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## Abortion For Military Rape Victims Amendment Passes Senate

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In a historic bipartisan vote on Tuesday, the Senate passed Sen. Jeanne Shaheen's (D-N.H.) amendment to the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act that would extend abortion insurance coverage to victims of rape in the military. If the House of Representatives decides to include the measure in its version of the defense bill, military servicewomen who have become pregnant from rape will no longer have to pay out of pocket for an abortion procedure for the first time [since 1981](#).

Army veteran Ayana Harrell, 34, has been closely watching the progress of the amendment. Harrell says she was drugged and gang-raped in February 2001 by a group of soldiers and Marines at the Redstone Arsenal base in Huntsville, Ala. It took her three weeks to drum up the courage to report the rape, she says, because she had been trained to believe that soldiers are not allowed to feel or behave like victims. By the time Harrell told her senior drill sergeant what had happened, she had discovered that she was pregnant from the assault.

"The only thing he said to me was, 'This is your thing. I don't want to hear it. You need to deal with it however you're gonna deal with it. Go off post and get an abortion,'" Harrell told The Huffington Post in an interview.

Harrell says she made an appointment at a local Alabama abortion clinic, but ended up backing out of the procedure in part because she couldn't afford the "\$200-something" fee. If she had been a civilian employee of the federal government, a recipient of Medicare or Medicaid, or even incarcerated in a federal prison, her insurance plan would have paid for her abortion. But military servicewomen receive health care and insurance through the Department of Defense's Military Health System, which is prohibited by law from covering abortions except when a woman's life is in danger.

"It shouldn't be that a woman joins the military and she loses her rights to make choices about her body," she said, "or that she has to make the choice to foot the bill out of her pocket for something that wasn't her choice in the first place."

Sen. Shaheen told The Huffington Post that the issue of fairness for military women -- not the abortion rights issue -- is the reason for her amendment, and the argument she is making to her Republican colleagues in the House. Regardless of whether certain members have an ideological opposition to abortion, she says, military women should be given the same level of health care coverage as civilians after they have been sexually assaulted.

"It's simply unfair that we've singled out the women who are putting their lives on the line in the military," she said. "We have young women who are starting out making \$18,000 a year, and they just are not able to deal with this situation on the private side when it happens to them."

Because the House version of the NDAA does not have a similar amendment attached, a bipartisan conference committee will be charged with deciding whether to include the measure in the final version of the bill. Senate Armed Services Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.) and ranking member Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) both support Shaheen's amendment, and Shaheen said that House Armed Services Committee ranking member Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.) has indicated that he would support it as well. House Armed Services Chairman Buck McKeon (R-Calif.) has not indicated whether he would support the measure's inclusion, but three out of four ranking conferees would make for strong odds.

Claude Chafin, communications director for the House Armed Services Committee, said the committee's policy is not to comment on issues that may be the subject of conference negotiations.

Greg Jacob, policy director of the veterans activist group Service Women's Action Network, says the amendment has better chances now that it did in previous years, because of the results of the November elections. Some Republicans in the House may still dislike the policy for ideological reasons, he said, but voters clearly rejected candidates like Rep. Todd Akin (R-Mo.) and Richard Mourdock of Indiana who opposed abortion rights for rape victims.

"Politically, it comes at a good time for us," Jacob said. "Clearly, those folks [like Akin and Mourdock] lost. The constituents and electorate have mixed feelings about abortion in cases of rape and incest, so it would be a difficult decision to maintain for you to deny that this is a necessary change in policy."

For Harrell, the trauma of having been raped and forced to continue her pregnancy continues to negatively affect her life more than a decade later. In the month after she reported the rape, she says she could not stop crying through her training activities. The other soldiers harassed her and called her a "slut," she says, and the military honorably discharged her for having a "personality disorder."

After she gave birth to her daughter, she says, she struggled for three years to connect with her. Today, she struggles with severe depression and cannot even go to the grocery store without constantly looking over her shoulder. "I'm fighting a war everyday in my mind," she said. "Every day it's hard for me to get up, just like that soldier that went to Iraq."

If Shaheen's amendment passes, Harrell says, it will feel like a personal victory. "When I was in the military, if you wanted that choice, you had to pay for it yourself or just deal with it," she said. "And you're being a slut, you're being the loose female. That's what they tell you.

"I was 'the slut' for so many years, so it's amazing just to see this now. It's bittersweet."

**UPDATE:** 11:50 a.m. -- Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.), ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee, confirmed to The Huffington Post in an emailed statement that he will argue for the inclusion of the Shaheen amendment in the House version of the defense bill.

"The women who serve to protect our nation should have the same access to health care services as ordinary citizens," he said. "If a women in our Armed Services or a female family member is the victim of rape or incest, they should receive the full support of our military, and that includes providing for all of their health care needs. This is about equality, and protecting the health and well-being of our service women and our female family members."

**CORRECTION:** *This article has been updated to correct the name of SWAN policy director Greg Jacob. House Armed Services Chairman Buck McKeon is a congressman for California, not Kentucky.*