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Fostering an Atmosphere of Dignity and Respect

By Army Sgt. Micah E. Clare, USAREUR Public Affairs Office

HEIDELBERG, Germany -- Integrity. Dignity. Respect. Sexual Assault.

How many of these words are a part of today's military?

A visit last week by the Defense Task Force on Sexual Assault in the Military Services to United States Army Europe in Heidelberg was one more step in finding out.

Commissioned by the Department of Defense in 2005 after major changes were made in the way sexual assault in the military was handled, the task force was charged with determining whether these new measures have been effective against the issue.

Concerns about sexual assault are the same now as they were before the changes were made, said Dr. Louis Iasiello, a civilian member of the task force.

"When it comes to reported cases, are we still looking at the tip of the iceberg?" he asked. "Why aren't more victims coming forward?"

The purpose of the task force's tour of roughly 20 installations over the next year is to assess whether the changes have worked by talking to those affected, Iasiello explained.

"We want to hear their stories," he said.

Through interviews with sexual assault victims and discussions with “focus groups” including Soldiers from all ranks, local subject matter experts and commanders, the task force members arrange meetings at each installation they visit, putting together a bigger picture of the current climate of sexual assault awareness throughout the military.

Since Heidelberg was only the fifth visit in their tour, it’s hard at this point to have a complete picture, Iasiello said.

Although no sexual assault victims came forward during their visit here, much useful information came from the focus groups and other sources, he said.

“We were able to give them feedback from the lowest level,” said 1st Sgt. Derrick Brown, first sergeant for USAREUR’s Headquarters and Headquarters Company, who volunteered to attend one of the focus group meetings.

Brown’s group was presented with both questions and scenarios testing their knowledge of sexual assault programs, reporting methods, and unit training.

“They wanted to see if everyone in this area was on the same page,” he said.

While so far, to his knowledge, his unit has been lucky and untouched by any sexual assault reports, he said there is room for improvement within the ranks.

“We need to start building better relationships with our SARCs (sexual assault response coordinator) like we do with our UVAs, (Unit Victim Advocate),” he said.

These UVAs and SARCs, a potential victim’s first response and liaison to their military commander, received special attention by the task force.

“We thought at first this was going to be some kind of inspection,” said Beth Duncan, the Heidelberg community’s acting Family Advocacy Program manager and SARC supervisor. “But it was much more productive.”

Duncan also had an also interview with the team, and received feedback from them.

Since changes in reporting were implemented, “More people have been coming forward,” she said she was able to report.

While most suggestions made by the task force are already in place here, it is always good whenever there’s a spotlight on this subject, she said.

“While sexual assault is a problem that may never go away, our goal is more about creating a culture of respect. Sexual assault is something our community doesn’t accept,” she said.

Visits like this show that the military is more concerned with issues like sexual assault than anywhere else, Duncan said.

“It’s good that DoD is getting involved in this,” said Brown. “They have a more objective, high-level view ... as opposed to us Soldiers who sometimes just want to ‘suck it up and drive on.’”

Sexual assault is far too critical an issue to ignore, said Iasiello, adding that his team has already noticed trends at installations successful in their fight against sexual assault.

“Command leadership is critical to establishing a climate and response capability for sexual assault,” he said. “It’s their attitudes and the way they approach this issue that determines its success.”

The task force also observed a need for focused unit-level training rather than quick briefings.

“There has been great success in those commands that use creative training in ways that really affect their Soldiers,” Iasiello said, citing the effectiveness of dramatic videos and travelling acting teams.

When they deliver their final report, the task force may suggest that a more standardized DoD accountability approach be used, rather than allowing each of the services to handle the issue individually, he said.

In the end, sexual assault not only erodes good order and discipline, but also combat readiness, Iasiello said.

“They are directly linked,” he said. “While we have a military population of great people with great hearts, we have a responsibility to develop the character of our future citizen-leaders ... by fostering an atmosphere of integrity, dignity and respect.”

Note: The Defense Task Force on Sexual Assault in the Military Services welcomes anyone who wishes to contact them. Please visit their website at <http://www.dtic.mil/dtfs/>, or send an email to assist@wso.whs.mil.

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