

900 Court Street Rm. S413
Salem, Oregon 97301



sen.lauriemonnesanderson@state.or.us
503.986.1725

Senator Laurie Monnes Anderson
District 25: Gresham, Troutdale, Fairview, Wood Village

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House Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness
Chair Matthews
Vice-Chair Parrish, Vice-Chair Fagan
Representatives Huffman, Boone, Esquivel, and Witt

Adopt SJM 1

Chair Matthews and members of the committee, I am State Senator Laurie Monnes Anderson and I represent Gresham, Troutdale, Wood Village, and Fairview, and I am here in support of SJM 1.

SJM 1 urges Congress to develop mechanisms that provide adequate notice to states in which persons convicted in military courts of sex crimes plan to reside. Some individuals have said to me that this Memorial should be stronger and I am willing to do so if the committee wants.

Sexual assault against military service members, despite pledges of zero-tolerance from Pentagon brass, remains an epidemic within the ranks.

There is a gaping hole in the military's sex crime protocol: The military doesn't keep a registry of convicted sex offenders, meaning that guilty parties often continue their service – even discharge into civilian life – with little to no public record of their crimes.

Any individual who was involved in a rape case would not be registered as a sex offender in any national military database – meaning other women or men would have no means of knowing whether a fellow comrade had a dangerous track record. And, even once that man or woman left the military, there is no guarantee that he or she would show up on state-run sex offender registries. In other words, individuals who commit assault, rape or other sexual offenses during enlistment might be able to wipe the slate clean upon return to civilian life.

Data released in July revealed that an estimated 20,000 “violent sexual offenses” occurred within ranks last year – an increase in offenses from 2010, and one that marks a disturbing trend: Sexual offenses have actually increased every year since 2006, according to Pentagon estimates.

Military officials admit that less than one-third of such offenses are ever officially reported, and fewer than 500 cases per year tend to go to trial. Of those, according to the Service Women's Action Network, fewer than half lead to convictions. And a full third of convicted offenders remain in the service.

With so few convictions, thousands of sex offenders continue their military careers without interruption. But even when a service-member is convicted by court martial, their offense remains dangerously difficult to detect. Until this year, in fact, the military actually disposed of sex crime records within a period of five years – making it extremely tough to track repeat offenders, or for assaulted, raped and victimized women or men to obtain health benefits if they waited “too long” to report the crime.

And despite years of pleas from concerned parties, and several Congressional legislation proposals, the military still doesn't have its own, dedicated registry of enlisted sex offenders. Such a registry would, if created, “alert service-members, unit commanders, communities and civilian law enforcement to the presence and movement of military sexual predators,” according to the Service Women's Action Network. Without such a registry, offenders – even those convicted by courts-martial – are sometimes able to elude detection once they re-enter the civilian realm.

To be clear: Official military policy mandates that sex offenders (at least, the tiny percentage of soldiers who are convicted) register with their state of residence. In reality, however, the situation is much murkier. Soldiers are not required to disclose their sex crime convictions on discharge papers.

I support having a registry but this joint memorial does not specifically ask for it. There needs to be a revamp of the military's sex registry policies but it is only one part of a solution that needs to be much, much broader in scope. There needs to be a host of changes including new procedures for handling complaints and the introduction of special units, mandated to handle such complaints, in each service branch.

This is a topic that many do not want to talk about but I know women who have come back to civilian life with scars resulting from sexual assault in the military. Please adopt SJM 1 to send a strong message to Congress that we cannot stay silent on this issue.