

Dept. of Military Affairs: New Wisconsin Guard sexual assault response coordinator brings vast experience and passion for victim advocacy to position

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MADISON, Wis. — Tierney Twing, the newly assigned sexual assault response coordinator for the Wisconsin National Guard at Joint Force Headquarters, got her start in the sexual assault prevention field working with incarcerated survivors of sexual assault and harassment as a member of the Prison Rape Elimination Act Unit with the state Department of Corrections.

“This truly opened my eyes to how far rape culture reaches, and how one act of sexual assault can touch and alter every part of a survivor’s life,” Twing said.

Later, as the lead shelter advocate with a domestic abuse shelter in Madison, Twing had to triage competing needs for abuse victims and their families and learned the necessity for a safe space for survivors to process through their sexual assault. Most recently, as a sexual assault victim advocate with the Dane County Rape Crisis Center, she learned the entire process a sexual assault victim goes through, and how that process changes based on the survivor’s needs.

“No survivor’s process is the same,” Twing said. “Survivors need more than just support when reporting. Sexual assault affects all parts of a survivor’s life and those around them. Knowing local resources is a huge part of making sure each survivor is equipped with as much support as possible.”

In her current position, which she began in May, Twing seeks to empower survivors to reach out to the sexual assault prevention and response program for consistent and effective advocacy through survivor-led decision making.

“My role is to promote a culture free of sexual assault and retaliation through prevention, education and survivor support,” Twing explained. “Getting there is a task that involves every single person in our community.”

“Over the next year our goal is to address rape culture,” she said. “This starts by acknowledging that we currently, in 2020, have a problem with the way we talk about sex and sexual assault. The way we address survivors needs to change, and to do this we need to weave conversations about sex, consent, and assault into our daily lives. Our office will do just that by addressing a new topic each month and starting a conversation about how sexual assault connects to that topic.”

Twing said the recent complex investigation into the Wisconsin National Guard’s sexual assault prevention and response program offers a unique opportunity to refocus the culture within the Wisconsin National Guard.

“Since starting in my role, I have seen nothing but 100 percent investment from personnel in listening to survivors and taking a hard look at what may need to change,” she said. “I would like to say directly to survivors, your voices will be heard and all of your feelings of frustration, anger, and sadness are valid.”

Twing said the goal for the sexual assault prevention and response program is to earn the trust of everyone in the Wisconsin National Guard and become a safe place for survivors to seek support, as well as be a source of education for the organization. The immediate focus is to enhance and streamline the prevention training and response resources.

Response from the program can mean something different to each survivor, she said. Whether the survivor chooses to participate in the criminal justice system or not, the main goal is allowing the survivor to make every decision possible. During a sexual assault the survivor’s choice is taken away so it is the program’s responsibility to reinforce and empower their right to choose.

“We will be working closely with survivor reporting options to ensure that if or when a sexual assault is reported, it is handled with appropriate trauma-informed guidelines,” Twing said.

She said she takes the responsibility to support all survivors through potentially one of the worst events of their life seriously. Progress will be monitored during the transition period to ensure a victim-centered approach is maintained throughout the process.

“We will continue to push ourselves to do better each and every day,” Twing said. “Creating a culture where survivors feel safe to come forward to report and/or seek services to support their healing is 100 percent possible, but it takes the daily vigilance of every single person within the Wisconsin National Guard.”