THE HOME
The Defense Department
Tessa Rosdahl's husband, an Army private, hit her. And every time Rosdahl sought help from the Army—like the time her husband punched her in the face, or the time he threatened her with a knife when she was nine months pregnant—she came up empty-handed.

It was a rough time. Rosdahl was in her early 20s and had young children. She and her husband were stationed in Germany, far from family and friends. "It didn't matter where I turned: the platoon sergeant, the chaplain, the military police," she says. No one gave her the help she needed. The chaplain warned her not to leave her husband, saying the violent man would get custody of the couple's three daughters. "The Army takes care of its own," he told her.

A counselor told her he would have to report anything she confided in him to her husband's commander. And when Rosdahl said she thought her husband's violence was linked to his alcohol abuse, the counselor responded: "Just let him drink." After one incident, the military police sent Rosdahl's husband to the barracks, where single soldiers live, but they sent him home the next day.

"When the military turns its back and sweeps the problem under the carpet, there's nowhere else to turn," says Rosdahl.

But the Defense Department is trying to do a better job of helping women in Rosdahl's situation. In fact, Defense is running the largest anti-domestic violence program in the United States. In November, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz issued a memo to service leaders saying, "Domestic violence will not be tolerated in the Department of Defense."

He called on military commanders to take action against perpetrators and to protect victims. "Domestic violence is an offense against the institutional values of the military services of the United States of America," Wolfowitz declared. "Commanders at every level have a duty to take appropriate steps to prevent domestic violence, protect victims, and hold those who commit it accountable."

The world's most powerful military was frightened into becoming a leading advocate for abused spouses by a January 1999 edition of 60 Minutes. The broadcast pronounced military families as much as five times more likely to be violent than civilian families. It charged the military services with neglecting the problem, stating that very few offenders ever face court-martial.

Congressional reaction was swift. The fiscal 2000 Defense authorization bill required the Pentagon to appoint a task force to come up with ways to solve the military's domestic violence problem.

Even without the bad press and the congressional mandate, the Defense Department had good reason for setting its sights on family violence. For one thing, domestic violence interferes with readiness, retention and morale in the ranks, whether the service members involved are abusers or victims. The military services espouse a deep belief in protecting the family. And because the Pentagon serves as doctor, landlord, employer, clergy, therapist, teacher, police officer, judge and almost everything else to 1.4 million service members and their 1.9 million dependents (about half of whom are spouses), the problems of family violence are shoved in its face every day.

Defense has had programs to help abuse victims and perpetrators since the early 1980s, but many find them inadequate.

Like Rosdahl, when Heather Morales (not her real name) was looking for help, she met roadblocks at every turn. Newly married, she and her husband, an Army corporal, were in Fort Polk, La., for a year. After a move to another duty station, the abuse started. He said she was fat and ugly, he punched her in the face, he tried to run her over with a car.

Morales called the military police, but they wouldn't take any action because they didn't witness the assault. Months later the civilian police arrested and charged Morales' husband with spouse abuse. After a week in jail, he was released into his commander's custody. Morales' husband was ordered to stay away from her, but the first night he was out of jail, he tried to break into her house.

Morales tried to get help from the Army's
mental health services, the military’s Family Advocacy Program, two chaplains, and more. “Nobody ever helped me,” she says. Her husband’s commander even witnessed one of the attacks, but beyond pulling the man off Morales, he took no action.

Last March, Morales, now 23, returned to her home state. But she’s not free of the terror of her husband’s abuse. He’s still in the military and still stalking her, Morales says. Her husband now has a new commander, who said to Morales, “As far as I’m concerned, he’s starting with a clean slate.”

TEARING DOWN BARRIERS
The Defense Task Force on Domestic Violence, made up of 12 service members and 1.2 civilians, convened in early 2000 to uncover—and tear down—the kind of barriers Rosdahl, Morales and others face. After a year of investigation, the task force released its first report in February 2001. The panel praised the military for the steps it has taken to combat domestic violence, but pointed out many areas for improvement and made more than 75 recommendations.

