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THE NOTE

## **Legislation Aims to Strengthen Prosecution of Sexual Assaults in Military**

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Days after the second sex crime scandal in the last month hit the military, a bi-partisan group of lawmakers introduced a bill Thursday that would take prosecution of sexual assaults in the military out of the chain of command, preventing military commanders from handling the cases of subordinates.

"The issue of sexual violence is not new. It has been allowed to go in the shadows for far too long," Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., the bill's sponsor, said in a news conference Thursday. "Enough is enough. It's time to change this system that has been held over since George Washington. That is simply not working today for the men and women who are serving."

"When any single victim of sexual assault is forced to salute her attacker, clearly our system is broken," Gillibrand said.

The bill would remove the prosecution of all crimes, including sexual assault, punishable by up to one year or more, from the chain of command and place them under the jurisdiction of military prosecutors. Survivors of sexual assault in the military have long advocated for such action because they believe the current system prevents some from reporting their assaults out of fear of retaliation.

"I feel if I didn't have to report to my chain of command and if military sexual trauma assault was not so hush and was being talked about more, I would have said something," Ayana Harrell, a U.S. Army veteran who was raped while serving in the military, said.

The announcement came hours before President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden will meet with Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, the joint chiefs and senior enlisted advisers to discuss the issue of sexual assault in the military.

Earlier this month, the lieutenant colonel in charge of the Air Force's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office was arrested for alleged sexual battery, and on Tuesday, the Army announced that the coordinator of a sexual assault prevention program at Fort Hood, Texas, was under investigation "for pandering, abusive sexual contact, assault and maltreatment of subordinates."

Last week, the Pentagon reported that 26,000 sexual assaults occurred in the military in 2012, a 37% increase since last year. The figure, coupled with the recent sexual assault cases involving those charged with leading programs to prevent such incidents, led Hagel to order the retraining, re-credentialing and re-screening of all sexual assault prevention coordinators and military recruiters.

Survivors of sexual assault in the military welcomed the legislation introduced Thursday, saying it's a starting point to solve the sexual assault epidemic in the military.

"These are tears of hope," Jennifer Norris, who is retired from the Air Force and was a victim of sexual assault during her time in the service, said as she cried. "I've never had this much hope in my life."

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