



2015

ANNUAL REPORT

Photo by: Chris Bartlett

"The current [military justice] system has contributed to an effect that emboldens predators instead of empowering victims. Barring access to fair and impartial justice pours salt in the wounds of those who have suffered immeasurable indignity and harm while serving their country in uniform."

- Senator Chuck Grassley



Protect Our Defenders

**Military sexual assault
is a greater risk factor
for PTSD than combat.**

Protect Our Defenders is the only national non-profit solely dedicated to serving active duty, veteran, and civilian survivors of military sexual assault and harassment through pro bono legal services, policy, and advocacy.



**Protect Our
Defenders**

Jessica, USAF, Survivor

www.protectourdefenders.com

From Our President



Protect Our Defenders (POD) is the only national organization solely dedicated to fighting the culture of sexual harassment, victim retribution, and the epidemic of rape within the military.

Every day, through policy reform, advocacy, and public education we **work to provide those who join our military a safe and respectful work environment and a fair and effective justice system.** By providing free legal and case services for survivors – active duty, veterans, and civilians – we work to ensure that victims of violent crimes are believed and do not stand alone.

2015 has been a landmark year in our fight for justice. For the second consecutive year, we helped secure a bi-partisan majority vote in the Senate to remove the decision to prosecute from the conflicted and often biased chain of command. We continue to press the President to lead as we build momentum to overcome an ongoing filibuster threat and pass fundamental reform. **Significant reforms championed by POD that enhance survivors' rights**

in a hostile court-martial process were signed into law. We joined Human Rights Watch and many courageous survivors to release a groundbreaking report that exposed the severe retaliation that plagues survivors who report their abuse. In response to growing demand, we partnered with two major law firms to host our first pro bono attorney training in five states and opened our free legal and casework services to support civilians who have been assaulted by a service member.

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright joined POD's Advisory Board, signaling to policymakers and survivors that support continues to grow rapidly for creating an impartial, professional military justice system. Announcing her support for POD's mission, Albright said: "These crimes go against the core values of the armed forces. Eradicating sexual assault and harassment from our military will make it stronger and better, and I am proud to stand behind this cause."

While our 2015 accomplishments are well worth celebrating, our work is far from done. **Military sexual assault continues to affect tens of thousands of active duty service members, veterans, and civilians each year.**

The conflicted military justice system fuels inequality for women, people of color, and LGBTQ service members, exacerbates a culture of abuse, destroys victims' careers, and undermines good order and discipline.

This year, we are amplifying our call to the President. He has expressed concern about this issue and we are counting on him to take swift and comprehensive action to support fundamental reform. We will also continue to fight for increased protections for victims and ensure this issue remains a part of our public discourse.

Thank you for your ongoing support to provide service members with a justice system worthy of the democratic values they have sworn to protect.



DON CHRISTENSEN, President
Former Chief Prosecutor
Colonel, (Ret.) U.S. Air Force

Front cover: Ciera Bridges served in the US Air Force from 2009 to 2014 and left after facing professional retaliation for her sexual assault. In 2015 she advocated with POD on Capitol Hill and told her story in the 2015 Human Rights Watch report on retaliation (see page 9).

Policy

Through legal challenges in military courts, reports exposing systemic abuse, and policy advocacy, Protect Our Defenders works to change the culture of harassment, to empower victims and enforce their rights within the broken military justice system. Simultaneously, we are increasing national momentum toward creating a conflict-free military justice system that ensures the impartial administration of justice.

Amicus Briefs

POD has filed numerous Amicus Briefs (also called “friend of the court” briefs) **to protect the rights of survivors, protect their dignity and enforce their rights.** POD has earned a **reputation for filing cutting edge amicus briefs.** As a result, we are frequently contacted by military Special Victims’ Counsel to aid them in filing their appeals and advise them on how to craft the best legal arguments. Victims’ counsel view POD as the experts in enforcing victim rights.