Advocates for abused women are skeptical about the task force and its report. The military has a long history, they charge, of ignoring victims’ needs. Christine Filiansen, executive director of the Miles Foundation, a private nonprofit organization, has worked with more than 7,000 survivors of abuse by service members since 1996. She says problems with the military’s response to victims are deep and systemic, and they won’t be easy to solve.

One major sticking point is the size of the problem. Some task force members and others who work on the issue insist the military domestic violence problem is no worse than that of the general population. Others think the statistics cited are basically sound, and that violence is rampant in military families.

All sides agree that active-duty service members and their families report 20,000 to 23,000 spouse abuse incidents every year and that the rate of substantiated incidents has remained fairly steady over the past five years.

What’s less clear is what those numbers mean. David W. Lloyd, director of Defense’s Family Advocacy Program, which serves families with abuse problems, is one of many who says that comparing civilian and military abuse rates is impossible: “It’s apples and oranges.”

The military’s statistics differ from those collected on civilians in several ways. First, the military only tracks incidents between spouses. That means any abuse involving dating couples, cohabiting couples, or people who used to date, live together but aren’t married is not counted. Second, civilian research doesn’t tally emotional abuse that occurs without physical violence, while the military does.

Also, the military does not look like America. Eighty-five percent of active-duty service members are men ages 18 to 35—the group at the highest risk of committing crimes, including physical violence, Lloyd points out.

If you control for demographic factors, the rates are “very close,” says Richard Heyman, a research associate professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, who has compared Army and civilian partner violence.

Heyman calls the “civilian versus military” angle on the issue “a sex one—but really a red herring. Sometimes the military gets heat when it is not deserved.” The Defense Department has funded some of Heyman’s research. “Does the military have a problem that needs to be addressed? Yes,” says Heyman. “Does it have more? It all depends on the perspective.”

Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-Calif., who led the crusade for a task force, subscribes to the theory that warriors may have trouble dropping the “might makes right” attitude when they get home. “We train the military to be combative,” says Sanchez, “so the personality may be a little bit more prone to violence than the average American.”

“NOT SOLDIER-LIKE”
Any amount of domestic violence is too much, in the eyes of Marine Lt. Gen. Jack Klimp, who until his June retirement was the military co-chair of the task force. “Domestic violence is not Marine-like. It’s not sailor-like, it’s not airman-like. It is conduct that is not acceptable from a member of the armed forces of the United States,” says Klimp, a veteran of Vietnam, Somalia and the Gulf War.

Klimp and the task force asked Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to declare war on domestic violence in the ranks with what they’ve dubbed “the mother of all recom-
wrote: "An unequivocal mendadons"—a zero-tolerance policy. In a letter to Rumsfeld accompanying their report, the task force members wrote: "An unequivocal statement from you will send a powerful signal throughout the department. It will make clear that this matter must be addressed decisively, judiciously and unwaveringly."

Touting the zero-tolerance strategy's success in reducing drug and alcohol abuse in the military, the task force sought a similar campaign on domestic violence.

When he was a commander, Klimp says, it wasn't uncommon for an officer to come to him in defense of someone in the unit who was in trouble and say, "But sir, he's a good Marine."

Klimp says, "Good Marines don't abuse their children, they don't abuse their spouses and they don't abuse their troops. And if they do do that sort of thing, they are not good Marines by my definition, regardless of how they perform in the field."

Wolfowitz's call for a crackdown on domestic violence in the military is a powerful acknowledgement of the problem and a strong statement against it, some task force members say. "Now there's no way to deny or minimize that there is a problem," says Debby Tucker, co-chair of the task force and director of the National Training Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence in Austin, Texas. Wolfowitz is "sounding the word out from the very top throughout the armed services," she says.

The task force found that service members at all levels—commanding officers, senior enlisted personnel, Family Advocacy Program staff, legal workers, and the police and medical providers who encounter victims right after violent incidents—say senior leaders should "publicly state their support for prevention of domestic violence, accountability for offenders and support for victims."

In addition to the call for zero tolerance, the task force made more than 75 proposals to prevent family violence and improve intervention. Some of its key suggestions fall into two areas: confidentiality and offender accountability.

