



Department of Defense /Department Veterans Affairs
Initiatives to Address Sexual Harassment, Trauma and Culture Change

Joy J. Ilem, National Legislative Director
Ashleigh B. Byrnes, Deputy National Director of Communications

April 30, 2021

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month

“Every member of the total force deserves a workplace free of sexual assault and harassment and personal fear,” Kirby said. “We must commit ourselves to eliminating this illegal and corrosive behavior.”

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III



New DoD Secretary Commits to Change

- Sexual harassment and assault still a problem in the ranks
- Serious threat to the men and women who serve in the military
- DoD working full-time to eliminate sexual assault in the ranks
- Change—new solutions a priority for the Department

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III



April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month

- In February, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III announced the establishment of an independent review commission (IRC) on sexual assault

The Commission has 90 days to—

- Evaluate military policies, programs and processes related to sexual assault
- Review and assess best practices from industry, academia and stakeholders organizations
- Recommend policy changes and proposals to improve sexual harassment and assault prevention efforts in the military services

IRC “Lines of Effort”

The Commission includes four working groups focused on—

- Accountability
- Prevention
- Climate and Culture
- Victim Care and Support

Independent Review Commission Members



The infographic features a dark teal background with white and light blue text. It is organized into four main sections, each with a header and a row of three portrait photos. The central text reads 'INDEPENDENT REVIEW COMMISSION' in large white letters, with 'Highly Qualified Experts & Line of Effort Leads' below it in smaller white letters. At the bottom center is the official seal of the Department of Defense, United States of America, which includes an eagle with wings spread, a shield on its chest, and a banner with the motto 'QUI PRO DOMINA JUSTITIA SEQUITUR'. The seal is encircled by the words 'DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE' and 'UNITED STATES OF AMERICA'.

IRC CHAIR

Lynn Rosenthal

LOE 1: ACCOUNTABILITY

Cindy Dyer James Schwenk Meghan Tokash

LOE 2: PREVENTION

Debra Houry Neil Irvin James Johnson

INDEPENDENT REVIEW COMMISSION
Highly Qualified Experts & Line of Effort Leads

LOE 3: CLIMATE AND CULTURE

Bridgette Bell Kris Fuhr Kyleanne Hunter

LOE 4: VICTIM CARE AND SUPPORT

Indira Henard Kristina "Kris" Rose Kayla Williams

Hearing From Survivors

- The IRC invites service members who are survivors of sexual assault and harassment to share their experience and thoughts
- Confidential—no personal identifying information should be used for you or others
- IRC will take all views into account in deliberations and when making recommendations

<https://www.safehelpline.org/military-feedback>.

Next Steps

- Collection of the data by the IRC first step
- IRC evaluation of what's worked to prevent sexual harassment and assault—and what hasn't
- Additional measures to ensure a safe, secure and productive environment for all military personnel

Department of Veterans Affairs

At VA, at least one in four women veterans and one in four women employees experience sexual harassment. Frequently, the perpetrator is a male veteran.

- Ending harassment is among DAV's 2021 critical policy goals
- Urged Biden Administration to prioritize this issue at VA
- VA Secretary McDonough has committed to no-tolerance in his first public remarks in the office



**“I WILL NOT ACCEPT DISCRIMINATION,
HARASSMENT, OR ASSAULT AT ANY LEVEL
OR AT ANY FACILITY WITHIN VA.”**

Department of Veterans Affairs



- In March, Sec. McDonough hosted roundtable with women veterans
- Open discussion on gender specific issues
- Follow up with participants