In 2015, POD filed two briefs in support of victims’ appeals with the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces (CAAF) and one brief with the Army Court of Criminal Appeals (ACCA):



Mental Health Records

An **Army trial judge violated a victim’s right to privacy** and the Military Rules of Evidence (MRE) **when he ordered her to turn over her mental health records from her civilian mental health provider and gave them to the attorney of her accused attacker.** The judge failed to hold a hearing that is required in order to determine whether any mental health records should be produced. The judge compounded the error by reviewing the victims’ protected records and then turning them over to the attorney of the accused, all in violation of MRE 513, the psychotherapist-patient privilege. POD filed an amicus brief with ACCA in support of the victim, arguing the judge had ignored the protections guaranteed under the law. The appellate court agreed with POD, and in a scathing critique of the trial judge, reversed his erroneous rulings.



Unlawful Command Influence

Unlawful command influence (UCI) occurs when a commander improperly influences the court-martial process, undermining the impartiality of military justice. Military judges have interpreted UCI in a broad way that has effectively prohibited commanders from taking a stand against sexual assault and, in some cases, resulted in sexual assault convictions being overturned. POD argued that in those cases where commanders do take action to hold sex offenders accountable, the cases should not be overturned.



Admission of Evidence of a Victim’s Prior Sexual History

In a recent sexual assault case, a military judge admitted evidence about a victim’s prior experiences of sexual assault. The victim petitioned the CAAF to prevent this evidence from being used at trial. POD filed an amicus brief in support of the victim, **urging the court to exclude evidence related to the victim’s prior sexual history or to at least require that the judge consider the victim’s privacy as a factor when making the ruling.** In prior cases, the CAAF improperly suggested it is unconstitutional to consider a victim’s privacy when making determinations under the military’s rape shield rule, and POD’s brief challenged this common misinterpretation.

POD Continues to Fight for Fundamental Reform

In 2015, for the second year in a row, the Military Justice Improvement Act (MJIA) received a bi-partisan majority vote in the U.S. Senate, though it failed to pass due to a filibuster. **MJIA would vest military prosecutors with the authority to make prosecution decisions** in serious criminal cases such as sexual assault, while leaving commanders with authority over military-specific offenses. This change would professionalize the system and ensure impartial justice for our service members.

Executive Order (EO) on Military Justice

On June 17, 2015, President Barack Obama signed EO No. 13696, **implementing important recent legislative changes that were championed by POD**, including: limitations on when a victim can be deposed prior to trial, **formalizing a victim's right to legal representation** and to make an unsworn statement during sentencing, limits to commanders' power to alter the findings and sentence of a court-martial, a prohibition on using the accused's "good military character" as evidence during trial, and provisions strengthening the psychotherapist-patient privilege that protects a victim's mental health records.

Judicial Proceedings Panel

The Judicial Proceedings Panel (JPP) is Congressionally mandated to review military justice policies related to sexual assault and recommend improvements to the system. In December 2015, POD prepared two submissions to the JPP detailing the retaliation we see regularly through our Pro Bono Network and outlining barriers that victims and their attorneys face in accessing critical documents about their case. POD urged the JPP to support reforms that force the military to take retaliation seriously, including better protections for survivors who face retaliation and holding offenders accountable. POD also called for the JPP to support victims' access to all court records and to provide victims an opportunity to give input in non-criminal disciplinary actions against their perpetrators. The JPP is continuing to deliberate on this issue.

Protect Our Defenders' Pro Bono Network is the only program in the country providing free legal services specifically for survivors of military sexual assault and harassment.

National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY 2016

In November 2015, the President signed the FY 2016 NDAA, which contains several important reforms to the military justice system and supported by POD, including:



An expansion of survivors' ability to contest adverse rulings regarding their rights, such as psychotherapist-patient privilege and the rape shield rule.



Language directing the President to ensure that military rules governing confessions are consistent with civilian rules, so that assailants cannot escape justice for crimes they have admitted to committing.



