



Appendix E: Safe Helpline Data



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The Department of Defense (DoD) Safe Helpline (SHL) is the Department’s crisis support service specially designed for members of the DoD community affected by sexual assault. SHL is secure, confidential, anonymous, and available 24/7 worldwide. Its availability ensures that survivors, their families, and other DoD stakeholders impacted by sexual assault have a place to safely talk about their experiences, express concerns, and obtain information. As such, SHL is often a first step in the reporting process and a key source of support for victims who might not otherwise reach out for help through military channels. It can also serve as a point-of-entry for victims before making an official report of their assault to a Sexual Assault Response Coordinator (SARC) or Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Victim Advocate (SAPR VA).

This summary provides an overview of users served and services provided by SHL in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 (FY23). Given the wide variety of users that contact SHL, the analysis sample did not include users who had no military affiliation.

Usage and Outreach

In FY23, 25,783 active users (17,080 online users and 8,703 phone users) contacted SHL for services (see Figure 1).¹

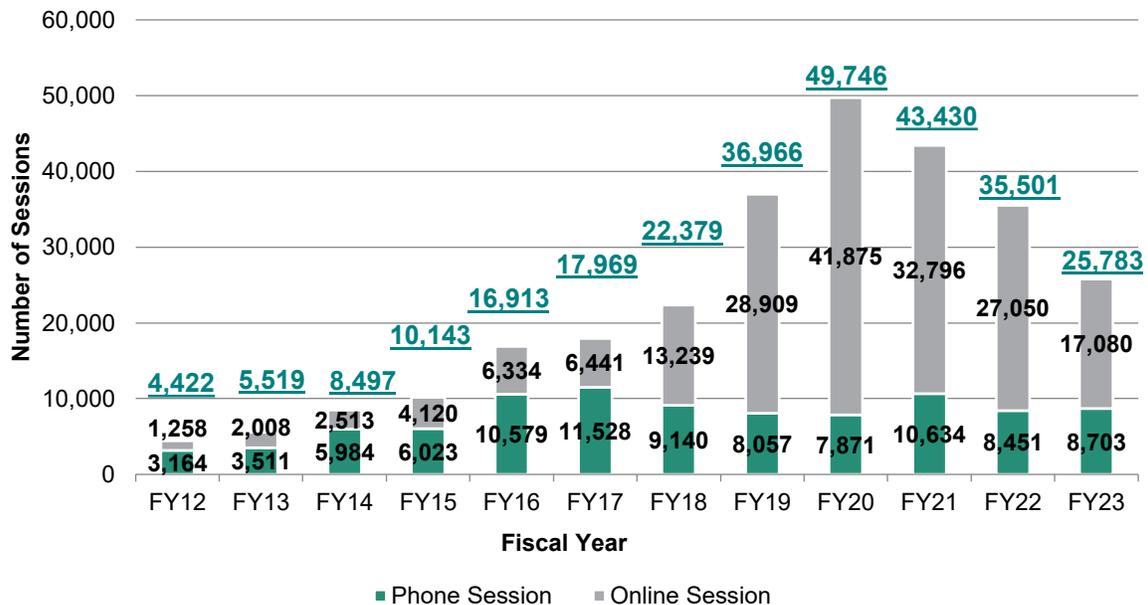


Figure 1. SHL Online and Telephone User Sessions

Additionally, SHL continued to promote its awareness as a unique resource that helps victims, their family and friends, and SAPR programs in the field by conducting outreach activities at

¹ SHL was able to improve data collection to delineate between active and inactive sessions. “Active chats” refer to chats in which one or more messages were sent by a user, whereas “inactive chats” are those in which a user did not send messages after connecting. The FY21 – FY23 data shown in Figure 1 include only active users, whereas years prior include both active and inactive users.

individual bases and installations. This year, SHL led 32 events and increased online outreach efforts.

Phone and Online Sessions

The data in this section is relevant to the experience of users from the military community. What follows are “snapshots” of experiences by SHL users that happened to disclose relevant information during their conversations with SHL staff. Since each of these “snapshots” involves different subsets of SHL users, the Department cautions against drawing broad conclusions about the experiences of all persons using the helpline or military sexual assault victims in general. While some user demographic and experience data are captured and summarized in this report, SHL does not record personally identifying information about users that contact the service for anonymous assistance, nor does SHL report out information that could potentially identify individual users.

The analysis of users and services provided is based on anonymous data obtained through calls and online chats. Information is never solicited. As a result, SHL staff do not always know if callers are currently a Service member, a retired or separated member, or in some other status. Users either called SHL or engaged in a chat session with one of the service’s operators. As such, analyses rely on information disclosed during a session and exclude cases with unknown information.

