

STATEMENT OF HOPE HERNANDEZ

CHAIRMAN WALTON: Ms. Hernandez.

HOPE HERNANDEZ: Good morning. I want to thank you all so much for your efforts. It means a lot.

My name is Hope Hernandez, and when I was 23, I was raped by a corrections officer in a hospital ward of a Washington D.C. jail in 1997 while I was going through therapy withdrawal.

I started out in a rehabilitation facility, but I was sent to jail after my withdrawal symptoms got too severe. When I got to jail, there was so much noise at night I couldn't sleep. These women were fighting with each other and laughing it up until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. I think I yelled "I can't take this any more. I need to get some sleep," and they sent me to the psych Doctors, who decided I was a suicide risk.

I wasn't. I was basically very tired and very ill and dealing with all of these things that I didn't understand.

They put me in a paper jumpsuit in a large room by myself on the medical unit, where there were both male and female inmates. They put me on a lot of medications, and I ended up sleeping a lot. I was in a daze.

I had been begging for a shower for three weeks. Pardon me.

(Witness crying.)

Finally, at about 2:30 one morning, this guard came into my cell and said I could go take a shower. He had a towel and a fresh paper jumpsuit and some shampoo.

After being incarcerated for three months, you learned to do what the guards tell you to do. They tell you to squat, you squat. If they said go into that stall, you go into that stall. If they said eat now, I ate. I was very compliant. I had no desire to cause trouble and every reason to believe that I was being directed by trained professionals. That's the psychology of the incarceration. The guards have the power, and the inmates do not.

So when the guard who took me to the shower came in the middle of the night, I had no reason to suspect foul play. He led me to a separate room with locked doors that had its own bathroom and shower. He waited out in the hall. The light was hurting my eyes, so I turned off the light and got undressed.

He came in while I was in the shower. Before I knew it, he was standing in the shower stall having intercourse with me. I wasn't in a position to say no. In addition to being heavily medicated, it was 2:30 or 3 o'clock in the morning, and he had awakened me from a dead sleep. It was like I was on a 30-second delay.

Before I knew it, he was leading me back to my cell. I felt myself screaming inside, and I just

couldn't -- the sound wasn't making it out of my throat. As we passed, the night nurse was fast asleep in her office.

I slept through the whole next day, and the next night he did it again. He led me to a bed, and after he had finished he handed me a paper jumpsuit. I was putting it on and still had an arm and a breast exposed as the shift captain walked in. He had already pulled his pants up, but the shift captain saw it and asked him what he was doing. He said he was helping an inmate get dressed.

Later I told a nurse what had happened, and they took me to the hospital to do a rape kit. But the officer had used a condom. The rape kit came back and it was inconclusive.

The jail staff just kept saying that I was hallucinating. But I didn't hallucinate what happened in that shower or in the bed on the next night. I didn't hallucinate being raped. It was the shift captain who finally reported the officer and the rapes.

The guard was suspended, but nothing ever came of it, and, as far as I know, he's still working as a corrections officer.

What happened to me wasn't an isolated act. There was other sexual activity going on in this facility as well. I met a woman there who was impregnated three times in 11 years by inmates. Another woman was having a sexual relationship with a

guard in exchange for cigarettes or other outside contraband.

Although it's been eight years, I'm still suffering from the effects of that rape. On the one-year anniversary of this rape, I kept seeing the guard's face over me. I got so angry because I wanted to see something besides his face, I punched the wall so hard that I broke my hand.

I would get so sick thinking about it that I would throw up.

And my husband has tried to be intimate with me. All I could see was this guard's face flashing back in my mind, and I would become ill. People may think things like this only happens in other places, other countries, but this is happening in America's capital. This is happening to young women with low self-esteem who are arrested for the first time after being completely strung out and hopeless.

I don't want what happened to me to happen to anyone else. Please make our jails, detention centers and prisons safe. I ask you to do this so that no one, no matter how young, vulnerable or sick, ever has to go through the terrible experiences that I did.

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN WALTON: Thank you, Ms. Hernandez. We appreciate your strength in coming forward and giving us your unfortunate experience. It's troubling to me

knowing that it took place where I live. Thank you.