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# Shaheen Amendment: Servicewoman Abortion Coverage Up for House Debate



By [Alison Tanner](#) December 8, 2012

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### Shaheen Amendment: Servicewoman Abortion Coverage Up for House Debate

The Senate has approved their version of the National Defense Authorization Act, including an amendment that would expand servicewomen's insurance to cover abortion procedures, as a result of rape or incest.

The Shaheen Amendment has gained bipartisan support in the Senate, including the vote Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.), the ranking Republican member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

While the House doesn't include similar language in their version of the NDAA, ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee Adam Smith (D-Wash.) confirmed Wednesday that he will argue for its inclusion.

Throughout the 1970s, military women had [access to abortion coverage](#). However, in 1978 Congress enacted a restriction barring abortion coverage in the military health system, except in cases of rape,

incest, or when a woman's life or health was in serious jeopardy. In 1981, the rape and incest exceptions were removed.

Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta reported that an estimated [19,000 rapes or sexual assaults](#) were committed in the military in 2010. Of those, only [3,158](#) were reported. Many refer to the rape epidemic our military is facing as "the Invisible War." Note that these rapes are committed against men *and* women in the military.

Army veteran Ayana Harrell is one of the amendment's many [supporters](#). Harrell was drugged and gang-raped in February 2001 by a group of fellow soldiers and Marines at the Redstone Arsenal base in Huntsville, Alabama. It took her three weeks to decide 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 about her assault, she discovered she was pregnant.

Had Harrell been a citizen employed by the federal government, a recipient Medicaid or Medicare, or a prisoner in a federal penitentiary, the abortion she desired would have been covered by her insurance. [The Hyde](#) amendment bans all federal funding of abortions except in cases of rape, incest or when the procedure is necessary to save the life of the mother.

But because her health care coverage is administered by the Department of Defense, she says she was unable to afford the \$200 fee for an abortion off base. Many young soldiers make only \$18,000 a year.

"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."

Senator Shaheen, the amendment's sponsor, [says](#) that the goal of the amendment is to increase fairness, not to the expand abortion rights.

"It's a real injustice to the more than 200,000 women who are serving on active duty in our military. They should have the same rights to affordable reproductive health services as the people they're protecting. This is about equality for these women."

Because the House does not include the amendment in their version of the NDAA, the amendment will become the subject of conference negotiations over the next few days, as leaders in the House and the Senate negotiate the content of the final bill. Advocates of the amendment remain hopeful as three of the four ranking members of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees support the bill (Levin, McCain, and Smith).

"This isn't about politics or ideology; it's about basic fairness and equity," [said](#) retired Maj. Gen. Gale Pollock, one of the many ranking military veterans who has come out in support of the Shaheen amendment. "Women who serve our nation should not be treated as political pawns."

Outgoing Rep. Todd Akin (R-Mo) and Indiana Treasurer Richard Mourdock's losses this November may have a direct effect on the lives of America's servicewomen. American voters showed that they do not want exception-less bans on abortion, and that survivors of rape and sexual assault deserve compassion and understanding. Are Republicans in Congress ready to listen to the voters, and grant our servicewomen the access to equal reproductive health care that they all deserve?

If you'd like to express your support for the amendment as it enters conference negotiations, or if you'd like to learn more, please go to [Stand With Servicewomen](#) to sign the petition.