Provisions strengthening the Special Victims' Counsel (SVC) program by expanding eligibility for the program to Department of Defense civilian employees, ensuring victims of sexual assault are quickly informed of their right to an SVC, and empowering SVCs to assist survivors with communications to the Inspector General or with Congress.

Pro Bono Network

Founded in 2013, Protect Our Defenders' Pro Bono Network is the only program in the country providing free legal services specifically for survivors of military sexual assault and harassment. Active duty service members, veterans, and U.S. civilians living across the country are able to access legal assistance and case support for the often traumatizing and complex legal and professional issues related to their assaults. This year, we expanded our services to civilians, including military dependents, who have been assaulted by service members and find themselves navigating the broken military justice system with little support and few resources.

In 2015, **255 survivors requested assistance from POD**. Of these, **195 survivors completed an interview** and **119 survivors received case assistance**, often including victim legal representation for the military justice process, protection from retaliation, discharge record corrections, and assistance with receiving needed health care.

Case Examples * All cases have been shared with permission of the survivor and names have been changed to protect privacy.

"I just wanted to send an email and thank you for the support during this final stage of the AF process. I especially want to thank you for connecting me with [PB Attorney]. I could not have gotten through last week without his support and help."

- Jennifer

Jennifer, a civilian, was raped by an airman. When she contacted POD, the military had just completed an Article 32 preliminary hearing to determine if there was enough evidence to go to trial. POD helped Jennifer obtain a copy of the Article 32 report, and we connected her with a military expert to review the report and explain the military's decision not to court-martial her assailant. The Air Force then held an administrative hearing to determine if the accused should be discharged. POD connected Jennifer to an attorney to represent her during these proceedings.

"If it were not for Protect Our Defenders, I would not have been able to go up against the [Army criminal investigators] nor would I have been in any way able to utilize attorneys with such experience in a case like mine. My fear level was minimized greatly for having [your] support staff talk me through my concerns. [You] also helped me gather the strength to continue my fight for justice... I am forever grateful to POD."

- Erica

Erica, a former civilian employee of the Department of Defense, was physically and sexually assaulted by her supervisor, an Army officer. After Erica contacted a Congressional office for help getting case documents for an upcoming restraining order hearing, Army investigators all but stopped communicating with her. POD found Erica an attorney team to represent her during criminal proceedings against her assailant. When the Army informed Erica they would not be prosecuting, these attorneys pressed the Army for more information and have advocated for the military to hold her assailant accountable. POD has also connected Erica to both local services and a second pro bono attorney to help her with the restraining order, which her assailant has appealed, so that Erica and her family are able to remain safe.

"Due to the fact that you found me an attorney, pro bono, who was willing to help me with my discharge review board for the U.S. Army, WE HAVE WON... Thank you from the deepest places in my heart for finding me an attorney."

- Steve

Steve, an Army veteran, was sexually assaulted twice while serving before being discharged for a wrongfully diagnosed personality disorder. This diagnosis appeared on Steve's discharge papers, hurting his employment chances. The diagnosis also did not qualify him for disability benefits, as the military considers a personality disorder a "pre-existing condition" unrelated to the assaults. Since then, he has been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to the assaults. When Steve contacted POD, he had already attempted to apply to the Army Board for Military Corrections (ABCMR) in order to remove the personality disorder diagnosis from his discharge paperwork. As in the majority of such cases, he was denied. POD found an attorney to help Steve appeal this decision free of charge, and was successful in getting the errant diagnosis removed from his discharge. Through creative and dedicated legal representation, Steve's attorney was successful.

A close-up portrait of a man with short, dark hair and a goatee, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark blue button-down shirt over a light green t-shirt. The background is dark and out of focus.

American veterans **visited**
the VA **1,027,810** times for
Military Sexual Trauma in
one year alone.



