



## 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) 2024 (FY24). 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 FY24, 21,947 active users (14,152 online users and 7,795 phone users) contacted SHL for services (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

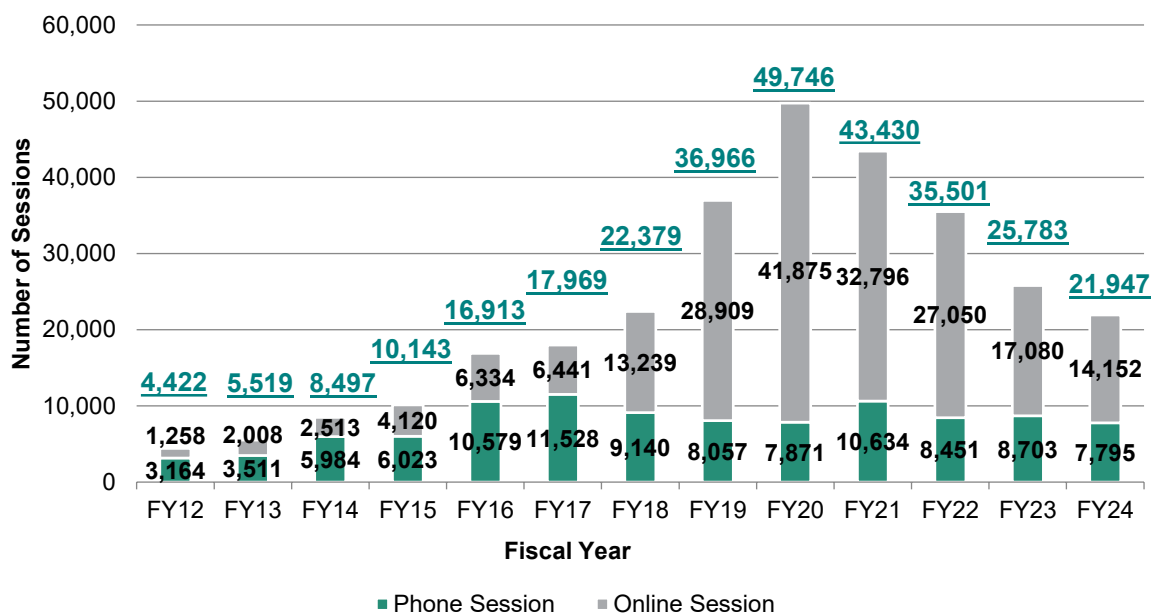


Figure 1. SHL Online and Telephone User Sessions

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 individual bases and installations. This year, SHL led 27 events, 25 of which were remote and two of which were in person.

<sup>1</sup> 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 – FY24 data shown in Figure 1 include only active users, whereas years prior include both active and inactive users.

## 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 more than a quarter of 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 FY24 findings demonstrate how SHL serves as an important bridge to victim assistance, reporting, and recovery. Key FY24 findings are summarized below and are based on 838 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 624 sessions in which an event was discussed and user/victim relationship was known, 83 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. While women were the most frequent users, the available sex data indicated that more than one-third of phone users (38 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 (0.4 percent).
- SHL continues to help people dealing with both recent situations and past trauma from many years ago. Of the 334 sessions that referenced the timeframe of the assault, almost half (49 percent) of assaults occurred within the last month of the individual contacting SHL, while 23 percent occurred more than five years ago.
- While most events discussed took place when the victim was an adult, nearly one out of six (15 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). Two-thirds of these events (67 percent) were discussed retrospectively by adult users. At the time of contact with SHL, 94 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 323 sessions that referenced the frequency of assault, 23 percent involved situations that

