

Plan B

Servicewomen Can Serve Our Country, But Have No Rights to Emergency Contraception

by Gaea L Honeycutt

In April, Representative Michael Michaud (D-ME) led a bi-partisan group of representatives to introduce the Compassionate Care for Servicewomen Act (HR2064) as an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act. If passed, it will require all military bases to make emergency contraception available to servicewomen. Currently, the medication is stocked at the discretion of base officials. Although the amendment enjoys strong support from a number of members of Congress, the vote has been postponed. According to staff in Rep. Michaud's office, the vote coincided with the travel schedules of amendment supporters.

Emergency contraception, or Plan B®, prevents pregnancy if taken within 72–120 hours of unprotected sex, but cannot terminate a pregnancy. Last year, the FDA approved over-the-counter sale of Plan B to women aged 18 and over. In 2002, the Department of Defense approved availability of emergency contraception by prescription in all health care facilities. However, the decision was changed a few weeks later, leaving availability up to base officials. Since then, bills requiring the military to stock emergency contraception have been introduced in Congress, but have not passed.

The driving force behind HR2064 is the continuing increase in reports of sexual assault against servicewomen—rising by almost 24% from 2005 to 2006. There is debate over whether this is due to the increased number of servicewomen, to more reports, or to a combination of both. Regardless, members of Congress are concerned that women who defend our country must also defend themselves from fellow soldiers. Emergency contraceptives would be particularly valuable in preventing unintended pregnancy due to sexual assault.

According to a 2005 General Accountability Office report, women make up 16% (352,000) of the military forces. Although estimates vary, Columbia University Professor of Journalism Helen Benedict noted a 2003 study reported that 30% of servicewomen are victims of sexual assault. The danger to women is greater in combat zones, where they're told to take a woman buddy with them at night or to the latrines and showers.

In a March interview on Democracy Now, Dr. Benedict discussed her interviews with women veterans: "[T]he problem was that there often weren't other women to choose...or it entailed waking somebody up in the middle of the night...[T]he soldiers are working 12 hours a day on the whole out there. They're getting almost no sleep. They wake up all night long for one reason or another. So having to wake

somebody up because you need to go to the bathroom is not as light as it may sound."

The Department of Defense has developed policies addressing sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape. However, servicewomen do not enjoy the same protections and as civilian women. Their privacy is often violated, they are more likely to be subject to further harassment and retaliation, and assailants often receive non-judicial punishment, which keeps them off sexual offender lists.

To make your voice heard about the Compassionate Care for Servicewomen Act (HR2064), find your representative at <http://www.house.gov/> or call 202-224-3121 to be connected with your representative.

~Gaea L Honeycutt; freelance writer in Alexandria, VA.

The Genesis Project

A faith-based community and education initiative sponsored by the Virginia Housing & Development Authority

Homeownership Education Class

Sept 8, 2007

Zion Apostolic Christian Memorial Church - Petersburg, VA

Sept 15, 2007

St Paul's Baptist Church - Richmond, VA



For class registration and monthly schedules @ Richmond area participating churches, call (804) 648-4432.