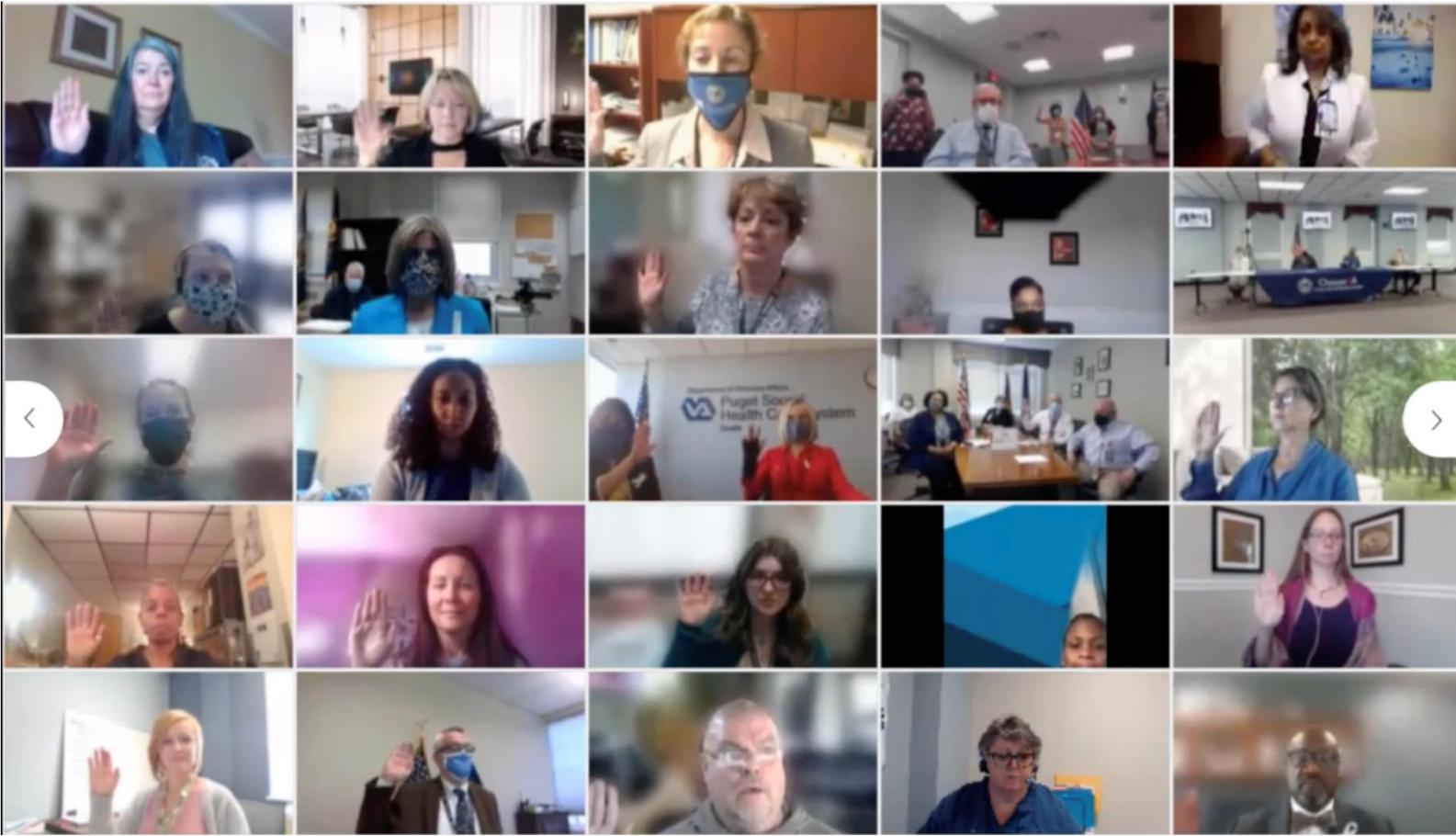
White Ribbon VA Campaign



White Ribbon VA is a national call to action to eliminate sexual harassment, sexual assault, and domestic violence across the Department of Veterans Affairs by promoting a positive change in culture so that the actions outlined in the pledge become the organizational norm.

White Ribbon VA is an awareness movement where **everyone**—regardless of gender—can participate.

“I pledge to never commit, excuse or stay silent about sexual harassment, sexual assault or domestic violence against others.”



DAV

White Ribbon VA Campaign

You can take the pledge and encourage those within your chapters and departments to take it as well:

www.whiteribbonusa.org/whiteribbon-va-pledge

WHITE RIBBON USA
WHITERIBBONUSA.ORG

ABOUT PLEDGE PROGRAMS EMPLOYMENT TEAM GET INVOLVED HELP CENTER DONATE

We can create a better future for our nation in which women and girls feel represented, respected, and safe. Join White Ribbon VA Campaign organized in partnership with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and National Association of Social Workers of the U.S.

WHITE RIBBON VA

DAV Activities

- Numerous statements and testimonies on Capitol Hill
- Advocacy on legislation that passed in the 116th Congress to create standardized policy to report and track sexual harassment in VA
- Took part in a closed door roundtable with HVAC to discuss the role of VSOs in ending harassment at VA
- Working with VA, Congressional Women Veterans Task Force and fellow VSOs



BUTCH WHITEHEAD
DAV National Commander

Respect begins with us

J. MARC BURGESS

In October, the Department of Veterans Affairs issued a declaration committing to a harassment-free health-care environment. The signers dedicated themselves to holding leadership, employees and veterans alike accountable to uphold a set of principles that aim to stamp out harassment within VA facilities.

With the Stand Up to Stop Harassment Now declaration, the VA commits to creating a safe, respectful and welcoming environment for everyone; empowering individuals to recognize, intervene and report harassment; advancing a harassment-free culture; providing a secure and compassionate reporting process; assisting veterans, visitors and volunteers with reporting incidents; taking prompt action to respond to reports; being accountable by tracking reports and the actions taken; and partnering with veterans and veterans service organizations to stop harassment.

This declaration comes on the heels of an incident at the Washington DC VA Medical Center, in which a woman veteran filed a report that she was sexually assaulted while in the hospital's lobby. Aside from being a veteran and a patient at the hospital, the woman is also a senior policy adviser for the bipartisan congressional Women Veterans Task Force charged with promoting inclusivity and equitable access to resources, benefits and health care for women veterans.

But this incident is far from an outlier. A 2019 VA study showed that 1 in 4 women veterans reported inappropriate, unwanted comments or behavior by male veterans on VA grounds. Those behaviors included being catcalled, whistled or stared at; being told by a male veteran to smile or that she is too pretty to be a veteran; being sexually harassed or sexually assaulted; and being followed or harassed by a male



DAV [video messages](#), [DAV Magazine](#) articles and the [DAV podcast](#), to educate VA health care users



Deborah Sampson Act – Section 5303

This provision directs VA to establish:

- A comprehensive policy to end harassment and sexual assault
- A process for any veteran to report harassment/assault
- Clear mechanisms for veteran to identify how to report
- Mandatory annual training for employees and policy materials to users
- Working group (to include VSOs) to develop action plan
- Designated POCs to receive reports
- Changes to intake policy to ensure veterans feel safe/welcome

More to Come...

- Bystander intervention training for veterans (already being implemented among VA staff)
- VA working group announcement
- Continued oversight and implementation of DSA/5303
- Additional messaging from DAV
- Appropriations request for VA anti-harassment efforts