

# Los Angeles Times

## Military sex assault victims' PTSD claims neglected, panel told

By Jamie Goldberg  
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WASHINGTON — Ruth Moore described herself as a "vivacious" 18-year-old serving in the Navy when, she says, a superior raped her outside a club in Europe.

After that, she attempted suicide and was discharged, diagnosed with borderline personality disorder — an ailment she says she did not have.

Moore applied for disability benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs but was denied multiple times — despite submitting witness testimony that she had been raped and subsequently treated for chlamydia. Finally, after decades, Moore won 70% compensation for the post-traumatic stress disorder, known as PTSD, and depression that had made her unemployable.

"This process took me 23 years to resolve, and I am one of the fortunate ones," Moore told a House Veterans Affairs subcommittee Wednesday. "It should not be this way."

The Defense Department estimates that more than 19,000 sex crimes were committed in the U.S. military last year, and just 14% were reported.

At Wednesday's hearing, Rep. Jackie Speier (D-Hillsborough) said that when victims reported sexual abuse they were often diagnosed with personality disorders and phased out of the military.

From 2008 to 2010, 32% of PTSD claims from veterans who were sexual assault victims were approved, compared with 53% of all other PTSD claims, according to the advocacy group Service Women's Action Network.

To receive disability benefits for PTSD, victims of military sexual assault must prove they have a current condition, provide a medical opinion from a doctor and prove that the attack occurred during their service.

Requiring victims of military sexual trauma to provide evidence of the attack is often difficult because they often don't report the assault when it happens and may not have records to verify their claims, testified Joy Ilem, a legislative director at the Disabled American Veterans advocacy group. Fear of retribution discourages them from coming forward, she said.

Thomas Murphy, director of compensation and pension service at the Department of Veterans Affairs said military sexual assault victims now could provide outside evidence to demonstrate their right to compensation.

And Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta announced in April that sexual assault complaints would be handled higher in the chain of command, so victims would not have to report the crime to a direct superior who may know — or even be — the perpetrator.

But military decisions remain inconsistent and many victims are denied benefits, experts said.

"It's rape mythology," testified Anu Bhagwati, executive director of the Service Women's Action Network. "It's this sort of unspoken feeling that women would make up that they were raped, assaulted or harassed."

Rep. Chellie Pingree (D-Maine) is sponsoring a bill that would allow victims of military sexual trauma seeking disability benefits to provide only a diagnosis of PTSD and an opinion from a doctor that an assault could have

caused the disorder.

"It's outrageous that men and women who sign up to defend our country end up being victims of sexual assault in the first place," Pingree said. "Then to deny them the help they need to recover is simply unacceptable."