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Mastering Advocacy in the Military

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. It is my great honor to attend the annual NOVA conference and spend time with the professionals on the front lines of caring for victims of crime. It is compelling and important work, and requires passion and empathy.

There are few as passionate and empathetic as Bette Stebbins, our senior victim assistance advisor in the Department of Defense. She is the driving force behind our Victim Assistance efforts, so I'm privileged to represent our office and the Department alongside her this week.

I'd like to pass on my sincere thanks to both Tim Jeffries and Will Marling for inviting me to speak today and for the opportunity to communicate our efforts to champion dignity and compassion for victims of crime and crises. Gentlemen, thanks for your leadership and commitment to this worthy cause.

We just saw some gut-wrenching clips that provide a glimpse of the effects sexual assault can have on our military family. That's why your work is so important; every victim requires empathetic and professional care and support. And this is why we've contracted with NOVA to advance the education and certification of our victim advocates across the Department of Defense. To the leaders of NOVA, the entire board of Directors and the assembled advocates here today, thank you for your leadership on this important cause and for your selfless efforts to care for the victims of crime.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm here today to talk about a serious issue, one that you know about all too well and one that demands our tireless efforts to eradicate from the Department of Defense. That issue is sexual assault.

When a Service member sexually assaults a fellow Service member, they fail to live up to the core values that define our profession of arms. Worse, the criminal who commits a sexual assault violates a sacred trust that collectively defines who we are and what is expected of every Soldier, Sailor, Airman, and Marine.

The act of sexual assault desecrates our traditions of honor, and it betrays the bonds of trust that exist between our brothers and sisters in uniform. Without this glue of trust, integrity, selflessness, and a willingness to sacrifice for our fellow service members, we cannot fulfill our

broader mission, to protect and serve our nation. Ultimately, we fail to honor the American people and values we defend.

Last month I appeared as a witness for the Department before a House Veteran's Affairs subcommittee to talk about sexual assault. The ranking member of the committee asked me about the effects a sexual assault can have on a military unit. In the very brief time I had to answer his question, really only a minute or so, a thousand thoughts flashed through my mind, some quite unpleasant. I thought of my personal experience serving in a unit over twenty years ago where two sexual assaults were committed. I still remember to this day the names and faces of those victims. I recall their pain and suffering—communicated to me in confidence as they sought to cope but on display for all to see when the victim took the witness stand. The effects wrought by two perpetrators against multiple victims tore our unit to pieces.

Not only were there terrible violations that needed to be punished and victims to nurture back to health, unit cohesion and mission effectiveness suffered severely.

Unfortunately, I also served in a separate unit where a senior noncommissioned officer sexually harassed members of the military and the extended community. It was equally troubling to see the effects of these destructive acts. Few went unscathed; victims, families, and other service members caught in the line of fire. Fortunately, in both instances, we cut out the cancers, the perpetrators were punished and we began the long process of healing. For the victims, as you know, it can take a lifetime, and for some, the wounds may heal but the scars remain.

In that short time I had to answer the Congressman's question, another set of thoughts flashed through my mind. I recalled the work done by leaders to heal the units, to communicate and set standards of discipline, to create a climate of dignity and respect, a culture that was intolerant of any behavior that failed to meet our expectations.

In one of those units, I was the Chief of Police and mission leader. It was difficult and trying. But when we cut out that cancer, and our Airmen knew that we would not tolerate these crimes, camaraderie and teamwork blossomed, mission focus and readiness soared. And victims learned that we would hold offenders appropriately accountable.

In those few short minutes, I shared with the Congressman and the collected Members of the committee what I know to be true from a lifetime of command and leadership, that commanders and senior leaders set the culture of the organization. That commanders own good order and discipline. And that commanders and leaders set the climate, focus and standards of their units. This is our focus in the Department of Defense. We own it and we will solve it.

We have set a strong framework to prevent and respond to these terrible crimes, and we have made great strides in victim care. Still, we are not satisfied. The Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff are absolutely committed to eliminating sexual assault from the armed forces. Easy to say, hard to do. But that is our mission and aim to achieve it. We are going to cut out the cancer that is sexual assault, to make our armed forces the strongest they can be, and to meet your expectations of our great institution.

We recognize that we cannot do this without collaborating with national experts in the field. Teaming with professional advocates enables us to capture the years of learning and experience

they bring and allows us to integrate those unique competencies into our military culture. That's why I'm here today -- to commit our support to victims and to the high standards of the National Organization of Victim Assistance and the National Advocate Credentialing Program.