**Protect Our
Defenders**

Heath, USN, Survivor

VHA MST Screening Data, FY 2013 Summary of MST-Related
Outpatient Care, Department of Veterans Affairs.

www.protectourdefenders.com

Expanding Our Network of Attorneys



On June 16, 2015, Protect Our Defenders partnered with two top law firms—Arnold & Porter LLP and Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer LLP—to lead a national training for attorneys interested in representing survivors of military sexual assault in five cities: Washington, DC, New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Denver.

POD developed this training to meet the continuing demand for pro bono legal services among survivors of military sexual assault. The training included an introduction to the military justice system, an overview of military victims' rights, how to protect and enforce these rights, and an explanation of additional military processes that impact victims, such as the often retaliatory administrative discharge process.



Ryan Guilds (above), at PBN attorney training.

"We know rape is not about sex. It's about taking power away from a survivor. [The attorney's] job is to give victims back that power. Success in a case...means that at the end of the day, your client believes that you fought for him or her, and that you gave them a voice in the process. You helped them along their journey from victim...to someone who survived and who does not have to let that event define them."

- Ryan Guilds, Counsel, Arnold & Porter LLP and POD Advisory Board member

"From the moment we learned of POD's work on behalf of sexual assault survivors, we were impressed and wanted to contribute. As general litigators, we knew our skills would be a great fit with POD's needs. POD provided us with customized training in military practice and procedure and has been a superlative and insightful resource during our representation of two very active cases that we have undertaken on referral from POD. We know from the grateful responses of our survivor clients (and from the attention the military has accorded us as survivor counsel) how important the work of POD is... We are delighted that Perkins Coie has added POD to its pro bono commitments and look forward to taking on additional survivor cases."

- Mary Rose Hughes, Partner, Perkins Coie and Donald Friedman, Partner, Perkins Coie

Research & Analysis

Members of Congress, stakeholders, and survivor advocates rely on Protect Our Defenders for fact-based analysis. POD analyzes and translates Department of Defense prevalence reports and Veterans Affairs research on sexual assault and harassment. We synthesize the results into fact sheets, educate the public and press on key findings, advise policymakers on implications for policies affecting active duty service members and veterans, and initiate and collaborate on major research reports.

Human Rights Watch Report on Retaliation

On May 18, 2015, Human Rights Watch (HRW), in collaboration with POD, released a report that was the result of an 18-month investigation. It found that women service members who report sexual assault are 12 times more likely to experience retaliation than to see their attacker convicted of a sex offense and that the military had done virtually nothing to hold those who retaliated against survivors of sexual assault accountable. POD provided general consultation throughout the investigation process, supplied subject matter experts, helped identify survivors to be interviewed for the report, secured survivors' consent in order to provide HRW access to pro bono case files and survivor databases, and reviewed and contributed feedback on the final report and policy recommendations. More than 150 survivors were interviewed through 255 in-person and telephone interviews.

The report would not have been possible without the many survivors who shared their personal stories in the report and those who traveled to D.C. for its release.



Survivors who were featured in the report joined POD and HRW at a joint press conference in Washington, D.C. and met with lawmakers on Capitol Hill and at the White House to push for action to end retaliation against survivors.



Miranda Petersen (center), POD Policy and Program Director, with survivors and Human Rights Watch staff, announcing the release of a new report on retaliation against survivors.

The report would not have been possible without the many survivors who shared their personal stories.



Ciera Bridges (above), was featured in the Human Rights Watch report and worked with POD to share her story with members of Congress. Photo Credit: Human Rights Watch

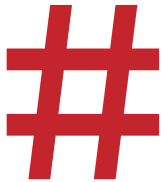
Education & Advocacy

POD trains survivors to speak with the press, their members of Congress, and at local events across the country. We work with an ever-growing community of survivors, families, and civilian advocates to develop calls to action and advocacy materials to educate the public.