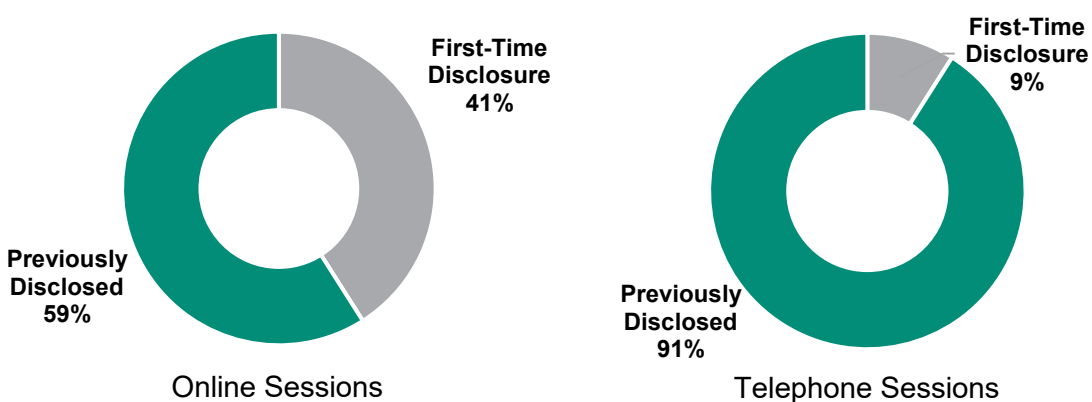
were “repeated and still occurring.” The ongoing nature of assault varied by the type of event considered to be of primary importance and emphasis in the session. While 14 percent of sexual assault incidents were considered ongoing, victimization was ongoing for 67 percent of cases in which sexual harassment was the primary event, and for 63 percent of cases in which physical assault was the primary event.

- The victim-alleged perpetrator relationship was discussed in two-thirds of sessions in which the user discussed an event and identified as the victim (67 percent). Of those that disclosed a relationship, alleged perpetrators were commonly categorized as a military coworker (21 percent), intimate partner/spouse (19 percent), friend/acquaintance (14 percent), senior Service member (14 percent), family member other than spouse (13 percent), and stranger/person briefly known (8 percent). While infrequent, alleged perpetrators occasionally included friends/partners of a family member (4 percent), medical or service providers (2 percent), and non-military authority figures (2 percent).
- When the sex of the alleged perpetrator was disclosed (N=307), alleged perpetrators were primarily men (84 percent) and less often women (16 percent).
- The alleged perpetrator’s status as a minor or adult was revealed in almost half of events discussed (47 percent). In these cases, alleged perpetrators were mostly adults (98 percent), and less often minors (2 percent).

### Disclosure

More than half of victims (61 percent) discussed whether or not they had previously disclosed their assault to another party. Of those that discussed disclosure, more than one-fourth (27 percent) indicated they were disclosing an incident for the first time on SHL, while around three-fourths (73 percent) had previously disclosed to someone else before contacting SHL. It is important to note that disclosure in this context does not necessarily mean making an official report. It could simply mean that victims 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, 41 percent of online users, compared to 9 percent of telephone 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, more than half (63 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 (18 percent and 11 percent, respectively).

Additional data explored victims' disclosure experiences. More than one-third of victims who previously disclosed (37 percent) discussed the reactions of those to whom they disclosed. Seventy-nine percent of users discussed negative reactions, such as instances where they were treated differently, where recipients of the disclosure dismissed their allegation, took control of the allegation away from them, or blamed them for the sexual assault. Other users discussed positive reactions (17 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 329 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:

- More than half of victims (58 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 13 percent of users had already made a report to a military authority, while 29 percent did not disclose their reporting status. Of the 13 percent (N=48) of users who had filed a report, 26 percent filed an Unrestricted Report, 23 percent filed a Restricted Report, and the remaining 51 percent did not disclose the type of report that was filed.
- Victims discussed multiple motivations for reporting. Of the 48 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 stop the alleged offender from hurting others (29 percent), to seek mental health assistance (27 percent), and to punish the alleged offender (23 percent).<sup>2</sup>
- 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, concerns care would trigger a report, and difficulty accessing care.

## Barriers to Reporting

Nearly one in eight adult sexual assault victims (13 percent) perceived one or more barriers to reporting. Of the 43 victims who discussed barriers to reporting, almost half (49 percent) discussed one or more barriers that reflected a lack of confidence in the military justice system,

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

including concerns about the report not being kept confidential (26 percent), concerns about not being believed (23 percent), and thinking nothing would be done (23 percent).

Moreover, of the 43 victims who discussed barriers to reporting, 42 percent cited not wanting anyone to know. Additionally, 44 percent of users discussed fear of retaliation. Among these 19 sessions citing retaliation, fears included ostracism (60 percent), cruelty or maltreatment (60 percent), and reprisal (42 percent).