As an Airman, I'm often fond of aerial anecdotes to illustrate my perspective. And in the Air Force, as in all the services, teamwork is essential to success. When my fighter pilot colleagues engage in battle, they are always supported by a wingman, or someone who is prepared to risk their life for their flight lead and who is there to ensure the success of the mission. Colonel Francis "Gabby" Gabreski, an early Air Force pioneer, said this: "The wingman is absolutely indispensable. I look after the wingman. The wingman looks after me ... We work together. We fight together ... Wars are not won by individuals. They're won by teams."

In the same spirit, we cannot win the war against sexual assault without your help. You represent the best our nation has to offer in supporting the victims of crime and crisis, and it is by collaborating with people with your perspective and your caliber and your experience that we will begin to deliver solutions that work.

NOVA is the nation's oldest victim advocacy organization, and established the benchmark program for assisting victims and certifying advocates. The Department contracted with NOVA to establish a program to certify our Sexual Assault Response Coordinators and Victim Advocates, which we call the D-SAACP, or the Defense Sexual Assault Advocate Certification Program. We are excited about this association with NOVA. Your demonstrated history of commitment to victim advocacy is recognized by victim advocates across the country.

As a result, we've aligned D-SAACP with the NACP standards, and worked with NOVA to determine the best way to stand up this Certification program. NOVA also provided great insight into our development of our Core Competencies framework, which I'll talk about in a few minutes, and is actively supporting us in all aspects of our certification program. We look forward to this collaboration, and to standing up D-SAACP together.

Let me talk briefly about who we are and our mindset. I joined the Air Force in 1987 and became a Security Forces officer – or in civilian terms, a military policeman. My job has always been to protect the force – in my last job, my mission was to protect the combat power of the Air Force and serve over 125,000 Airmen and their families in Air Combat Command. I bring this sense of purpose and mission, along with a commitment to my Service's values, to my current position where we serve 1.5 million members of the armed forces. Along with my Director, Major General Gary Patton, we are honored to lead fighting against sexual assault in DoD.

Our formal mission is to develop policy and programs to improve prevention, enhance victim support, and increase system accountability. Undergirding the mission is this aspiration: Our ultimate goal is to eliminate sexual assault from the military. Let me say that again....**Our goal is to eliminate sexual assault from the military.** We are the first to admit this is a lofty goal. It may even be safe to say that achieving this goal has never happened before, either in or out of the military.

The psychologists and anthropologists will tell us that sexual assault is a societal problem. The experts will also tell us that no matter the environment – civilian or military-- sexual assault

changes the boundaries of the victim's world. After a sexual assault, the simple tasks of life can seem like climbing the most dangerous, difficult mountain. Compounding the challenge is the fact that sexual assault, by its nature, is a crime of secret, shame, and silence. Often, victims will suffer alone for years, carrying the burden of someone else's transgression – and no one will ever know. In many ways, the military is a mirror of society, we are comprised of the men and women society produce, and a military sexual assault victim is in many ways similar to a civilian one.

However, there is one major difference: Those in uniform have a moral obligation to care for our team members, our battle buddies, shipmates, fellow Marines and our Wingman. Our job is to protect this country from harm, and we succeed at that mission by caring for each other.

Personally, when I hear about sexual assaults in the military, the idea of one member in uniform violating and assaulting another, my reaction is that this is disgraceful, and repulsive – and I can't believe that this is going on in uniform, among Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines, but it is and we recognize it. When I hear about this type of crime, my reaction is to say that we cannot tolerate this – not in my Air Force, and not in my sister services, the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps. Not in our armed forces. This is not what we stand for, nor is it who we are as value driven servants, nor it is what you expect of your nation's military.

As I mentioned, the Department has already set the framework for action by establishing the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office in 2005. Over the past seven years, we have launched a variety of policies and programs to prevent sexual assault and improve victim assistance. In January and April of this year, Secretary Panetta reinforced that sexual assault has no place in the Department, along with announcing new initiatives to protect victims. In May 2012, the Joint Chiefs of Staff released an unprecedented 32-star Strategic Direction on sexual assault prevention and response, calling all commanders and leaders to action.

This direction calls on the entire force to focus on enhancing awareness, encouraging open communication and timely reporting, holding offenders appropriately accountable, and providing responsive victim services. Our goal is to create a culture that will not tolerate sexual assault and our Secretary and uniformed leaders are leading this effort.

Despite some progress, we are still not where we want to be. In addition, we must continue to work to change military culture. We have to set the tone that sexual misconduct and inappropriate behavior will not be tolerated. We must create a climate of trust with the victim, which means providing confidentiality, quality treatment, and justice. We must establish a climate where bystanders proactively intervene. And most important, we must respect victims throughout the process.