Training

POD provides speakers for military trainings and community events on sexual assault. In 2015, Col Don Christensen spoke at an Army SHARP (Sexual Harassment/Assault Response Prevention) Summit at Fort Knox, KY. Christensen briefed Fort Knox leaders on issues impacting survivors of military sexual assault and about the responsibility commanders have to support survivors and prevent retaliation by both peers and superiors. Our mini-documentary videos featuring survivor stories and survivor advocates are also frequently requested for training purposes throughout the year.



#EndVictimBlaming

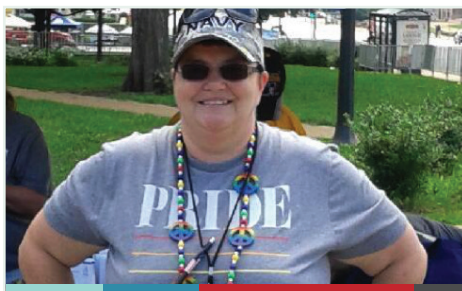
Throughout 2015, the Pentagon continued to attempt to discredit sexual assault survivors. While victim-blaming and other tactics have been frequently used over the years to question victims' experiences, this year, the Pentagon suggested that victims only think they are being retaliated against and that such "perceived retaliation" is a misunderstanding. In response, POD launched an #EndVictimBlaming campaign, calling on President Obama, who had just joined Twitter, to address the military's disgraceful attempts to smear victims. Hundreds of supporters tweeted a message to the President, asking him to take a stand against victim-blaming.

"I was assaulted, expected to be silent and just carry on... I spent years overcoming what happened. I couldn't understand the reprisal [that I faced] from the military, so I blamed myself and even doubted my sanity until I realized that reprisals happened to the majority of military women in my situation. The dialogue that was opened up by organizations like yours made a big difference... I've found the confidence again to be myself and keep moving. I was able to speak [publicly] and get in contact with Senators. Thank you for helping me to be heard as a full citizen."

- Name withheld to protect privacy

Advisory Board Survivor Advocates

We are forever grateful to the brave survivors who come forward to share their story to push for change and ensure that every survivor is treated with dignity and respect. Here are just a few whom we are honored to work with through our Advisory Board.



Terri J. Odom

US Army and Navy veteran and survivor of military sexual assault

Terri is a full-time volunteer veteran adviser with the VA St. Louis Health Care System. She conducts veteran outreach, trains VA staff to serve veterans more holistically, and speaks to troops before and after deployments. Terri writes blog posts for the POD survivor community throughout the year and fields requests for peer-to-peer support. She has been a steadfast leader of this movement since POD's founding in 2011.



BriGette McCoy

US Army veteran and survivor of military sexual assault

BriGette is a nationally recognized veteran advocate. BriGette founded a non-profit that connects and empowers the women's military and veteran community through electronic and mobile technology education programs. BriGette is the Veterans Affairs Commission Vice Chair for the City of Atlanta. She is also the recipient of the Inspiring Women Award from the WNBA Atlanta Dream. In 2015, BriGette hosted WVSJ's second annual National Empowerment Conference in Georgia, supported by POD. The conference combines professional development training with health and healing resources for women veterans.



Brian Lewis

US Navy veteran and survivor of military sexual assault

Brian is President and Co-Founder of an organization which supports men recovering from Military Sexual Trauma and is a member of POD's Advisory Board. Brian strives to bring attention and resources to male survivors, whose needs are too often overlooked. In October 2015, in partnership with Congresswoman Niki Tsongas (D-MA) and Congressman Mike Turner (R-OH), Brian helped organize a highly attended Congressional briefing on male sexual assault, where he spoke as part of a panel of survivors and experts. This hearing brought attention to the unique experiences of male survivors and the work still needed to address stigma and protect male survivors from retaliation.

"When I first shared my story of my rape and torture while serving in the US Navy, I was broken. I felt as though I had no path. But I am once again serving my country.... POD gave me support, vision and myself back...and my son sends his gratitude for me being alive today."

