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**Following Online Photo Scandal, Heller, McCaskill, and Ernst Propose Bipartisan Fix to Military Law to Better Protect Service Members**

**Washington, D.C.** – U.S. Senators Dean Heller (R-NV), Claire McCaskill (D-MO), and Joni Ernst (R-IA) introduced The PRIVATE Act – a bipartisan fix to military law to better guard against circumstances similar to the Marines United scandal earlier this year. The legislation creates a standard of conduct across all branches of the military.

“If members of our military fall victim to someone sharing their private information without their consent, they should have the assurance that their privacy rights are protected regardless of where they are serving,” **said Heller.** “The PRIVATE Act is a commonsense bill that bolsters privacy protection measures for service members who often cross state lines during duty, and it’s a positive step toward better addressing sexual exploitation.”

“The vast majority of our troops conduct themselves with the highest standards of honor and integrity, but for the few bad apples, we’ve got to make sure the punishment fits the crime,” **said McCaskill**. “And this kind of degradation and intimidation of servicemembers—whether online or in the barracks—is a serious crime that threatens the good order and discipline that makes our military the greatest in the world.”

“Sexual assault, disgusting online activity, and illegal photo sharing are issues that plague society as a whole. However, certain servicemembers’ online activity that has surfaced in recent months utterly fails to meet the high standards of integrity and faithful service to which we hold those who wear our nation’s uniform,” **said Ernst**. “Through this legislation our military can hold bad actors accountable, and take important steps forward toward changing the culture and making clear that sexual assault or harassment of any kind will not be tolerated - period.”

Earlier this year, an investigative journalist and Marine veteran exposed a series of nude posts of female service members online in the Facebook group “Marines United” – in which Active Duty and Reserve service members posted degrading comments and shared nude photos of fellow service members online. Additional nude photo sharing sites were also uncovered, and reports suggest the horrific activity was carried out by members in each service branch.

In spite of this scandal, The Department of Defense’s [Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military](http://sapr.mil/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=110) released last month showed a continuation of the trend demonstrated since an historic overhaul of the military justice system—a further drop in incidents of sexual violence, combined with an increased willingness of victims to come forward.

The report shows a nearly 27 percent decrease in incidents of sexual assault and an increase in the number of victims coming forward to report crimes. The Pentagon’s report also estimated in 2016, 14,900 servicemembers experienced a sexual assault, down 27 percent from approximately 20,300 in 2014. The report also showed a 1.5 percent increase in incident reporting from 2015 to 2016, with 6,172 reports filed last year.

The last Fiscal Year Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, for 2014, which measured both reporting and incidents, showed that incidents of unwanted sexual contact dropped by 29 percent from 2012 to 2014. The total number of reports (restricted and unrestricted) went up 11 percent from 2013 to 2014, and up 70 percent from 2012.

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