program by way of the friend's wife, who had to leave dinner unexpectedly following a call from a victim. Dean said he later inquired about and knew he had to get involved in the work she was doing.

Dean said his work as a victim advocate over the years—and finally being able to tell his story—is what finally helped him to get over the attack. "Talk to somebody," he advises other victims, because being able to talk about the assault is "the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"I never had formal counseling, don't need formal counseling," thanks to his work with victims and his ability to at last talk about the incident, he said. Dean retired from the Air Force last month.

DOD today is "leaps and bounds" ahead of where it was on sexual assault two decades back. "It's apples and motorcycles," he said. "We're not where we need to be, but we're damn sure headed in the right direction."

One bit of constructive criticism for the current process, however, lies in the mandatory third-party reporting of incidents. "It should be up to [individuals] to decide what level of help they want and how they want to go about deciding to get that help," Dean said.

Overall, it is estimated that .95 percent of DOD's sexual assault victims are male.

interview with *Air Force Magazine*. "We've done a lot to educate people, we've done a lot to make certain our victims are cared for, ... but in an ideal world, the crime would never happen."

That effort to ensure the crimes never happen was part of the motivation for a January conference on sexual assault prevention held at JB Andrews, Md. Over four-and-a-half days, airmen covered definitions and barriers, cultural and climatic factors—including social media and healthy relationship education—and future action plans.

Overall, the sentiment is that airmen are taking the issue of prevention very seriously.

But as Grosso pointed out, "Prevention is a really complex thing."

Keny said although attitudes about prevention "have gotten better," there are still airmen who "don't have that personal interaction with it, ... don't believe it, don't want to believe it, or don't know anybody who's gone through it."

There is still work to be done on figuring out "how ... we make it safe for airmen to come forward and say, 'That's not going to be tolerated in this environment,'" Grosso said.

There is also still some room for improvement on the support side for victims, Keny said. For example, investigators should give victims a little time and space to deal with the incident personally before being subjected to questioning. "When you have something traumatic like that happen to you, you're not going to just

be like, 'Oh, here's every single detail. Take every bit of it. I'm open to sharing that right away.' It's personal, it hits you hard," she said. "I don't think if somebody's child passed away, they're going to want to open up about it all the way. They're going to have that emotion and the hurt from it. It's the same thing with sexual assault."

For victim advocates, it is critical that they provide support, "constantly stay with that person and help them, but don't help them too much to the point that they can't stand on their own," she said.

The victim-turned-advocate, the sexual assault response coordinator, and the major general all believe USAF is trending in the right direction in its efforts against sexual assault. "I know there's a lot of people out there who appreciate the SAPR world and appreciate the ability to reach out," Keny noted.

Grosso believes the more the SAPR office talks about the problem, the more people are comfortable reporting incidents to leadership, which contributes to the force's ability to continue to combat the issue. And the Air Force continues to receive DOD-wide recognition for its efforts in the fight. "We're doing a lot right," Grosso said. ★

USAF photo by Scott M. Ash



Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh speaks to a gathering of Total Force wing commanders at a 2013 sexual assault prevention summit.