- Terri

Media

POD's continued presence in national, local, and social media keep the epidemic of sexual assault in the military and the need for fundamental reform in the spotlight.

POD has been featured in over 1,200 articles including major newspapers such as **The New York Times**, **The Washington Post**, **The Wall Street Journal**, **USA Today**, and all major broadcast news outlets including **NBC**, **ABC**, **CBS**, **NPR**, and others. POD has worked with the media on investigative reports, exposing scandals and diving deeper into cases that have brought the epidemic to light. We also continue to work closely with editorial boards to influence public opinion and award-winning reporters who have exposed this crisis to the American public.

The Washington Post

From today's available websites: Washington Post

Monday, Sunday 45/36 • Tomorrow: Partly sunny 58/69 DETAILS, C12

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2015

WashingtonPost.com • \$3

Scandals undermine Army's battle against sexual assault

Soldiers entrusted with key roles in the campaign to protect victims and punish offenders have themselves been accused of misconduct

BY CRAIG WHITLOCK

FORT STEWART, GA. — To mark the end of Sexual Assault Awareness Month in April, the 158th Infantry Brigade held a potluck luncheon here at the largest Army installation east of the Mississippi River. The deputy commander reminded his soldiers they were all "responsible for bringing an

ment," according to the brigade's Facebook account.

What most of the soldiers didn't know was that the deputy commander, Lt. Col. Michael D. Kepner II, was himself facing court-martial on charges that he had sexually harassed and assaulted a female lieutenant on his staff.

Despite repeated complaints

I truly thought the Army was better than this, to promote a sexual predator into such an important role

Lieutenant's sworn statement, explaining why she did not trust the

Kepner's chain of command violated Army rules and allowed him to stay in a leadership post for at least eight months while he was under criminal investigation, internal Army emails and memos show. He later pleaded guilty to some of the charges and is serving time in a military prison.

For the past two years, the Pentagon has acknowledged having a

sault in the ranks. Military leaders have promised Congress, the White House and their own troops that they are redoubling efforts to protect victims and punish offenders.

But those pledges have been undermined by a string of previously undisclosed cases in which soldiers entrusted with key roles in the campaign against sexual

December 20, 2015 Washington Post Excerpt.

On December 20, on the front page of *The Washington Post*, reporter Craig Whitlock took the military to task for continuing to protect and promote commanders who abuse their power and prey on people under their control in an investigative report, "In the war against sexual assault, the Army keeps shooting itself in the foot." Whitlock broke the story of a U.S. Army First Lieutenant who filed a report against her commander, accusing him of sexual assault and multiple instances of sexual harassment. Her Special Victims Counsel (SVC) had reached out to POD to help tell her story. During the investigation, the commander was promoted, allowed to participate in sexual assault prevention programs, spoke at a sexual harassment prevention luncheon, and supervised other sexual assault response coordinators. POD worked with *The Washington Post* for months to highlight the need for immediate reform:

"Don Christensen, president of Protect our Defenders, a victim-advocacy group, said the armed forces have hamstrung themselves by filling sexual-assault-prevention jobs with poorly trained personnel... The system shows that the military 'doesn't really take sexual assault seriously and just plugs somebody in without vetting them,' said Christensen, a retired colonel who served as the Air Force's chief prosecutor."

Days later, *The Washington Post* followed up with an editorial calling for an independent military justice system, stating: "If there ever is to be real progress, sexual assault crimes need to be removed from a chain of command that is more inclined to protect than prosecute wrongdoers."



Miranda Petersen, POD Policy and Program Director, speaks on CNN about the severe retaliation many survivors face after reporting a sexual assault.

Human Rights Watch Partners with POD on Report on Retaliation Against Victims

In May, at a joint press conference in Washington, D.C., Protect Our Defenders joined Human Rights Watch to announce the release of a report that found that service members who report sexual assault frequently experience retaliation that goes unpunished. The press conference and report was covered in nearly 50 separate news stories – both local and national media outlets, including CNN. *USA Today* said: “Punishment for those who retaliate, however, appears to be a rarity.”

