

# Navy Chaplains to Receive More Training on Sexual Abuse

Kristen Leslie began her 2003 book, *When Violence Is No Stranger*, with a verse from Psalms, a nod to her training as a theologian.

"It is not enemies who taunt me—I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me—I could hide from them. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend."

The book's subject was acquaintance rape, and it got the attention of a chaplain at the **Air Force Academy**. The school was then reeling from a **Pentagon** report that indicated 7 percent of its cadets reported being the victims of **rape** or attempted rape. Nearly 90 percent of the perpetrators were their own classmates.

Leslie, now a professor of pastoral theology and care at Eden Theological Seminary in Webster Groves, Mo., was invited to Colorado to consult with academy leaders on how to train Air Force chaplains to deal with sexualized **violence** on campus.

Now, a decade later, the **U.S. Navy** has come knocking.

In September, the Navy announced it had contracted with Leslie and another expert to conduct training sessions next year with its chaplains. The Navy hopes chaplains can help address a crisis in underreporting of sexual abuse by military personnel.

"Chaplains have been trained so far in the legal issues surrounding sexual assault, but that's not their primary focus," Leslie says.

In June, the joint chiefs of staff testified before the U.S.

Senate Committee on Armed Services on proposals to combat sexual assault in the military; last month, the Pentagon introduced regulations that it says will help prevent sexual assault and better prosecute the crime when it happens.

A little more than a week later, a high-profile hearing began looking into allegations that three Naval Academy football players sexually assaulted a female midshipman last year.

In its 2012 report on sexual assault in the military, the **U.S. Department of Defense** cited 26,000 cases of unwanted sexual contact, up from 19,000 in 2010. The same report said only 3,000 service members who were victims of sexual assault reported the incident to military authorities.

Defense Secretary **Chuck Hagel** says the results of the report suggest behavior that “is just not acceptable.”

“We will get control of this,” he says.

Each year, Navy chaplains receive professional development training around a specific issue. Navy chaplain Lt. Cmdr. David Thames, deputy executive assistant to the chief of Navy chaplains, helped coordinate next year’s focus on sexual assault.

In an email, Thames said that although chaplains already receive training in sexual assault reporting procedures, Leslie’s training will represent “the first time the chaplain corps has focused on specialized pastoral care training for chaplains caring for sexual assault victims.”

Leslie will conduct the training with Marie Fortune, founder of the FaithTrust Institute in Seattle. They will travel to eight naval locations in the United States and to locations in Naples, Italy, and Okinawa, Japan, to take part in the three-day professional development course.

A major focus of Leslie’s training will be the subject of

confidentiality. Reasons military members don't report sexual assault range from fear of reprisals to fear of creating more work for their colleagues.

A 2011 Air Force survey found that nearly 50 percent of women who were raped didn't want their superiors to know. Nearly 50 percent also said they didn't report the assault because they didn't want to cause trouble in their unit.

Chaplains are considered outside the chain of command and are bound by confidentiality. Because chaplains are officers, though, young, inexperienced service members often see them simply as superiors.

The Navy points out that confidentiality—which it calls a “sacred trust”—has been standard practice for its chaplain corps since 1775. But to reinforce the practice, it made chaplain confidentiality official policy in 2008.

And yet according to a recent poll on the Navy Personnel Command's website, 63 percent of Navy personnel did not believe that what they tell a chaplain is considered confidential, and 65 percent said they thought chaplains were required to report certain matters to the command.

Two members of the Armed Services Committee—Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo.; and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y.—have been pushing legislation to reform the legal aspects of prosecuting military sexual assault.

McCaskill says that while her focus has been justice for victims, “chaplain training is essential.”

“The fact that the Navy is doing this is a positive sign that the military is taking this seriously,” she says.

The Rev. Cynthia Ramirez Lindenmeyer, a former Army chaplain who is a member of the Pentagon's Defense Advisory Committee on Women and the Services, says chaplains represent part of

the solution to the problem, but a lot of work remains to be done.

“Most military chaplains are coming into the military from seminaries that don’t do much training in that area,” Lindenmeyer says. “So this kind of pastoral training the Navy is starting is a good move.”

Military chaplains are endorsed by hundreds of faith traditions, many of which have conflicting views on what Lindenmeyer—a United Church of Christ pastor—calls “the rape-myth culture.”

“Chaplains need to learn more about the culture that is predominant in fundamentalist Christian churches that blames a woman for drinking when she was attacked, or dressed provocatively or out with 10 guys,” she says. “When some chaplains blame the woman, that hurts the victim even more.”

*(Tim Townsend writes for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.)*