Improving Tools for Preventing and Responding to Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the U.S. Antarctic Program

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**Information Paper Submitted by the United States**

***Summary***

The U.S. Antarctic Program (USAP) consists of a range of research environments – from deep field camps to more populous stations with participants from many institutions and organizations. These diverse situations and populations present unique challenges for preventing and responding to sexual assault and sexual harassment. Recently, USAP enlisted subject matter experts to assess the current state of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the USAP Community. The assessment concluded that sexual assault, sexual harassment, and stalking are ongoing, continuing problems for our deployers. Since receiving the report, NSF has launched a broad, strategic effort to strengthen prevention and response tools not only for USAP but also for all research locations where work is funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF).

***Background***

NSF has Agency-wide policies and requirements to promote research environments that are free from sexual assault and sexual harassment. In 2018, NSF published its expectations for the [community](https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/issuances/in144.jsp). A major component of this notice was the establishment of [new policies](https://www.nsf.gov/od/oecr/harassment.jsp) requiring scientific grant awardee organizations to report when Principal Investigators (PI) or Co-PIs working on NSF-funded research are placed on administrative leave; PIs or Co-PIs are subjected to administrative actions as a result of investigations of sexual or other forms of harassment; or there are findings or determinations by the organizations that PIs or Co-PIs engaged in sexual assault, sexual harassment, or other forms of harassment. In addition, NSF established a secure [online portal](https://www.nsf.gov/od/oecr/notification_form.jsp) for awardee institutions to submit harassment notifications. At the same time, NSF’s Office of Polar Programs took additional steps in the form of strengthening the language in the [Polar Code of Conduct](https://www.nsf.gov/geo/opp/documents/policy/polar_coc.pdf) and increasing communication on harassment issues and reporting mechanisms through briefings, training, and postings at stations and on vessels.

Building on these efforts, OPP enlisted external subject-matter experts in 2021 to examine sexual harassment and sexual assault in the USAP Community. Their findings and recommendations were detailed in the recently released [Sexual Assault Harassment Prevention and Response (SAHPR) Needs Assessment Report and Implementation Plan](https://www.nsf.gov/geo/opp/documents/USAP%20SAHPR%20Report.pdf). The Report presented both serious concerns and a clear path for improvement.

The Report’s key conclusions included:

* Multi-jurisdictional enforcement mechanisms across USAP create gaps that hinder response and prevention efforts;
* There is a lack of trust among the contractor community in their employer’s human resource organizations;
* Reporting and response mechanisms to NSF are inadequate;
* Prevention infrastructure, including training, clear mechanisms for reporting, and evaluation of the efficacy of training and reporting is lacking; and
* There is significant motivation within the USAP Community to engage in prevention efforts, despite currently insufficient opportunities to do so

***Immediate Improvements***

At the beginning of the 2022-2023 summer research season, NSF identified key action items through the [NSF SAHPR Action Plan](https://www.nsf.gov/od/oecr/docs/nsf-actions-to-prevent-sexual-assault-and-harassment.pdf). The Plan ensured that there was a cross-agency effort to address the immediate concerns highlighted in the Report. The highlights of that Plan included obtaining input from the community to inform NSF’ next steps, improving training, and providing additional resources for support, communication, and reporting.

NSF held seven in-person listening sessions at McMurdo Station that included 160 deployers. Another six listening sessions were held virtually, open to current and former participants. Additionally, NSF leadership held two town halls for the USAP Community on the research and working environment. Each of these engagements expanded NSF’s understanding about individual experiences regarding sexual assault and sexual harassment in USAP, and community members provided meaningful recommendations for improvement, some of which were implemented immediately. For example, additional training for supervisors was immediately provided, and other informational materials were distributed.

NSF also implemented more than 70 bystander intervention training sessions this past season that reached over 1,200 deployers.  Sessions focused on scenarios tailored to the USAP environment, and key messages from the training were reinforced throughout the season through message boards and emails.

NSF deployed a confidential, Victim Advocate for the first time this past season. The Victim Advocate was available to provide confidential support, safety planning, and advocacy to the USAP community on issues related to sexual harassment and assault. The advocate was based in McMurdo Station for the austral summer but available to any deployer by phone and email, and they continue to provide remote support to all deployers during the austral winter. NSF also added SAHPR intranet pages at the stations to provide easy access to key documents and contact information in one place, and the Victim Advocate contact information was added to the “emergency contacts” page on the intranet and on postings around station. The response from community members was positive.

To increase NSF’s oversight of incidents of sexual misconduct, changes were made to contract terms for the USAP operations contractor to include additional reporting on contractor and subcontractor investigations of sexual misconduct, and additional criteria for screening potential employees on the contract.

NSF put in place some additional security measures, including increased satellite communication devices for all field teams, the addition of door viewers to all lodging rooms, and the ability for all lodging room doors to be locked from the outside as well as the inside at every station.

A new SAHPR Office was established at NSF to serve as a centralized communication point for sexual assault and harassment matters, ensuring issues are appropriately referred and providing access to resources and guidance to help prevent and address sexual assault and harassment.  The office is also responsible for ensuring the timely, appropriate, and transparent processing and resolution of USAP sexual assault and harassment complaints and reports. Individuals who wish to report sexual assault or sexual harassment can reach the NSF SAHPR Office via its secure inbox at [saferscience@nsf.gov](mailto:saferscience@nsf.gov). Individuals can also contact the NSF SAHPR Office with questions about or suggestions for NSF’s SAHPR efforts.

To combat challenges related to the many different employers and institutions involved in USAP, the SAHPR Office established executive-level points of contact at USAP federal and military partners in addition to existing contacts for academic institutions and contractors. This is to build collaborative relationships with all USAP partners and ensure clear communication as NSF continues to build upon the SAHPR program.

Recently, the SAHPR Office stood up a [24/7 crisis hotline](https://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=307199&org=OPP) for USAP participants to provide immediate crisis intervention and emotional support to survivors of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Services are available via phone, text, and online chat as an additional resource for the community.

***Path Forward***

Actions implemented to date are just the beginning and much work remains. Additional steps are planned in three main areas; continuing to expand and improve training, conducting an annual survey to establish incidence and prevalence baseline data, and re-evaluating NSF’s on-ice staffing posture.

The bystander intervention training provided last year was well received, and NSF is continuing to improve that content and roll out new courses. The current focus is on developing a supervisor “toolkit” that will include training in how to receive a complaint of sexual misconduct, how to include SAHPR-related messages in pre-job safety meetings, and how to develop an individual safety plan when necessary.

While the 2021 Needs Assessment Report provided important information, it was not designed to pinpoint the incidence or prevalence of sexual misconduct across USAP. To measure the impact our SAHPR efforts have on the USAP Community, we need a baseline against which to monitor. A detailed survey has been developed for this purpose, and it will be implemented in July and August for input from current and former deployers.

The SAHPR Needs Assessment Report and feedback received during subsequent listening sessions indicate a need for NSF to increase its on-site presence at our Antarctic stations. Over the years, the number of deployed NSF federal staff has decreased to a level that does not provide adequate engagement with and oversight of station operations. In addition, our law enforcement capabilities across USAP have always been limited and may need to be expanded. As the next season approaches, NSF is re-evaluating these two factors for potential future changes.