

DoD Safe Helpline

Sexual Assault Support for the DoD Community

Sexual Assault Response Coordinator (SARC) Guidance

Introduction

Victim care is a key component of the Department of Defense (DoD) Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Policy. As part of victim care, in April 2011, the Department launched DoD Safe Helpline as a crisis support service for members of the DoD community who are victims of sexual assault. The services provided by Safe Helpline are available to adult Service members in the Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve Component consistent with DoD SAPR Policy as well as Coast Guard and Transitioning Service members. Users can “click, call or text” for anonymous and confidential support 24/7, worldwide.

Goals

Underreporting poses a serious challenge to military readiness as the potential costs and consequences of sexual assault are extremely high. The first goal of Safe Helpline is to provide additional channels for adult Service members of the DoD community to seek one-on-one sexual assault assistance and crisis support securely and anonymously. The second goal is to increase victim reporting. Research indicates when sexual assault victims receive care, system confidence builds, which increases the likelihood victims will report to law enforcement.

Services Offered

Users can access confidential support anonymously from anywhere in the world:

- **CLICK:** Logging on to www.SafeHelpline.org allows users to receive live, one-on-one confidential help with a trained professional through a secure instant-messaging format. The website also provides vital information about recovering from and reporting sexual assault. This service can also be accessed via a format for mobile phones.
- **CALL:** Calling 877-995-5247 allows users to speak with trained Safe Helpline staff for personalized advice and support. Safe Helpline staff can transfer callers directly to installation-based Sexual Assault Response Coordinators (SARCs)/ On-call SAPR Victim Advocates, civilian rape crisis centers, Military OneSource, or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. The “warm hand-off” process personally connects the user with a resource representative for further assistance. Staff will transfer the caller to any resource at the location of the caller’s choice. For example, a caller may want to speak to the SARC at the location where their unit is based, not where they are currently located. If the contact is unavailable at the time of the “warm hand-off,” the Safe Helpline staff will offer contact information to the caller to follow-up with support personnel at a later time.
- **TEXT:** Texting a location or zip code to 55-247 in the U.S. and 202-470-5546 outside the U.S. allows users to receive contact information for the SARC; medical, legal, spiritual, and military police personnel at their installation or base; as well as DoD, VA and civilian resources for Transitioning Service Members.
- **Mobile App:** The Safe Helpline Mobile Application (App) is designed specifically for military sexual assault survivors. It enables users to connect with live sexual assault response professionals via phone or anonymous online chat from their mobile devices. Users can also navigate transition-related resources (e.g., disability assistance, medical benefits, housing help, and employment assistance, or search for resources near their base or installation). Additionally, users can manage the short-and long-term effects of sexual assault. The app contains the option for users to record their current emotional state and create tailored self-care plans that can be stored for future reference and accessed without internet connection. The Safe Helpline Mobile App is free and available for download from Apple and Android app stores.

- **SafeHelpline.org:** Visitors may access the Safe Helpline website and search for their nearest resource as well as access valuable information about understanding the effects of sexual assault.
- **Safe HelpRoom:** In April 2013, DoD SAPRO launched a ground-breaking online service called “Safe HelpRoom.” The Safe HelpRoom allows military sexual assault survivors to connect with one another in a moderated and secure online environment at SafeHelpline.org. This new feature was created in response to Safe Helpline users who frequently request peer support services. Benefits of a secure moderated peer discussion forum include participants feeling less lonely, isolated or judged; improving coping skills and sense of adjustment; reducing stress, depression and anxiety; receiving practical advice or information about treatment options; and removal of barriers due to time, cost, distance, scheduling, care-giving responsibilities when seeking support.
- **Complaint Feature:** Visitors may choose to provide feedback to the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) directly through a confidential and anonymous feedback form on SafeHelpline.org. Feedback information may include comments, suggestions and complaints about the services provided on the installation/base or provided by any DoD personnel. When needed, SAPRO will refer complaints received to the DoD Inspector General for priority investigation.

Service Operator

Safe Helpline is administered by the Department of Defense via a contract with the non-profit Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), the nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization. Safe Helpline staff have been trained on the unique needs of those living and working in the DoD community and are knowledgeable on military and civilian resources worldwide.

Background on RAINN

The non-profit RAINN was founded in 1994 and is the nation’s largest anti-sexual assault organization. RAINN hosts the only secure, live, web-based National Sexual Assault Online Hotline with anonymous chat capability, which enables victims of sexual assault to reach out to receive help via an instant-messaging type format. RAINN also operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline, which provides help to victims telephonically through a toll-free number.

Safe Helpline “Warm Hand-Off” Procedure

When users visit Safe Helpline, staff will offer a variety of up-to-date service referrals for resources on and off a military base or installation. The Safe Helpline service referral database was populated with input from each Military Service, the National Guard Bureau, the Coast Guard, Military OneSource, and Military HomeFront. The database will be updated frequently to ensure accuracy and ensure staff members are able to provide information on SARCs, legal, medical, mental health, and spiritual military resources. The referral database also houses information for local civilian resources for Safe Helpline users seeking information and crisis support away from the military response system.

