

Hagel announces new Anti-Sexual Assault Initiatives

By Jim Garamone, American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON (NNS) -- Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel today announced seven new initiatives to strengthen and standardize the department's sexual assault prevention and response effort.

In a memo to the field, Hagel called elimination of sexual assault in the military one of the department's top priorities.

"This effort requires our absolute and sustained commitment to providing a safe environment in which every service member and DOD civilian is free from the threat of sexual harassment and assault," he wrote in a statement. "Our success depends on a dynamic and responsive approach. We, therefore, must continually assess and strive to improve our prevention and response programs."

On May 6, 2013, the secretary directed the services and defense agencies to strengthen the program in commander accountability, command climate, victim advocacy and safety.

The secretary's initiatives announced today strengthen these areas further. They include:

-- The secretary directed the services to improve victim legal support. He directed the service secretaries to create a legal advocacy program to provide legal representation to sexual assault victims throughout the judicial process. He set Nov. 1, 2013, as an initial operating capacity for this and for it to be fully functional by Jan. 1, 2014.

-- Hagel directed that pre-trial investigative hearings of sexual assault-related charges are conducted by Judge Advocate General officers.

-- The secretary directed service secretaries to enhance protections calling on them to develop and implement policies allowing for the reassignment or transfer of members accused of committing sexual assault or related offense. Hagel wants this done in order to eliminate

continued contact while respecting the rights of both victims and the accused.

-- Hagel is requiring timely follow-up reports on sexual assault incidents and responses to be given to the first general or flag officer within the chain of command.

-- He also directed the DOD Inspector General to regularly evaluate closed sexual assault investigations.

-- Hagel ordered the service secretaries to standardize prohibitions on inappropriate behavior between recruiters and trainers and their recruits and trainees across the department.

-- And, Hagel directed the DOD general council to develop and propose changes to the Manual for Courts-Martial that would allow victims to give input during the sentencing phase of courts-martial.

The new measures should strengthen the department's sexual assault prevention and response programs, the secretary said.

"Remember, we are all accountable and responsible for eliminating this crime from our ranks," Hagel said in the memo.