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Klobuchar seeks help for military sex assault victims

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U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar said she will introduce legislation on Monday intended to preserve evidence and documentation of military sexual trauma, an effort to address one of the biggest issues facing the military as more women join the armed services.

The bill, which has strong bipartisan support, is designed to assist victims of sexual assault and trauma in the military who may not immediately report the case but seek benefits and treatment for it afterward. It also will allow research into sexual assault and harassment in the military, which is known as Military Sexual Trauma, or MST. In 2008, 21 percent of women tested by the military were found to have been the victims of MST.

"It's a small piece to make sure these things don't fall through the cracks," said Klobuchar, D-Minn. "These are things that

any civilian would expect, and it brings the military up to that same level."

There is no unified standard for maintaining evidence of sexual assault across the five branches of the military. In many cases records that include forensic material are destroyed in one to five years.

Klobuchar's bill would implement a unified method of record-keeping and ensure lifetime access by any victim, which could prove valuable in later submitting a Veterans Administration disability claim or preparing for a court proceeding. A record of a complaint could strengthen a future case, said Klobuchar, a former Hennepin County prosecutor.

Kim Wellnitz, who reported being raped while in the Marine Corps, said the requirement for maintaining permanent records might have kept her perpetrator from sexually assaulting two teenage girls after he left the service.

She joined the Marines in 2004. Her attacker was a corporal who received what she called a slap on the wrist: His rank was reduced, his pay was cut and he was required to do "hard labor," which amounted to picking up leaves and mowing grass. After he left the service,

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he was arrested in California, where he was accused of sexually assaulting two teenagers. Police said no one knew of his past, as he wore his Marine dress blues in middle schools and worked with troubled youth.

"If this legislation were in place and he would have got kicked out of the Marine Corps, at least the general public would have known," said Wellnitz, 25, who left the Marines three years ago and now works as a massage therapist in Mora, Minn. "It would be a great thing, and it might even help females who say, 'Why is this happening to me?' and be ready to speak out and not be ashamed of it."

The requirement to retain records permanently also would help MST victims qualify for benefits and obtain compensation for ailments such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Many MST victims don't come forward for years following their departure from the military.

"It's certainly not a fix, and it only addresses a little of the problem, but every little bit counts," said Trista Matascastillo, the head of the Minnesota Women Veterans Initiative Working Group, an organization that has focused on MST-related issues and the VA

system.

Klobuchar said the bill requires little in extra funding because the records already are kept digitally.

Support has come from both sides of the aisle. Republican Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Susan Collins of Maine agreed to sign on as co-authors, along with Democrat Claire McCaskill of Missouri.

"This landmark bill will ensure that the documentary evidence of Military Sexual Trauma is preserved to protect the right of Military Sexual Trauma victims to get the care to which they are entitled, and to hold the Defense Department accountable for their obligation to eliminate Military Sexual Trauma incidents in the armed forces," Murkowski said in a statement.

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