

In the wake of hearings, Maine soldiers finally have hope for reform at national guard

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by **Callie Ferguson**



Rebecca Cornell du Houx (left) and Brittany Smith are both part of a group of current and former Maine National Guard members speaking out about the organization's poor handling of recent sexual assault cases. Credit: Troy R. Bennett / BDN

If you or someone you know needs resources or support related to sexual violence, contact the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault's 24/7 hotline at 800-871-7741.

On Wednesday, a panel of lawmakers called for state and federal agencies to investigate the Maine National Guard's handling of sexual assaults, including a probe that could lead to criminal charges for offending soldiers. They also backed other measures to better support survivors.

It marked a hard-fought victory for female soldiers on the Army side of the organization, who have watched guard leaders downplay or dismiss the problem for years.

Now, as state leaders are poised to enact reforms, survivors for the first time are cautiously hopeful about the future of the guard, but said that leaders still have a lot of work to do to build back soldiers' trust.

"We've had a major breakthrough," said Aleigh Suffern, a former sergeant who has spoken up about how a sexual assault cut short her promising military career, "but there is a long road ahead."

That breakthrough underscores the power of the spotlight to create change in institutions that have long resisted it, survivors said. That's especially true in a small state like Maine, where tight-knit communities can hamper effective oversight, and, within an institution like the National Guard, which few understand from the outside and rarely receives attention from politicians.

"A system should not be that enclosed," said First Lt. Rebecca Cornell du Houx, who is also a clinical social worker.

She and others said it's unlikely there would be political will to fix the guard if not for [a Bangor Daily News investigation](#) that exposed a [predatory culture](#) on the Army side of the organization last year. The series raised public awareness of the issue and gave survivors a collective voice that, behind the scenes, brought them together.

After the stories ran, survivors formed [a support group](#) at the Sisters in Arms Center in Augusta, which is run by Cornell du Houx, creating a more organized way to lean on one another as they navigated the aftermath of abuse. When the Legislature took up the subject of military sexual abuse last month, they felt less afraid to contact lawmakers and [tell their stories](#) in public because they knew they wouldn't be alone.

NATIONAL GUARD INVESTIGATION

- [How we investigated the Maine Army National Guard](#)
- [Lawmakers want to add criminal probe to review of sexual assaults in Maine National Guard](#)
- [Lawmakers hear 3 hours of testimony from soldiers who survived sexual abuse in Maine Guard](#)
- [Maine lawmakers call for National Guard probe under pressure from female soldiers](#)

Since the public hearing, "I have probably had, on average, four to five Facebook messages from a current guard member a day. They are hopeful too," said Sarah Cayia, who told lawmakers Friday that

she left the Maine Army guard in March 2021 to escape its “toxic world,” then listed examples.

She is now a sergeant first class in the Florida National Guard, as one of several women who left to serve elsewhere because of their treatment in Maine.

In addition to the Facebook messages, the guard also reached out to Cayia following her testimony, she said.

She is flying home to Maine next week to meet with Maj. Gen. Douglas Farnham, the guard’s adjutant general, to talk about her experience and share the concerns of other women, she said.

Survivors want the guard to try harder to prevent sexual violence and harassment before it happens, make access to mental health services more accessible, and ensure that soldiers who come forward aren’t retaliated against, to name a few.



Brittany Smith is part of a group of current and former Maine National Guard members speaking out about the organization's poor handling of recent sexual assault cases.

Whatever comes of this moment, former Staff Sgt. Brittany Smith hopes the guard becomes a safer place for anyone who puts on a uniform, not just women. It can be hard to be a minority in the guard's overwhelmingly white, male environment, she and others said.

But like others, Smith is waiting to see real change before believing it's here. After she went through the demoralizing process of reporting her own assault, she also offered to sit down with leaders and share her concerns. No one listened, she said.