

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 10, 2025

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Hegseth,

We are writing to express our deep concern over reports suggesting that the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) training programs have been paused, and the Navy’s program has “no timeline for resuming.”¹ This decision is not only irresponsible but also dangerous, sending a clear signal that leadership is willing to deprioritize a systemic issue that continues to harm service members. Given the military’s well-documented struggles with addressing sexual violence, pausing this critical training is indefensible and raises serious questions about the commitment to protecting those who serve.

The law requires providing SAPR training for incoming service members, civilian employees, first responders, staff who directly support victims, as well as in professional military education.² Sexual assault remains a crisis in the military. The most recent report from the Department of Defense estimated 29,000 active-duty service members experienced unwanted sexual contact in 2023.³ The actual rate is likely even higher. A 2024 Brown University report⁴ highlighted there were more than 75,500 cases of sexual assault in the military in 2021, significantly higher than the Department’s estimate of approximately 35,900 cases. Additionally, we know thousands of cases go unreported due to fear of retaliation, lack of trust in the system, and a culture that too often silences survivors.⁵ Training programs are not optional – they are a fundamental tool in prevention, accountability, and shifting the toxic norms that have allowed these crimes to persist. Pausing or delaying the training undermines progress and puts more service members at risk.

Before you were confirmed, you told the Senate Armed Services Committee that there is “no place in our military for sexual assault or sexual harassment,” and that “the Department must do better to train and ingrain the fact that sexual abuse and assault is not tolerated in the force.”⁶

There is nothing in the executive orders published to date that would remotely lead to this result. The SAPR program and the training it requires is based in law, dovetailing with the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the need to maintain good order and discipline. In light of the reports we have received and, given the gravity of the issue, we seek answers to the following questions:

¹ Defense One, “Navy pauses sexual-assault prevention and response training,” Audrey Decker, February 6, 2025, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2025/02/navy-pauses-sexual-assault-prevention-and-response-training/402829/>.

² 10 U.S.C. §1561 note

³ Department of Defense, “Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military Fiscal Year 2023.” March 26, 2024, https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/public/docs/reports/AR/FY23/FY23_Annual_Report.pdf

⁴ Lehrfeld, J. (2024, August 19). *Military sexual assault rate higher than DOD estimates, report finds*. Military Times. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2024/08/19/military-sexual-assault-rate-higher-than-dod-estimates-report-finds/>

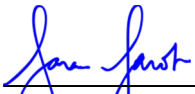
⁵ Acosta, J. D., Chinman, M., & Shearer, A. L. (2021). *Countering Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the U.S. Military: Lessons from RAND Research*. www.rand.org. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1318-1.html

⁶ Senate Armed Services Committee, “Advance Policy Questions for Peter ‘Pete’ B. Hegseth, Nominee to Serve as Secretary of Defense,” p. 66, January 6, 2025, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/hegseth_apq_responses.pdf.


- Can you confirm whether SAPR training or programs within each branch of the U.S. military have been suspended, paused, or rolled back? If so, what is the rationale behind this decision?
 - How long will this pause remain in place?
 - What measures are being implemented to ensure that the progress made in preventing sexual assaults is not undermined during this period?
- Which executive orders do DoD or the military services believe necessitate pausing the SAPR program?
- Were you provided a legal opinion that pausing these training programs violates or complies with 10 U.S.C. 1561?
- Were uniformed military leadership consulted before this decision was made? Why or why not?
- Which specific SAPR training programs are subject to the pause?
- How many new SAPR victim advocates undergoing training across all U.S. military branches are affected by this training pause?
- What steps are being taken to ensure that pausing these training programs does not result in further harm to survivors and a decline in reporting rates?
- Are these SAPR programs being restructured across the U.S. military branches? If so, what is the specific restructuring plan, and what is the timeline? Please provide all details.
- Have any internal audits or reviews suggested that SAPR programs were ineffective or unnecessary? If so, please provide the reports and data.

The safety and well-being of our service members must remain a top priority. The DoD has a duty to maintain a safe and professional environment amongst all branches of our military, and this move signals a disturbing lack of commitment to that mission. We look forward to a prompt response outlining answers to all our questions and notification of what steps will be taken to reinstate training and strengthen protection against sexual assault in the military.


Sincerely,




Sara Jacobs
Member of Congress



Chrissy Houlahan
Member of Congress



Mikie Sherrill
Member of Congress



Marilyn Strickland
Member of Congress



Jm N Tokuda
Member of Congress



Maggie Goodlander
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