**RETRIBUTION RISK**

Many abuse experts say the military's family violence problem is larger than the numbers indicate: As formidable as the barriers to reporting abuse are in the civilian world, they are in some ways worse for service members and their families.

 Civilians can confide in clergy, lawyers or therapists and be confident their secrets are safe. Not so for those in the armed forces, nor for their spouses or children. In fact, if someone reports abuse to the Family Advocacy Program, to the military police or to other installation service providers, the service member's commanding officer will be told immediately.

The military requires such reporting because commanders are responsible for the safety and well-being of those under their commands and their families. Commanders are "charged with the responsibility to maintain good order and discipline for all service members within [their] unit," according to the task force report.

The result can be devastating for victims. The military's lack of confidentiality discourages reporting of abuse and may put victims at greater risk, an April 2000 General Accounting Office investigation found (GAO/NSIAD-00-127). The Defense task force found that advocates for victims believe the requirement to report domestic violence to commanders "can result in the unintended consequences of putting the victim at increased risk of retaliation from the offender and/or reinforce the victim's sense of powerlessness and lack of control."

Instead, the task force urges, victims should have a say in how cases are handled. The military should provide for privileged communication with counselors and should reevaluate the mandatory reporting rule, the panel says.

**WHERE TO TURN**

> **DEFENSE TASK FORCE ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**
> www.dtic.mil/domesticviolence

Provides information on the task force and its 118-page report.

> **MILES FOUNDATION**
> (877) 570-0688
> http://members.aol.com/ht_a/milesfdn/myhomepage

A private nonprofit organization that provides services to victims of violence associated with the military. "Intimate Partner Violence and the Military: A Victim's Handbook" is available free to victims and survivors, $15 for others.

> **"MILITARY DEPENDENTS: SERVICES PROVIDE LIMITED CONFIDENTIALITY IN FAMILY ABUSE CASES"**
> (GAO/NSIAD-00-127)

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stalled at the Pentagon, awaiting Rumsfeld’s review. Some on the Hill were unconcerned, ascribing the delay first to the change in administration and later to the response to the Sept. 11 attacks. Others accused the Pentagon of foot-dragging.

When the report was finally transmitted in November, the Pentagon signed off on all but 11 of the task force’s recommendations and promised to begin work on them immediately. The task force’s second report was scheduled to be released the last week in February.

Despite the delays, a mood of optimism surrounds the military offensive against domestic violence. Given its role and its reach, the military is in some ways ahead of the private sector in combating physical abuse. Task force director Stein says the Pentagon’s history of forthrightly addressing other social issues—such as drug and alcohol abuse, equal employment opportunity, child care and drunken driving—give him confidence that this project will be a success.

Twenty-five years ago, Stein says, drunken driving got service members “a wink and a nod. Now, an offense has significant consequences for your career. I think we’ll see that kind of change in domestic violence. It goes against the institutional values of the military.”

Co-chair Tucker cites the military’s record in dealing with racism in the ranks. The department recognized that it couldn’t change people’s thinking or attitudes, but made it clear that “behavior toward others cannot be discriminatory,” she says. The military learned that “If you act as if you respect people from other cultures, your values and attitudes and beliefs will catch up with that.” A similar approach of policing abusers’ behavior while encouraging attitudinal change, Tucker believes, can work with domestic violence.

Observers say the task force’s work to date is just the low-hanging fruit. Many of the recommendations, such as the need for more and better training, are obvious. And they are more easily said than done. Most of what the task force is recommendi
ing, says Family Advocacy Program director Lloyd, “will not necessarily be easy, quick or cheap.”

The proof will come in the next year or so, when the task force considers domestic violence in military families overseas, follows up on implementation of its recommendations and puts together a comprehensive, strategic plan for combating domestic violence in military families.

“The result of our collective efforts should be military communities that are safer, more wholesome, and provide a quality of life for our men and women in uniform and their families that is free of fear,” the task force wrote to Rumsfeld.

Realistically, Stein points out, no system anywhere can prevent all domestic violence. “What we need to do is make the system as good as possible,” he says. “That way, if some domestic violence happens, people will understand that it is not because of the system, but in spite of it.”

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