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Alaska National Guard civilian earns national award

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska —

An Alaska National Guard civilian was awarded the 2018 Department of Defense Exceptional Sexual Assault Response Coordinator of the Year Award.

The award recognizes the dedicated individuals responsible for the needs of victims and leading command prevention efforts, and is presented annually to recognize one SARC within each of the six military components.

Nicholas Gonzalez, the Joint Forces Headquarters SARC for the Alaska National Guard Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program was named as the National Guard Bureau awardee.

“I am truly humbled by receiving this award,” said Gonzalez. “It is an extreme honor not only for me, but for the entire AKNG SAPR program. The work I did that earned me the nomination for this award could not have been possible without the assistance of my victim advocate coordinator, [and] our incredible Army and Air victim advocates who truly make our program great.”

As the SARC, Gonzalez provided overall program management for the AKNG SAPR program as well as management, training and certification of over 35 victim advocates. He also provided direct victim advocacy when needed.

“He is a skilled first responder, able to provide comfort and support to any client regardless of gender, stature, race, religion, rank or other background,” said Octavia Thompson, the state family program director.

Alaska has its own unique difficulties to overcome, and that is also true for sexual assault prevention and response. Dealing with the physical size of the state and the distribution of armories within it creates a constant challenge.

“The largest hurdle to overcome was ensuring that our service members drilling in outlying areas have access to resources in the event an incident occurs,” said Gonzalez.

To respond to this challenge, he created a plan to ensure victim advocates are located in all remote areas of Alaska by the end of 2018.

Gonzalez started the process of increasing the footprint of the SAPR program by seeking assistance.

Community engagement allowed Gonzalez to network and foster relationships with community partners, thereby increasing services offered to victims and providing training opportunities for victim advocates.

Gonzalez credits much of his success to effectively marketing the SAPR program, which he says resulted in increased awareness of reporting options, increased trust in the program and initiated an overall change in the culture of the Alaska National Guard.

Under his leadership, SAPR Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts were created.

“Internally, we have been able to reach so many more people through our own Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages than we could reach by face-to-face visits,” said Gonzalez. “This has assisted in providing education and training, increasing awareness and encouraging prevention.”

Social media has helped develop lines of communication that the SAPR program, victims and the community did not previously have. Despite the advantages of using social media, it is not the only avenue for positive change.

“Do not be afraid to have and use a voice that differs from the majority,” said Gonzalez. “On-the-spot corrections, intervention and open dialogue about potentially offensive behaviors are what will change the culture of the Alaska National Guard, creating a more positive environment for all its service members, civilians and family members.”

In addition to his full-time civilian job as the SARC, Gonzalez is also a staff sergeant serving with the 207th Multi-Functional Training Regiment.

Gonzalez enlisted in the U.S. Army in 2008 as an active duty paralegal specialist. During his time in that role, including two deployments to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Gonzalez worked with perpetrators and victims of violent crimes.

“Working closely with victim witness liaisons and special victims' counsels peaked my interest in focusing specifically on victim support and recovery,” said Gonzalez.

Prior to becoming the JFHQ SARC, Gonzalez temporarily filled the role of JFHQ victim advocate coordinator.

“When you work with a person who has experienced trauma, at many points throughout their recovery the future can look pretty grim for them,” said Gonzalez. “What makes my job worthwhile is seeing those individuals embrace their resilience, overcome adversity and go on to do great things. This is the highest level of reward you can receive in this line of work.”

If you feel you are a victim of sexual assault, harassment or unwanted sexual contact please call the AKNG SARC at 907-854-1899 or the Safe Helpline at 877-995-5247.

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PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.

2. **Flickr link** includes an event album with the complete selection of full-resolution, free downloadable images. (May not be accessible from all military computers.)

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/42087886124/in/dateposted-public/>

3. **DVIDS link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.) <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/281031/alaska-national-guard-civilian-earns-national-award>



Nicholas Gonzalez, the Joint Forces Headquarters sexual assault response coordinator for the Alaska National Guard Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program (SAPR) was named as the 2018 Department of Defense Exceptional SARC of the Year for the National Guard Bureau. "It is an extreme honor not only for me but for the entire AKNG SAPR program," said Gonzalez. (Courtesy photo by Nicholas Gonzalez)