At the heart of this culture change is a focus on victims. In the armed forces, Sexual Assault Response Coordinators, or SARCs, and Victim Advocates, or VAs, are foot soldiers of victim care. When addressing victim needs, we recognize that it is vitally important to keep in mind that victims will deal with their trauma according to their needs.

We remain mindful of the fears and trepidation a victim feels. If victims fear retaliation, lose control of their treatment, or see a potential for others to judge them, then there may be significant reluctance to seek professional support. And as you know, without the needed crisis

intervention, recovery can take a great deal longer, or may not occur at all. Further, without a sense of support, victims may be very reluctant to cooperate with efforts to hold offenders appropriately accountable. And without their committed participation, criminals cannot be brought to justice.

Providing this engaged support can be a demanding and draining task for SARCs and VAs. In addition to providing committed emotional support to victims, some SARCs and VAs have to manage competing tasks associated with their military duties. Often, SARCs and VAs have multiple responsibilities or serving as a SARC or VA may be an additional duty to another full-time job. The sheer numbers of SARCs and VAs also make standardizing best practices challenging. As of early this year, our SARC and VA staff totaled over 17,000 people. Add to this number the fact that these advocates are dispersed across the globe, and one can quickly surmise that professionalizing this force will be no easy undertaking.

Still, the Department is taking this challenge on. In 2011, we established a working group to explore certification options and to recommend requirements for professional standards. The result is our contract with NOVA to establish the D-SAACP. As I mentioned earlier, NOVA will administer the D-SAACP certification process and starting this fall, the National Advocate Credentialing Program Committee will approve applications from our military SARCs and Victim Advocates.

Certification is just one component of the D-SAACP. We also worked with experts in advocacy to develop a Core Competencies Framework, which identifies knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for successful advocacy. Each competency represents a knowledge, skill or attitude that SARCs and Victim Advocates can and should possess; they are based on empirical studies, professional practice guidelines and DoD policy; they have specific and measurable behaviors defined describing what the competency looks like in an installation or unit environment; and they have expected levels of proficiencies associated with those behaviors.

In addition, we have organized the core competencies according to the four elements of sexual assault response – crisis intervention, recovery & investigation, command decision making and action, and reintegration.

For example, during crisis intervention, we know that anyone providing direct victim assistance must have the ability to be an active listener; they must be able to address safety and security needs, and effectively communicate post-assault procedures. They must make immediate efforts to intervene, assess, and reduce the severity of a crisis and address victims' urgent needs.

During the victim's recovery, when a victim is receiving treatment and during the investigation, our SARCs and VAs must understand the social and psychological needs of a victim. They must be able to effectively talk and communicate with the survivor and create a supportive climate. And our SARCs and VAs can help educate commanders and unit leaders on the victim's perception of the situation and his or her potential reactions.

While the command is deciding the most appropriate course of action to take against a military perpetrator, our SARCs and VAs need to ensure they understand the victim's rights throughout the military justice process. SARCs and VAs must be able to communicate information

in a clear and effective manner and advocate in a professional demeanor on behalf of the victim when needed.

Finally, when survivors are reintegrating and focused on rebuilding their lives, we know their level of functioning may be negatively impacted. SARCs and VAs need to understand this process and have the ability to connect victims with resources that will foster ongoing recovery. It is imperative to us that our SARCs and VAs reflect these skills and have this knowledge when working with survivors.

A final critical element of D-SAACP is training. The Department is taking a hard look at how we train our SARCs and VAs. We will ensure that this training is consistent with certification standards and that we are instilling the right skills. In the end, our objective is simple to describe: engaged and motivated responders who understand their value, advocates who are well-trained, and professionals who meet the highest standards of victim care.

Ladies and gentlemen, sexual assault is one of the most traumatic events an individual can endure. Reporting, and all that follows can be just as difficult.. That's why we have to make sure that victims are confident in the help they get. SARCs and VAs are the ultimate Wingmen, battle buddies, and shipmates in this fight. Our responsibility lies in making sure that they are professionally trained to handle these vital duties, because they will often be the difference in instilling trust and confidence, which is the essential bridge to accountability and justice. Our certification program represents a critical step forward to our overall goal of eliminating sexual assault from the military.

Benjamin Franklin said, "Energy and persistence conquer all things." We must be persistent and determined if we intend to conquer this enemy, if we intend to eliminate sexual assault. We must band together to face the intricacies of this horrible crime, we must continue to confront the brutal facts associated with these crimes, and make it absolutely clear that we will not tolerate sexual assault in our armed forces. That is our mission and we will get it done. Thank you for helping us get this right. Thank you for all that you do, day in and day out – you are the heart of victim advocacy and we salute your efforts.