

Former Md. sailor, rape survivor talks military sex assaults

Brian Lewis talks pressure to stay silent as Pentagon report comes out
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BALTIMORE —A new report released by the Pentagon shows that an increasing number of military service members have to defend themselves against sexual assault among their own ranks, and one local man who said he suffered a rape at the hands of a fellow sailor said he hopes to see changes addressing the issue.

A Pentagon health survey found that roughly one in five women in uniform reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact from another member of the military. A Baltimore man said he knows firsthand that sexual assault is something both genders have to deal with, along with pressure from superiors to stay silent. Former Petty Officer Brian Lewis described the events that led up to his discharge from the Navy in 2000.

"A rape, a cover-up and victim blaming," Lewis told 11 News reporter Kerry Cavanaugh.

He said he was raped by a male superior while deployed near Guam, and he was diagnosed with a career-ending personality disorder after it was reported. He channeled his anger into advocacy for military sexual assault victims of both genders.

"It's really about power and control. It doesn't matter if it's a man or woman perpetrator. In the military, power is at play all the time," said Lewis, who is an advocate for the group Protect Our Defenders.

New Pentagon numbers show that sexual assault reports in the Armed Services rose 6 percent in 2012 to top 3,300; however, it's unclear if incidents are on the rise or if reporting has spiked. The report came as the chief sexual abuse prevention officer for the Air Force was accused of groping a woman in a parking lot.

President Barack Obama called the results of the report and the recent allegations an outrage. "When you engage in this behavior, it is not patriotic -- it is a crime. We have to do everything we can to root this out," he said.

The president condemned a military culture in which victims may have no faith in the chain of command. His response came as a separate Pentagon survey found that the number of unreported sexual assaults in the military may have ballooned to 26,000 last year. Lewis and his partner of five years said they are hopeful that the current attention focused on the issue may save other victims from staying silent or risking their careers by speaking out. "I carry my discharge around every day as an official, permanent stamp of disapproval. I am shamed on top of it," Lewis said.

Lawmakers said legislation is in the works to strip military officers of the ability to effectively throw out convictions reached by military juries. It's a practice that some say has been widely used to deter victims from coming forward.

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Note, there is also a 2 min 50 sec video clip of the interview available on the website.