An important statistic is that one in four victims had not disclosed their assault to anyone before visiting SHL. Further, of those who discussed adult sexual assault, the majority had not yet reported to a military authority. The FY23 findings demonstrate how SHL serves as an important bridge to victim assistance, reporting, and recovery. Key FY23 findings are summarized below and are based on 1,265 in-depth session assessment forms completed by staff immediately at the end of online or phone sessions.

User Characteristics

Users primarily identified themselves as victims contacting SHL to discuss issues related to their own sexual assault: of the 833 sessions in which an event was discussed and user/victim relationship was known, 81 percent identified themselves as victims. In addition to victims, other users identified themselves as friends, family members, and intimate partners of victims. Allied professionals and SARCs seeking information about services also used SHL. Some users called on behalf of a victim to learn how they could provide support and help prevent re-victimization. While women were the most frequent users, the available gender data indicated that just more than one-third of phone users (39 percent) were men.

Events Discussed

- Sessions were primarily focused on incidents of rape and sexual assault (84 percent), while some also involved issues such as sexual harassment (5 percent), abuse not otherwise specified (4 percent), physical assault (3 percent), technology-facilitated abuse (3 percent), and stalking (0.5 percent).
- SHL continues to help people dealing with both recent situations and past trauma from many years ago. Of the 374 sessions that referenced the timeframe of the assault, more than half (48 percent) of assaults occurred within the last month of the individual contacting SHL, while 26 percent occurred more than five years ago.
- While most events discussed took place when the victim was an adult, nearly one out of six (16 percent) involved a victim who disclosed he/she was a minor at the time of the incident (e.g., allegations of incest and other forms of child sexual abuse). At the time of contact with SHL, 92 percent of users were believed to be adults, as assessed by staff.

- Data suggest that SHL is an important resource for those at risk for re-victimization. Of the 467 sessions that referenced the frequency of assault, 20 percent involved situations that were “repeated and still occurring.” The ongoing nature of assault varied by the type of event considered to be of primary importance and emphasis in the session. While 15 percent of sexual assault incidents were considered ongoing, victimization was ongoing for 46 percent of cases in which sexual harassment was the primary event, and for 71 percent of cases in which physical assault was the primary event.
- Victim-alleged perpetrator relationship was discussed in two-thirds of sessions in which the user discussed an event and identified as the victim (66 percent). Of those that disclosed a relationship, alleged perpetrators were commonly categorized as a military coworker (20 percent), family member other than spouse (13 percent), intimate partner/spouse (18 percent), friend/acquaintance (14 percent), senior Service member (17 percent), and stranger/person briefly known (9 percent). While infrequent, alleged perpetrators occasionally included friends/partners of a family member (3 percent), medical or service providers (1 percent), and non-military authority figures (2 percent).
- When the gender of the alleged perpetrator was disclosed (N=441), alleged perpetrators were primarily men (84 percent) and less often women (15 percent).
- The alleged perpetrator’s status as a minor or adult was revealed in over half of events discussed (57 percent). In these cases, alleged perpetrators were mostly adults (94 percent), and less often minors (6 percent).

Disclosure

More than half of victims (62 percent) discussed whether or not they had previously disclosed their assault to any other party. Of those that discussed disclosure, nearly one-fourth (24 percent) indicated they were disclosing an incident for the first time on SHL, while around three-fourths (76 percent) had previously disclosed to someone else before contacting SHL. Disclosure in this context does not necessarily mean making an official report. It could simply mean that they told someone about their experience. Online users were more likely than telephone users to disclose for the first time on SHL. As shown in Figure 2 below, 34 percent of online users, compared to 13 percent of phone users, disclosed for the first time on SHL.

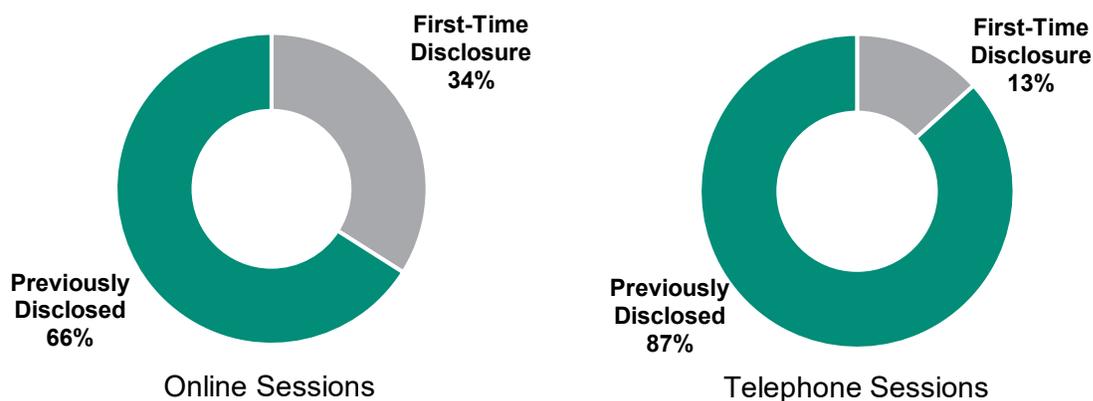


Figure 2. Disclosure by Type of Interaction

Analyses of those who had previously disclosed revealed a mix of disclosure recipients (i.e., persons to whom the victim disclosed), indicating both formal and informal support. Of victims who discussed disclosure recipients, roughly half (55 percent) disclosed to a formal support