As part of the service referral option, Safe Helpline users are offered a “warm hand-off” option to SARCs/On-call Victim Advocates (VAs) and civilian support personnel listed within the database. The “warm hand-off” process includes a Safe Helpline staff member contacting a SARC, Veterans Affairs (Veterans Benefits Coordinator) or civilian resource, depending on the preference of the user. Once the staff member has successfully contacted a resource representative, the user will be “handed-off” to that representative for further assistance and the Safe Helpline staff member will disconnect from the conversation. If the contact is not available at the time of the “warm hand-off,” the Safe Helpline staff member will give the contact information to the user to follow-up with the contact at a later time.

What is a Transitioning Service Member?

A Transitioning Service Member (TSM) is an individual separating from the U.S. Armed Forces through a voluntary or involuntary retirement; end of service commitment; a medical discharge; voluntary or

involuntary discharge; and/or release from Active Duty. TSMs will be considered as those Service members who are within 12 months of separation or within 24 months of retirement.

Why is an Expansion of Services to TSMs Necessary?

Based on an Executive Order to bring troops home from specified locations overseas that began in December 2011, DoD estimated that 125,000 Service members transitioned out of the military during fiscal year 2012 alone. Data from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) universal screening programs indicate about 1 in 5 women and 1 in 100 men seen in the Veterans Health Administration respond “yes” when screened for Military Sexual Trauma (MST).¹ Women veterans with histories of MST report more problems readjusting after discharge, more mental health problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, and substance abuse disorders), and more physical problems across all organ systems.² Additionally, women who indicate they experience MST are nearly 9 times more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than those who did not experience MST, and men are 3 times more likely to develop PTSD than those who do not.³ VA studies show that veterans were more likely to develop PTSD associated with heavy combat exposure.⁴

What are the Benefits of Enhancing Services?

TSMs seeking assistance following a sexual assault may be either unaware of or overwhelmed by the options and resources available to them upon leaving the military. TSMs seeking benefits related to an assault often are dealing with much more than paperwork. They may face concerns over confidentiality, privacy, and stigma. Safe Helpline offers an anonymous, confidential service that provides a safe space to discuss what options are best suited to their needs. Through leveraging Safe Helpline’s existing infrastructure, the Department is able to present clear and easily accessible information on counseling, benefits determinations, transitions, and employment, which may enable them to reach out for long-term support upon leaving the military. By bridging the gap from DoD to the VA for sexual assault victims, we provide a continuum of care from active duty to veteran.

What Resources will Safe Helpline Provide to TSMs?

Safe Helpline staff members are specially trained to focus on the unique challenges faced by TSMs, which will allow them to provide appropriate resources to TSMs who are victims of sexual assault. A veteran-specific resource dashboard includes benefits, resources, and referrals available 24/7. Additionally, TSMs will be able to text their location to be connected with VA resources.

How SARCs Can Help

SARCs will play a vital role in making the Safe Helpline a success. Below are a few of the ways SARCs could help:

- Maintain working phone numbers that are accessible to Safe Helpline users and Safe Helpline staff and volunteers to support the 24/7 response capability.
 - Be ready to accept a “warm hand-off” from a Safe Helpline staff member and provide excellent care for military victims of sexual assault.
 - Check the phone numbers in Safe Helpline for your base or installation and if incorrect, update with your Service’s SHARP or SAPR office.
- Track the number of referrals to Safe Helpline as well as the number of warm-handoff transfers received from Safe Helpline.

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs, Patient Care Services, Office of Mental Health Services (2010); Military Sexual Trauma Screening Report Fiscal Year 2010.

² Skinner et al., (2000), Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 15 and, Frayne et al., (1999), Journal of Women’s Health and Gender-based Medicine, 8

³ Kimerling, et al., (2007), American Journal of Public Health, 12

⁴ Kang, H., Dalager, N., Mahan, C., & Ishii, E. (2005); The role of sexual assault in the risk of PTSD among Gulf War Veterans. Annals of Epidemiology, 15(3): 191-195.

- Note: SAPR Program Managers will provide additional guidance on how to collect this information.
- Be an advocate for Safe Helpline and actively communicate its services and benefits to military leadership, command, transitioning assistance programs, and Service members. You could:
 - Access www.SAPR.mil to download Safe Helpline communication materials for reproduction and distribution.
 - Think of circumstances and locations on your base or installation in which information surrounding Safe Helpline can be displayed or included in already existing events or activities; including:
 - 1.) Have Safe Helpline resources available at Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM) events or activities on your base or installation.
 - 2.) Display Safe Helpline posters in your SARC office and/or in various high visibility locations throughout your base or installation, including mess/chow halls and bathrooms.
 - 3.) Display magnets on metal surfaces in offices and bathrooms
 - 4.) Affix stickers on Sexual Assault Response and Prevention posters.
 - 5.) Ask your base or installation library and community center for permission to provide Safe Helpline brochures within their facility.

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Current as of November 2013