### Perceived Problems with Reporting

Of the 43 victims who filed a report with a military authority, 42 percent 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 (44 percent), perceived retaliation (44 percent), and lack of respect by responders (44 percent) were mentioned most frequently.

Of those 18 victims who perceived problems with the reporting process, 44 percent discussed perceptions of retaliation including ostracism (33 percent), reprisal (22 percent), and cruelty or maltreatment (17 percent). Users experienced retaliation from a variety of sources, including a coworker or someone in the user's unit (22 percent), the alleged perpetrator (17 percent), or someone in the chain of command (17 percent).

### 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 495 users who identified as victims, more than half (57 percent) discussed specific emotions (e.g., anger, worry, sadness/despair) related to an assault. Mental health concerns (29 percent) were also frequently discussed. Other prominent topics included reporting options and legal issues (13 percent), physical health concerns (11 percent), and professional issues (11 percent).
- Almost half of users who brought up mental health topics also discussed mental health services/counseling. Anxiety, flashbacks related to the assault, and depression 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 86 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.

Inconsistent with previous years, there was no statistically significant difference between men and women with regard to disclosure. Specifically, 18 percent of men and 25 percent of women disclosed for the first time.

However, consistent with FY23 findings, there was no statistical difference between men and women with regards to 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 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 44 percent of sessions, victims accepted referrals to military resources. About one in four victims (27 percent) accepted a referral to a SARC. SHL staff completed warm handoffs to on-base resources in seven percent of phone sessions, and the majority of such sessions were transferred to SARCs. Of the telephone sessions in which a warm handoff was offered or attempted, one-sixth of users did not accept the handoff (15 percent). In three sessions, users were encouraged to call at another time or offered the contact information of another provider.
- Six percent of users stated they had already accessed or attempted to access military services prior to contacting SHL.
- Many victims were interested in civilian resources as an alternative to military resources. Civilian referrals were provided in one-fourth of sessions (23 percent) where the user was the victim, with the most frequent referrals being to RAINN civilian sexual assault service provider affiliates (11 percent), mental health resources (six percent), legal resources (three percent), and civilian articles and websites (two percent).

### User Feedback

FY24 user feedback was based on 86 phone and 1,364 online sessions for which users completed a comment card. Satisfaction ratings were obtained on a scale from one to five on several domains, including ease of use, satisfaction with staffer knowledge and service, likelihood to recommend SHL, and intent to use resources provided. An average rating of 4.00 was achieved across phone and online users on all domains.

### Staff Performance and Training

SHL supervisors rated staff on key skills and fidelity to the ENGAGE model used in SHL training. Staff exceeded or met performance expectations on all the key domains, such as opening a session/call, engaging and supporting the user, providing appropriate information and referrals, managing crisis situations, and ending the session. Staff met performance expectations of 90 percent or above on all domains.

### Additional Resources

#### [SafeHelpline.org](https://www.safehelpline.org)

In FY24, SafeHelpline.org website was visited 3,675,530 times. This was a 46 percent decrease from FY23 (6,836,704 website visits). Of the FY24 total, 2,405,313 were unique website visitors (a 45 percent decrease from FY23).

#### SHL Educational Tools

In FY24, SHL continued to attract users to previously launched self-paced courses, including *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 FY24, 7,333 users visited a course via the website. Furthermore, 8,134 users completed at least one course through Joint Knowledge Online.

## 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 may 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 FY24, 42 users attended 26 of the 101 scheduled sessions (26 percent); the other 75 scheduled sessions had no users. Of sessions that users joined, the number of users ranged from one to seven. The amount of time spent in a session ranged from less than one minute to one hour and 31 minutes (median = 4 minutes and 25 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 certified SARCs and SAPR VAs are trained as moderators and are able to host Safe HelpRoom sessions for their communities. A total of 43 SARCs and SAPR VAs registered for Local Safe HelpRoom moderator training, 20 of whom completed the 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 assist callers with Unrestricted, Anonymous, and Third-Party reports. Specifically, staff facilitate Anonymous and Unrestricted Reports via the DoD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office and can provide warm handoffs to SARCs for Unrestricted Reports. In FY24, SHL received three 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 sex because of stigma. Online users who do not disclose their sex may therefore be disproportionately male.
- Given indirect clues and tone of voice were used to code the visitor's sex, sex estimates should be interpreted with caution.