



## ABRAHAM LINCOLN CARRIER STRIKE GROUP PENNY PRESS

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### **A light amid the darkness**

By: Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Han A. Puyu

PHILLIPINE SEA — There comes a point in almost every person's life where they will encounter dark times, whether it be grief, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc. It's difficult, especially for those experiencing the aftershock of sexual assault, but there is always someone there to listen and help — acting as a light amid the darkness.

Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) is a Navy program that supports and provides guidance to sexual assault victims to help them recover from and move past their trauma.

The SAPR program aboard USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) established a structure dedicated to helping service members connect with resources aboard and ashore. Victim advocates (VA) are there to guide them along the way, even if the sexual assault occurred before or after military service.

Abraham Lincoln has 45 certified VAs, including 25 from embarked commands.

“This is not any ordinary collateral duty,” said Lt. Holly Murphy, the ship's administrative SAPR VA and the radiation health officer, referring to the responsibilities of being a VA. “Being able to provide emotional support is a highly sensitive position.”

VAs must have the emotional capacity to take on cases, understand the sensitivity of various situations, display maturity in times of need, empathize with service members and be knowledgeable of available resources.

“It could mean the difference between life and death,” said Murphy. “Somebody could not be receiving the right support, and it could escalate. We never want it to get to this point.”

Any unwanted or unconsented physical touch that is considered sexual in nature by a service member is considered sexual assault, according to Murphy. Sexual harassment is more about unwanted sexual language.

SAPR cases can lead to two types of reporting: restricted and unrestricted. Both types of reporting provide service members with VA support as well as medical and behavioral health support. They can get connected with a sexual assault response coordinator ashore, chaplains in the command religious ministries department, as well as Abraham Lincoln’s deployed resiliency counselor, Nandranie “Nan” Busjit.

Restricted reports allow only essential people to know about the case, providing the victim more privacy. On the other hand, service members who file for an unrestricted report are eligible for a military or civilian protective order, expedited transfer to another duty station and involvement in the investigation. However, more people may be informed about the case on a need-to-know basis.

Under the previous restricted reporting policy, service members were not provided an investigation nor allowed to talk to their chain of command. The new policy states that an investigation is allowed as long as the service member is not involved in the investigation, and service members still have the option to file a restricted report if they talked to their chain of command.

VAs inform service members of their choices of reporting, explaining each option's pros and cons, but it's always up to the service member to choose which type of report they want to pursue.

"Sexual assault victims had their choice taken away," said Cryptologic Technician Maintenance 1st Class Jennifer Martinez, a VA and ship signal exploitation space leading petty officer. "We are not trying to take it away again. We're trying to focus on whatever they need."

Murphy encourages service members to contact a VA prior to talking to anybody else.

"If it does lead to a report," said Murphy. "They still have the option to choose between restricted and unrestricted report."

Being a VA means being ready to assist anyone in need 24/7. For Machinist's Mate (Nuclear) 1st Class Hannah Johnson, a VA and dosimetry supervisor, she is ready to be pulled away at a moment's notice.

"If I'm being called away as a SAPR VA, someone needs my help at that moment," said Johnson. "It's very important that they are my top priority."

Although being a VA is a challenging duty, Martinez said helping service members is worth it. Martinez recalled one time she helped a Sailor go through a medical screening. She made some jokes to help the Sailor laugh and relax, and by the end of the night, the Sailor told her that she chose the right job.

Another integral part of SAPR is prevention. VAs encourage active intervention, previously known as bystander intervention, by watching out for each other if anyone sees something inappropriate.

“If you see something, say something,” said Retail Specialist 1st Class Demetrius Edwards, a VA and hotel services and laundry leading petty officer. “By stepping in, you could not only save someone’s career, but you could help someone’s life.”

The SAPR team helps spread awareness of sexual assault prevention and resources available through the program at command indoctrination classes, departmental training and special events.

Martinez also educates Sailors and Marines on sexual assault facts and encourage them to watch out if they see someone acting inappropriately.

“Preventing sexual assault is critical to the health and well-being of everybody on the ship,” said Murphy. “It affects more than just the victim or the perpetrator. It could affect everybody.”

To spread awareness for sexual assault and prevention month (SAAPM), the SAPR team will co-host a karaoke night and ice cream social with morale, welfare and recreation (MWR) on the aft mess decks, April 30 at 2000.