

Victims' Legal Counsel Program Spans the Globe

From CTF 51 Public Affairs

The Navy's Victims' Legal Counsel (VLC) Program was introduced to forward deployed Sailors and Marines aboard the multipurpose amphibious assault ship USS Bataan (LHD 5) in the 5th Fleet area of responsibility, March 19, 2014.

Sailors and Marines assigned to the Bataan Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) and the embarked 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) received information about the VLC Program, established to provide legal advice and advocacy to eligible victims of sexual assault.

U.S. Navy Lt. Cara Addison discussed the program's details and her role as the Navy VLC stationed at Naval Support Activity, Bahrain. She explained the types of services provided, the attorney-client relationship and confidentiality, and the collaboration with other personnel available to assist sexual assault victims.

"I serve as legal counsel for the victim only, not for the government, nor for the accused," Addison said. "I ensure that victims have the opportunity to be heard and informed, and are treated with fairness and respect for their dignity and privacy."

Addison spoke to separate groups, each with a special role in the prevention of sexual assault and processing of a report. She stressed the program's focus on providing compassionate and coordinated support to victims.

Enlisted and senior leadership teams from the ARG, MEU, and USS Bataan, as well as, victim advocates, sexual assault response coordinators, chaplains, healthcare personnel, staff judge advocates and legal officers received interactive briefs about the independent VLC program.

"The Navy's Victims' Legal Counsel is a program needed for many years," said Senior Chief Master-at-Arms Katherine Gutierrez, Bataan's chief master-at-arms. "The VLC can help victims of sexual assault



U.S. Navy Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class RJ Stratchko

Lt. Cara Addison discusses the Navy's Victims Legal Counsel Program to enlisted leaders aboard the multi-purpose amphibious assault ship USS Bataan (LHD 5). The Navy established its VLC program, August 15, 2013 to complement the support provided by Sexual Assault Response Coordinators (SARCs) and Victim Advocates (VAs) by offering legal advice, representation and, as appropriate, advocacy for victims of sexual assault. Bataan is the flagship for the Bataan Amphibious Ready Group and, with the embarked 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, is deployed in support of maritime security operations and theater security cooperation efforts in the U.S. 5th Fleet area of responsibility.

by giving them a voice in the legal process and sound legal guidance from a lawyer assigned to represent victims only. This ensures the victim is treated fairly and with dignity at all times.”

The Navy established its VLC program, August 15, 2013. It is designed to complement the support provided by Sexual Assault Response Coordinators (SARCs) and Victim Advocates (VAs) by offering legal advice, representation and, as appropriate, advocacy for victims of sexual assault. Navy VLCs help victims understand the investigative and military justice processes, advocate in court as appropriate for the victim’s rights and interests, and provide legal advice to assist the victim.

“It is important for our Sailors and Marines to know that this program is available and that it provides an opportunity to have counsel that is focused solely on their interests as victims,” Commander, Task Force 51, Brig. Gen. Gregg P. Olson, said. “Lt. Addison’s zeal in seizing the opportunity to share the program with forward-deployed expeditionary forces is a tribute to her dedication and highlights the VLC Program’s commitment to providing comprehensive legal assistance to our Shipmates.”

Bataan is the flagship for the Bataan Amphibious Ready Group and, with the embarked 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, is deployed in support of maritime security operations and theater security cooperation efforts in the U.S. 5th Fleet area of responsibility. Task Force 51 provides command and control of amphibious forces deployed to U.S. 5th Fleet.

For more information about the VLC Program, or to contact a VLC office, jag.navy.mil. 

Editor’s Note:

Although Lt. Addison briefed both Sailors and Marines on the program, the Marine Corps also has Victims’ Legal Counsel. In fact, each service has judge advocates specifically assigned as victims’ counsel.



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SUBJECT: Sexual Assault Prevention and Response

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.