

South Dakota National Guard

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Buddy Aid training recognized for excellence in sexual assault prevention

RAPID CITY, S.D. – Establishing an organization that is optimized to support and sustain the development, implementation, and evaluation of a comprehensive sexual assault prevention program can be a long-term undertaking. However one South Dakota Army National Guard soldier has made it her mission to not only develop an effective program but also create a culture change toward prevention in soldiers and units.

The training program is called Buddy Aid, and it aims to operationalize the response to sexual assault and build a culture where no victim walks alone. Developed by Maj. Bridget Flannery, SDARNG sexual harassment, assault, response and prevention (SHARP) master trainer, Buddy Aid is a basic soldier-skill training program that teaches a first responder-style approach to sexual assault.

“Sexual assault in the military is currently treated differently than other kinetic threats. This has left soldiers unprepared to respond when someone discloses that they’ve been the victim of sexual assault – and because sexual assault is a threat on- and off-duty, in combat and at home station, it is categorically the most likely threat faced by uniformed soldiers,” said Flannery. Buddy Aid operationalizes the response to sexual assault within the Army National Guard, meaning soldiers treat it like any kinetic threat from any adversary.

“Just like we train for medical first aid, all soldiers need to know their ‘actions on contact’ for someone who has just disclosed having been sexually assaulted,” Flannery said.

“Buddy Aid is the right training to ensure we absolutely take care of soldiers,” said Brig. Gen. Michael Oster, assistant adjutant general of the SDARNG. “It addresses the uncomfortable truth that we may very well have to deal with the aftermath of sexual assault, because the enemy gets a vote, and like any type of first aid, we want to make sure our soldiers are prepared to render immediate and effective care.”

Buddy Aid has become so effective, it received the National Guard Bureau’s 2020 Promoting Excellence in Prevention Award for its comprehensive and innovative approach.

Flannery, a unit victim advocate for 15 years, first developed Buddy Aid in 2013 while serving as a tactical intelligence officer, and as her unit’s unit victim advocate in Afghanistan. Understanding how well-prepared soldiers were to respond to different types of enemy attacks, she came to appreciate how differently sexual assault and other threats were treated. To mitigate the threat, they needed to first recognize and then treat sexual assault like a kinetic threat, like all other threats faced on the battlefield.

“Predators and adversaries seek soft targets, and this training prepares soldiers at all levels to present hard targets by destigmatizing the conversation around sexual assault and by incorporating sexual assault into daily operations,” Flannery said. “Buddy Aid helps to shrink predators’ hunting grounds within our formation.”

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Buddy Aid is a one-hour course designed for soldiers of all ranks. Flannery also built a Train the Trainer program to insure quality of implementation throughout units.

Because of its innovative approach in treating sexual assault like any other kinetic threat, Buddy Aid negates the training fatigue that can sometimes accompany soldiers attending a ‘mandatory’ sexual assault brief.

“Buddy Aid changes the conversation about sexual assault,” said Flannery. “It’s built on the premise that when we talk to Soldiers in a language they understand – an operational, tactical language – they’re able to respond with a mission-oriented, muscle-memory mind-set. That’s good for readiness, and it’s good for the victims in our ranks.”

After receiving the training, Flannery says soldiers recognize how sexual assault prevention and response is operationalized; by including it in deliberate risk assessments, battle drills, mission briefs, pre-combat checks, and incorporating scenario injects during field and staff training exercises.

“Operationalization of the sexual assault fight will positively impact readiness and retention,” said Flannery. “Fewer victims will leave our ranks when they recognize that the operating environment is safe to disclose, get help and report. And incorporating prevention and response into daily operations increases the likelihood that predators will hunt elsewhere.”

Upon returning from Afghanistan, Flannery continued her efforts to develop the first-responder style training. She began working with mental health professionals specializing in military sexual trauma, or MST, from the Sioux Falls VA Medical Center, the Sioux Falls Veterans’ Center and full time SDNG SAPR personnel. In its earliest stages in Afghanistan, convoy commanders, company commanders and first sergeants also provided key inputs that informed Buddy Aid’s methodology, said Flannery.

By 2014, Buddy Aid training was validated with the support of mental health professionals and began to see implementation in SDARNG units. Since then, Flannery has continued to train SDARNG units and multiple Regional Training Institute classes, impacting Army National Guard units nationwide.

In 2019, the National Guard Bureau’s Warrior Resilience and Fitness Innovation Incubator selected Buddy Aid as one of their eleven inaugural projects, and the Institute for Defense Analyses recognized it as a promising practice on the continuum of evidence of effectiveness. The Buddy Aid Train the Trainer course is now being offered to National Guard victim advocates nationwide.

Brig. Gen. Oster, who also served as the battalion commander in Afghanistan when Buddy Aid was in its infancy, said he is excited about the nationwide application of the training.

“In my experience, the impact of this training is the provision of immediate care which increases the likelihood of recovery for victims and in some cases, saves lives,” said Oster. “Buddy Aid’s candid approach creates an environment where people feel safe to get help. I’ve seen first-hand the climate-change this creates in a unit, and that’s certainly good for the victims we serve alongside. It’s also good for readiness. If we have the opportunity to get this in front of every formation in the country - we should seize that opportunity.”

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210302-Z-BN267-0002: Maj. Bridget Flannery, South Dakota Army National Guard SHARP master trainer and developer of Buddy Aid, leads eight Army National Guard victim advocates through training on the program, which is designed to help respond to sexual assault, March 2, 2021, at the State Military Reservation in Virginia Beach, Virginia. With the support of the Warrior Resilience Fitness and Innovation Incubator, Flannery is building a bench of trainers to disseminate Buddy Aid Training across the National Guard. (U.S. National Guard photo by Cotton Puryear)



210302-Z-BN267-0001: Maj. Bridget Flannery, South Dakota Army National Guard SHARP master trainer and developer of Buddy Aid, leads eight Army National Guard victim advocates through training on the program, which is designed to help respond to sexual assault, March 2, 2021, at the State Military Reservation in Virginia Beach, Virginia. With the support of the Warrior Resilience Fitness and Innovation Incubator, Flannery is building a bench of trainers to disseminate Buddy Aid Training across the National Guard. (U.S. National Guard photo by Cotton Puryear)



210302-Z-BN267-0003: Maj. Gen. Timothy P. Williams, the adjutant general of Virginia, presents a coin to Maj. Bridget Flannery, South Dakota National Guard SHARP Master Trainer and developer of Buddy Aid, March 2, 2021 at the State Military Reservation in Virginia Beach, Virginia. The training on “Buddy Aid – First Response to Sexual Assault” was sponsored by the office of the Virginia National Guard Sexual Assault Response Coordinator and included a combination of military and civilians from National Guard Bureau’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, Delaware, Maryland, Tennessee, Washington, D.C., and Virginia. (U.S. National Guard photo by Cotton Puryear)

FOR MORE INFORMATION, please contact the SDNG Public Affairs Office at (605) 737-6721 or e-mail ng.sd.sdarnng.list.pao@mail.mil