Col Christensen was quoted in many of the articles: “Over and over, we hear from survivors that the retaliation was the worst part. They wish they hadn’t come forward.”

POD Policy and Program Director Miranda Petersen, who spoke at the press conference, said, “This report affirms what we see daily through our Pro Bono Network: Service members who face retaliation have nowhere within the system to turn and know that most likely no one will be held accountable. This leaves survivors with two practical options: either suffer in silence or leave the military.”



POD President Col Don Christensen (ret.) speaks at the National Press Club with survivors and their families.

Survivors Filed Lawsuit to Prevent Commanders From Handling Sexual Assault Cases

On March 31, survivors of military sexual assault led a lawsuit with attorney Susan Burke to stop the Department of Defense from putting commanders in charge of rape cases. POD President Col Don Christensen (ret.) joined the survivors and their families and spoke on a panel at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

The lawsuit also brought an unofficial Air Force songbook that glorifies sexual violence back into the headlines. In a *USA Today* article, Col Christensen said: “This is something that is used by Air Force officers today. These are the commanders who sing songs about raping women as fun. These are the people Sgt. Smith [victim] has to look to get relief, to get justice.”



POD President Col Don Christensen (ret.) on MSNBC discusses a songbook used in the Air Force that encourages rape and violence against women.

When Civilians Accuse Troops of Rape, Military Courts Often Decide

A story from NPR in April exposed how civilian survivors of sexual assault in the military are forced to navigate an unfair and ineffective justice system where they face intimidation, embarrassment, and hours of interrogation. In military courts, the many legal rights victims have in the civilian world do not apply, and these civilians have little to no support from the military during a trial. POD worked closely with the reporter, victim, and victim's mother featured in the story.

In the piece, Col. Christensen said, "The court-martial process is unlike any other criminal process in this country. It's confusing enough for military members who go through the process. But for a civilian who has no ties to the military, it is like entering another world."

POD connected NPR with Brittany Bentz, who was only a 16-year-old civilian when she says she was raped by a member of the United States Air Force. Brittany and her mother also were provided a lawyer through POD's Pro Bono Network.

Sen. Gillibrand Report on Civilians and Military Spouses

In May, Senator Gillibrand released a new report based on findings from the four largest military bases. **Her review found high rates of assault against civilian women and military spouses.** The fact that these two groups are not included in Pentagon surveys on sexual assault calls into question the true scale of the epidemic.

Col. Christensen issued a statement calling the report "shocking" and a "wake up call for President Obama."

Air Force Retaliates Against Victims' Attorney

Captain Maribel Jarzabek was a Special Victims Counsel (SVC) who posted comments on Sen. Gillibrand's Facebook page, expressing her support of military justice reform. The Air Force responded by opening a criminal investigation of Jarzabek for expressing "opinions online that could undermine public confidence in the Air Force," as revealed by The Washington Post.

POD President Don Christensen was quoted in the article: "It's clear that if you support the current system and you do

so publicly, then that's something that's considered praiseworthy and can get you promoted. But if you oppose it and say so, you'll get criminally prosecuted."

Stories like these "clearly show much more needs to be done" to improve the military justice system, said an Oakland Tribune editorial. The editorial continued: "Victims choose not to report for a wide variety of reasons, but one of the biggest ones is that they feel the justice system is stacked against them and that they will be put on trial instead of the accused."

Before Jarzabek started working with victims, she said, "I did not believe the 'Invisible War' stories. I did not believe that this was going on. I heard about it, but I didn't see it, I didn't believe it... Ruffle feathers, push boundaries, that wasn't my intention ever," referencing the Academy Award-nominated documentary, in a Washington Post op-ed.

Senate Votes on Military Justice Improvement Act (MJIA)

In May, The Washington Post published an editorial in support of Senator Gillibrand's Military Justice Improvement Act (MJIA), which would bring fundamental reform to the military justice system and put prosecution decisions into the hands of legal experts instead of commanders. This was just one of many top-tier editorial boards that supported MJIA in 2015.

