



## Tsongas: More to do to help military sex-assault victims

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Updated: 01/13/2011 09:44:31 AM EST

LOWELL -- While meeting wounded veterans in 2007, U.S. Rep. Niki Tsongas talked with one soldier who said she was more afraid of her fellow soldiers than the enemy.

The woman, a former military nurse in Afghanistan and Iraq, said she knew of a number of female service members who had been sexually assaulted while serving.

"As she would travel around to different bases, she always made sure she had whatever she needed to defend herself," Tsongas said.

The Lowell Democrat, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, said she had seen numbers indicating women were often victims of sexual assaults in the military, but the nurse's disturbing story gave a personal feel to the problem.

"All the statistics were made very real," Tsongas said.

In response, Tsongas has spearheaded efforts to require the Department of Defense to more aggressively respond to reports of military sexual assaults and track them in a more uniform manner. Last week, Tsongas secured a major victory in her work when President Barack Obama signed into law a defense-spending bill that included provisions she authored to better protect veterans who have been victims of sexual violence.

The law requires the Department of Defense to

appoint one official to oversee all complaints of sexual assault for all the branches of the military. The department also will have to implement minimum training standards for sexual-assault responders and advocates, and devise a more comprehensive

policy for addressing sexual-assault prevention and response.

"It is very difficult to engage in serious oversight because each branch of the military deals with this differently," Tsongas said. "We felt there should be a consistency."

Furthermore, the Department of Defense will have to consider providing a military lawyer to all victims of sexual trauma. The original language in the House defense bill required the military to provide all sexual-assault victims with a lawyer, but the Senate tweaked the language. The Defense Department's report on providing lawyers to victims is due in 2012, and Tsongas said she will hold their "feet to the fire" on the issue until then.

Tsongas said conversations between victims and military lawyers and victim advocates are not privileged, which prevents some victims from feeling comfortable about coming forward with accusations. Pentagon statistics indicate that as few as 10 percent of sexual assaults are reported, so Tsongas said she will work to protect dialogue between victims and lawyers or victim advocates as private.

"We would be shocked if conversations between a client and their attorney were not privileged in the civilian world, and similar rights must be afforded to service members who may be the victim of a crime," Tsongas said. "Similarly, while victims have a right to speak to a victim advocate in confidence, until those conversations are privileged, this

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confidentiality is virtually meaningless."

There were 3,230 reported sexual assaults in the military in fiscal 2009, an 11 percent increase from 2008. Approximately one in three women experience some form of sexual trauma while serving, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

The Pentagon established the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office in 2005 to provide sexual-crime prevention programs, and Defense Department officials have argued that the increase in the number of sexual assaults reported indicates victims are beginning to feel more at ease about coming forward to superiors.

But Greg Jacob, policy director for the Service Women's Action Network, which advocates for women in active duty and veterans, says that sexual trauma in the military is "a crisis, if not an epidemic." Research has indicated that sexual crimes are the No. 1 cause of post-traumatic stress disorder for women veterans, according to Jacob.

He said the problem is much worse than the statistics indicate, because victims feel that no action will be taken by their superiors against the alleged perpetrators and worry they will be harassed -- so they often don't report sexual crimes to superiors.

"Until the military prosecutes perpetrators and provides protection to victims, survivors will be unlikely to come forward," Jacob said.

For Tsongas, the nurse's words in 2007 provide just as much motivation now to keep seeking greater protection for victims, as they did when Tsongas first heard them.

"We ask those who serve in the military to put their

lives on the line for our country, and they shouldn't fear harm from their fellow service members," she said. "There is still work to be done."

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