

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 15, 2013

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

Dear Secretary Panetta,

We both have recently had the pleasure of meeting with Lieutenant General Rich Harding, Staff Judge Advocate General of the Air Force, to discuss the Air Force's new Special Victims' Counsel Pilot Program. We were pleased to hear that the Air Force leadership agrees that providing victims of sexual assault access to legal counsel is a critical step in the process of creating an environment that encourages victims to report sexual assaults and holds criminals responsible.

During his briefing, Lieutenant General Harding explained the measures the Air Force is taking to meet the requirements established in the 2012 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), specifically to ensure the availability and delivery of legal services to victims of sexual assault. We were encouraged to hear the Air Force has created a Special Victims' Counsel Pilot Program within its JAG Corps. Lieutenant General Harding also informed me that he and his staff have developed business practice rules for the provision of legal assistance to victims, has already provided specialized training to 60 judge advocates in a 3-day course held in December at the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School, and plans to implement the Air Force Special Victims' Counsel Pilot Program no later than January 28, 2013.

We commend Secretary Michael Donley and Lieutenant General Harding for their effort and look forward to hearing of the progress and effectiveness of the pilot program as it is employed throughout the Air Force. As the Air Force implements and begins assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the program, I hope that you will not hesitate to contact me directly if there are additional ways in which Congress can assist.

We appreciate your attention to this issue and Lieutenant General Harding's efforts to ensure compliance within the Air Force. Additionally, I am extremely interested to know what steps the other Services are taking to ensure that victims of sexual assault have access to legal assistance services in accordance with requirements of the NDAA. Please have your staff direct any questions or concerns to Don Bergin, Director of Military, Intelligence and Foreign Affairs for Congressman Turner at Don.Bergin@mail.house.gov or (202) 225-6465; or Sara Outterson, Legislative Counsel for Congresswoman Tsongas at Sara.Outterson@mail.house.gov or 202-225-3411.

Sincerely,



Michael R. Turner
Member of Congress



Niki Tsongas
Member of Congress