

YourArmy

MPs' trauma training adapted for command

By Joe Gould

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The Combined Arms Center is working to blend training from the Army Military Police School on the behavior of sexual assault victims into the program of instruction for the pre-command course for lieutenant colonels, colonels and top enlisted advisers, officials with both agencies said.

The change would help commanders better understand how victims react to trauma, officials said.

The training has derived from a technique for interviewing trauma survivors used by Army law enforcement, called the Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview. The technique recognizes the nonlinear way victims process and remember traumatic experiences and emphasizes open-ended rather than directed questioning.

"We want to expand it as much as we can, because we're currently not meeting what I see as the training needs," said Russell Strand, chief of the Army Military Police School Family Advocacy Law Enforcement Training Program. Strand developed the technique with former Denver prosecutor Anne Munch.

Strand's comments came as the Army tries to encourage more sexual assault victims to come forward and increase prosecutions, but also amid signals it still has much work to do. Nineteen former and current soldiers and airmen filed a class-action against the Defense Department this month, alleging their sexual assault complaints were ignored and otherwise mishandled.

Strand said elements of his training may be incorporated into the pre-command courses, the command course and other leadership courses, mirroring some of the training for military police and Criminal Investigation Command agents.

"We are working with [Training and Doctrine Command] to make sure that happens as quickly as possible," Strand said.

Rep. Niki Tsongas, D-Mass., said she had met Strand and she lauded his efforts, saying commanders need better training to understand how victims react to trauma so complaints are handled correctly.

"I've felt strongly that there isn't adequate training at the command level to change the culture of the military and ensure that these cases [are taken] more seriously," Tsongas told Army Times. "[Victims'] stories are dismissed for a host of reasons as the victims seek help, and the process discourages them from coming forward. We need better training and better investigative techniques."

Over the past several years, Army law enforcement has worked to improve its ability to investigate sexual assaults. CID

has special victims units at 70 CID units worldwide and 20 expert sexual assault investigators assigned to 19 major Army installations around the world.

Since the Military Police School's two-week course began in 2009, more than 350 Army personnel have undergone the training, according to data provided by the Army. The course has since been expanded by the Defense Department to train personnel from other services and DoD agencies.

In fiscal 2011, reports of sexual assault in the Army increased less than 1 percent over fiscal 2010, according to Hank Mini-trez, spokesman for the Office of the G-1. There were 1,695 reports of sexual assault in the Army last year, of which 301 were restricted and 1,394 were unrestricted.

In 2009, Strand said he and Munch created FETI by adapting from child forensic interview techniques, neurobiology research and critical incident stress debriefings to better unlock the memories of trauma victims.

The training has since been provided to CID supervisors all the way down to new special agents.

Strand teaches that during a traumatic event, the prefrontal cortex shuts down, making it difficult to remember the kind of linear narrative law enforcement agents may be after.

"There are really good reasons why they don't remember the color of the socks, the hand and how much time this was," Strand said. "We had a higher expectation of the victims than what the science would allow."

He has agents use neutral, open-ended prompts like, "Help me understand what you're able to experience," and allow the victim to recall an incident in the way they experience it.

Strand teaches agents about "tonic immobility," when a victim experiences paralysis during a traumatic event, which can explain why the person may not resist during a sexual assault.

Prosecutors, too, are receiving FETI training to solicit witness-stand testimony that demonstrates not what happened, necessarily, but how the victim experienced it.

"We have to stop treating ... victims like they are witnesses to the crime in which they were victimized," Strand said.

To provide the best information to commanders — who must decide whether an accused soldier is punished or referred to a court-martial — CID agents are documenting and explaining victim behaviors to commanders differently.

"When you hear the 'who, what, when, where and why,' there may not be a lot of believability, but if you experience it with the victim as they remember it, you understand," Strand said. □



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