provider such as a medical or mental health professional, and nearly one-fourth (22 percent) to a family member. Friends and intimate partners (current or former) were also frequently mentioned (20 percent and 14 percent, respectively).

Additional data explored victims' disclosure experiences. About half of victims who previously disclosed (47 percent) discussed the reactions of those to whom they disclosed. Two in three users discussed negative reactions (67 percent), such as instances where they were treated differently, where recipients of the disclosure dismissed their allegation, took control of the allegation away from the victim, or blamed the victim for the sexual assault. Other users discussed positive reactions (19 percent), such as being offered emotional support, being believed, and being offered tangible aid or informational support. The remaining users discussed some combination of positive and negative reactions or did not provide enough information to determine whether the reaction was positive or negative.

Reporting Concerns

Users frequently contact SHL to discuss reporting-related concerns and connect to resources that might ultimately lead to an official report. SHL fulfills victims' needs to disclose in a safe context, receive validation, and express their concerns safely and securely. As such, SHL helps to build confidence in the reporting process for victims reluctant to use military resources.

To provide a focused examination of reporting-related concerns, analyses were based on a sample of 488 users who identified as victims of adult sexual assault. The session assessment captures information about reporting-related concerns (e.g., barriers to reporting, motivations for reporting, and negative experiences in reporting). Key findings are as follows:

- Nearly half of victims (49 percent) stated they had not yet filed a report, underscoring that SHL serves as an important resource for providing victim assistance, understanding reporting options, and learning about recovery. Only 10 percent of users had already made a report to a military authority, while 42 percent did not disclose their reporting status. Of the 10 percent (N=48) of users who had filed a report, 42 percent filed an Unrestricted Report, 12 percent filed a Restricted Report, and the remaining 46 percent did not disclose the type of report that was filed.
- Victims discussed multiple motivations for reporting. Of the 72 victims who discussed their motivations for reporting, those most frequently mentioned were: to stop the alleged offender from hurting the victim again (29 percent), to punish the alleged offender (25 percent), to seek mental health assistance (25 percent), and to stop the alleged offender from hurting others (24 percent).²
- Barriers to medical care were also discussed and were often intertwined with reporting-related concerns. Some victims stated they did not seek medical care because they felt afraid or they did not want anyone to know. Key themes from qualitative data included concerns that the process would not be kept confidential, previous denial of medical care, and lack of knowledge of how to access care.

Barriers to Reporting

Nearly one in six adult sexual assault victims (15 percent) perceived one or more barriers to reporting. Of the 72 victims who discussed barriers to reporting, more than half (53 percent)

² Percentages do not total to 100 percent because SHL staff were able to select more than one reason for reporting as disclosed by the user.

discussed one or more barriers that reflected a lack of confidence in the system, including thinking nothing would be done (38 percent), concerns about not being believed (35 percent), and concerns about the report not being kept confidential (21 percent). Moreover, of the 72 victims who discussed barriers to reporting, 29 percent cited not wanting anyone to know. Additionally, 40 percent of users discussed fear of retaliation. Among these 29 sessions citing retaliation, fears included reprisal (66 percent), ostracism (52 percent), and cruelty or maltreatment (45 percent).

Perceived Problems with Reporting

Of the 48 victims who filed a report with a military authority, 35 discussed problems encountered during the process or as a consequence of filing a report. Of those who discussed problems, lack of responsiveness to their allegation (47 percent), perceived retaliation (47 percent), and lack of respect by responders (35 percent) were mentioned most frequently.

Topics Discussed and Services Provided

The assessment captured information about topics discussed and services provided for all sessions where the user identified as a victim of an incident. Key findings were as follows:

- Of the 678 users who identified as victims, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) discussed specific emotions (e.g., anger, worry, sadness/despair) related to an assault. Mental health concerns (41 percent) were also frequently discussed. Other prominent topics included physical health concerns (16 percent), professional issues (11 percent), and reporting options and legal issues (11 percent). Half of users (50 percent) who brought up mental health topics also discussed mental health services/counseling. Anxiety, flashbacks related to the assault, and depression, for example, were also frequently discussed. Further, suicide was discussed in four percent of sessions where the user indicated being a victim.
- SHL staff frequently indicated working on problem solving or safety planning with users. SHL staff provided qualitative descriptions of problem solving and safety planning in 114 sessions. Across problem solving and safety planning, common themes included discussing means of self-care to improve mental health, brainstorming ways to avoid interacting with the alleged perpetrator, talking about the potential impact of disclosing the assault to a third party, discussing contacting authorities/reporting, obtaining medical attention, understanding consent, and empowering the user to define their own experience.

