



Sexual Assault Prevention Summit Offers Multiple Tactics to Prevent Sexual Assault

JANUARY 21, 2015, WASHINGTON (AFNS) – Leaders in academia, government, and industry presented cutting-edge research related to sexual violence at the Sexual Assault Prevention Summit Jan. 13, 14, and 15 at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland.

Dr. Andra Tharp, Dr. Gilbert Botvin, and Dr. Dorothy Edwards spoke to 150 Airmen about sexual assault prevention models, as well as strategies to overcome prevention barriers and risk factors through life skills and effective bystander intervention and training.

The speakers represent the many leaders and experts who presented current research and perspectives to participants during the five-day summit designed to engage Airmen of varying ranks and career fields in a conversation about sexual assault in the Air Force.

“Sexual violence is a significant public health problem,” said Tharp, a health scientist in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Division of Violence Prevention. “It really does have a ripple effect through individual lives and through an entire community.”

According to Tharp, a public health approach to sexual assault prevention includes defining the problem, identifying risk and protective factors, and developing effective strategies to stop sexual violence before it starts.

Sexual violence and related problem behaviors are the result of the complex interaction of risk factors, such as alcohol and drug use, poor decision making, peer pressure and media influence, said Botvin, a Ph.D. at Weill Cornell Medical College.

“There is no single cause of violence,” Tharp emphasized. “It’s the confluence of risk factors that causes violence.”

Edwards, the executive director of Green Dot Etcetera said the external risk factors are compounded by individual barriers to taking action. Every person has their own personal barriers to overcome, such as shyness or fear.

Successful prevention strategies will leverage protective measures, such as emotional health, empathy and connectedness to offset risk factors, Tharp said. Comprehensive approaches will impact individuals to communities for a “surround sound effect.”

Botvin expressed that each intervention designed to offset these external and internal risks should be developed to impact attitudes, knowledge and behaviors. The life skills approach decreases vulnerability to risks by bolstering social skills, teaching self-management, and increasing resilience.

“We do not assume that people know how to cope with stress and anxiety, and we provide them with specific skills,” Botvin said. “The skills I’m talking about are not taught in any systematic way. All of us kind of blunder through life, learning some of these things if we’re lucky.”

All the speakers agreed that an effective sexual violence prevention strategy will be multi-faceted. There is no single magic bullet that will work. Consequently, each of these strategies will only be effective if Airmen own the process.

“There is no policy, order or directive that can force an Airman to find some way to step in and do something,” Edwards said. “Prevention only works, we’re only going to get where we want to be, if we can engage intrinsic motivation.”

Throughout the summit, Airmen took the information from each session and applied it in working groups designed to create tools to help the Air Force prevent sexual assault.

As they tackled the significant issue with lots of new information, Airmen were warned against falling into the trap of taking on too much at once.

“Don’t sacrifice depth for breadth,” Tharp said. “Choose a few key risk factors or a few key approaches and really invest in those to get things started.”