From the editorial: "A number of retired military officials, including those with experience handling these cases, such as former Air Force chief prosecutor Don Christensen, agree on the need for fundamental change. **Mr. Christensen, now president of Protect Our Defenders, told us that the climate in which sexual harassment is seen as the norm won't change as long as decisions about prosecution are made by those who**

create the climate... Considering that zero tolerance was first promised in 1992 by then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, it's time to help fulfill that promise."

In June, a majority of Senators voted to create a fair justice system was blocked by a filibuster, but we gained important ground. Two Senators who previously voted against the bill voted yes this time, and three new Senators voted yes – demonstrating that it is only a matter of time before fundamental reform is passed.

Following the vote, Col Christensen wrote an editorial that appeared in The Huffington Post and other outlets that addressed how we can best protect victims and strengthen the military. "Regardless of commanders' almost complete failure to protect victims now, they do have the full ability to protect victims if they chose. The Military Justice Improvement Act leaves unchanged a commander's ability to order an offender into pretrial confinement, to restrict an offender's movements, to move an offender out of a work area, to stop abuse and retaliation of coworkers, to issue a military protective order to keep an offender from contacting or threatening a victim, and to ensure a victim is receiving the support she or he needs.

After the MJIA vote, more than 2,000 members of the POD's community thanked the Senators who voted for the legislation.

Social Media

In addition to making sure the viewpoints of survivors are accurately reflected in traditional media, Protect Our Defenders continues to organize advocacy through online campaigns to put pressure on our elected officials to investigate the epidemic of sexual assaults in our military and legislate fundamental reforms.

POD's Facebook page has nearly 22,000 'likes' and continues to grow. POD also has 25,000 subscribers to our e-news and over 2,000 followers on Twitter – where we are constantly engaging with reporters, elected officials, and other prominent voices in the advocacy community. POD's YouTube also has nearly half a million video views.

Congresswoman Jackie Speier Introduces Military TRAC Act



Congresswoman Jackie Speier (D-CA), speaking about military sexual assault at an event for Protect Our Defenders in Burlingame, CA.

In February 2015, Congresswoman Jackie Speier (D-CA) introduced the Military Track, Register and Alert Communities Act of 2015 (Military TRAC Act) with Congressman Mike Coffman (R-CO) and Protect Our Defenders President Colonel Don Christensen. The legislation would close a loophole that allows those convicted of rape and sexual assault in the military to return to civilian life without having to register as a sex offender.

Awards

Scripps won a Peabody for their "Under the Radar" series that investigated problems that occur when service members who are convicted of sex crimes re-enter civilian life. POD worked closely with Scripps during their investigation.

Journalist Steve Freiss received an LA Press Club award for his article, "The Military Has a Rape Problem—and It's Not Just Women Who Suffer." The report profiled Brian Lewis, a remarkable advocate and member of POD's Advisory Board, who testified before Congress about his assault and the retaliation he faced. We worked with Freiss extensively on the piece.

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright Joins Advisory Board



Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright

Dr. Albright said, "As someone who has the deepest respect and admiration for the men and women of the United States military, I am honored to join Protect Our Defenders' advisory board. I strongly support their efforts to give voice to service members who have been sexually assaulted or harassed and to ensure that our military justice system is impartial and effective. These crimes go against the core values of the armed forces. Eradicating sexual assault and harassment from our military will make it stronger and better, and I am proud to stand behind this cause."

Did you know? Last Year:



Over 20,000 American service members were raped or sexually assaulted at least 47,000 times



53% of of military sexual victims are male



86% of victims do not report the crime



62% of those who reported assault suffer retaliation for coming forward

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Protect Our Defenders
Headquarters: Washington, DC
info@protectourdefenders.com 202.733.5196
www.protectourdefenders.com

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