Concerns of Men Who Disclose Victimization

SHL plays a key role in the Department's efforts to enhance support and resources for male Service members impacted by sexual assault. Staff receive specialized training in working with male survivors, which covers topics including social expectations, effects specific to male survivors, and scenarios and exercises to practice engaging with male survivors.

While in prior years, men were more likely than women to disclose their assault for the first time on SHL, this difference was no longer significant in FY23. Specifically, 31 percent of men and 19 percent of women disclosed for the first time to SHL.

Similarly, there was no significant difference between men and women about the timeframe of events. Men and women were equally likely to discuss past events (i.e., events that occurred one or more years ago).

Referrals to Military Resources

While the majority of users reached out to SHL to disclose their assault and seek emotional support, a significant percentage were also open to receiving referrals to other service providers. Key findings are below:

- In 36 percent of sessions, victims accepted referrals to military resources;
- Nearly one in four victims (23 percent) accepted a referral to a SARC;
- 6 percent of users stated they had already accessed or attempted to access military services prior to contacting SHL; and
- One-third (33 percent) of sessions involved a referral to civilian services.

User Feedback

FY23 user feedback was based on 63 phone and 1,209 online sessions for which users completed a comment card. Satisfaction ratings were obtained on a scale from of 1 to 5 on several domains, including ease of use, satisfaction with staffer knowledge and service, likelihood to recommend SHL, and intent to use resources provided. Average ratings across all phone and online users ranged from 4.29 (ease of use) to 4.16 (satisfied with staffer knowledge and skills).

Additional Resources

SafeHelpline.org

In FY23, SafeHelpline.org website was visited 6,836,704 times. This was a 20 percent increase from FY22 (5,438,671 website visits). Of the FY23 total, 4,393,373 were unique website visitors (a 16 percent increase from FY22).

SHL Educational Tools

In FY23, SHL continued to attract users to previously launched courses, *Suicide 101: Responding to Suicidal Ideation Among Survivors of Sexual Assault*, *Transitioning Service Members*, *Building Hope & Resiliency*, *How to Support a Survivor*, and *Safe Helpline 101*. In FY23, 15,532 users visited a course via the website. Furthermore, 1,870 users completed at least one course via the learning management system.

Safe HelpRoom

Safe HelpRoom is an anonymous, moderated online group chat service available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This resource allows individuals who have experienced sexual assault in the military to connect and support each other, minimizing geographic and other barriers victims may encounter accessing in person peer support. In FY23, 47 users attended 31 of the 98 scheduled sessions. Of sessions that users joined, the number of users ranged from 1 to 4. The amount of time spent in a session ranged from less than one minute to 50 minutes (median = 1 minute and 17 seconds).

In May 2018, the Department launched Local Safe HelpRoom, which leverages Safe HelpRoom technology and empowers local SARCs and SAPR VAs to operate their own online, moderated sessions. DoD Sexual Assault Advocate Certification Program (D-SAACP) certified SARCs and SAPR VAs are trained as moderators and are able to host Safe HelpRoom sessions for their communities. A total of 37 SARCs and SAPR VAs registered for Local Safe HelpRoom, 5 of whom completed their moderator training.

Prison Rape Elimination Act Hotline

SHL serves as a hotline for individuals assaulted in military correctional facilities, playing a key role in the Department's implementation of the requirements of the Prison Rape Elimination Act. In addition to providing crisis intervention, information, and referrals, staff assists callers with Unrestricted, Anonymous, and Third-Party reports. Specifically, staff facilitates Anonymous and Unrestricted Reports via the DoD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office and can provide warm handoffs to SARCs for Unrestricted Reports. In FY23, SHL received 11 calls from users in military correctional facilities. Such calls are forwarded to SARCs identified as supporting correctional facilities.

Limitations of SHL Data

The following are limitations of SHL data:

- Analyses are based on a sample of users who contacted SHL; the sample is not representative of all SHL users or the DoD community at large.
- Assessment data are based on information that SHL users spontaneously discuss in session; SHL staff do not solicit information from users for research purposes.
- Analyses are based on disclosed information, while information not disclosed is excluded from analysis. This limitation may affect estimates; for example, men may be less likely than women to disclose their gender because of stigma. Online users with unknown gender may therefore be disproportionately male.
- Given indirect clues and tone of voice were used to code the visitor's gender, gender estimates should be interpreted with caution.