

National Gay and Lesbian  
**Task Force  
Action Fund**



Testimony of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Action Fund

For the Hearing:  
“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” Policy

***Committee on Armed Services  
United States Senate***

Room SD-G50  
Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Tuesday, February 2, 2010

Chairman and Members of the Committee:

We would like to thank the Senate Armed Services Committee for holding a legislative hearing on the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. On behalf of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force — the oldest national organization advocating for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people — we urge you to consider the swift repeal of this discriminatory and ineffective policy.

There are approximately 66,000 lesbian, gay and bisexual Americans currently serving in the U.S. Armed Forces and there are over one million gay veterans. The “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy should be eliminated because it contradicts our nation’s founding principles and undermines the country’s commitment to equal opportunity. In his State of the Union address last week, President Obama pledged to “... work with Congress and the military to finally repeal the law that denies gay Americans the right to serve the country they love because of who they are.”<sup>1</sup> We believe this change is long overdue. This policy mandates systematic discrimination and is the only federal law that requires the federal government to fire someone because of his or her sexual orientation. No American who volunteers to serve our nation in our time of need should suffer discrimination.

Not only does “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” discriminate against and jeopardize the livelihood of thousands of dedicated military personnel, it is also harmful to the military. We have already lost over 58 Arabic linguists and 800 other service members in critical specialties, such as medics who save lives and technicians who dismantle explosive devices, to this policy. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” discourages thousands of qualified Americans from entering and staying in the military and often forces commanders to discharge people they would rather retain, solely because they are found out to be gay, lesbian or bisexual. Recent estimates show that lifting these restrictions could attract an estimated 36,700 men and women to active duty service along with 12,000 more individuals to the guard and reserve.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, since its inception in 1994, the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy has cost the military between \$290 million and more than a half a billion dollars. The military spends an estimated \$22,000 to \$43,000 per person to replace those discharged under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”<sup>3</sup>

Public opinion on gays in the military has dramatically changed since the enactment of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” As early as 1999, a report released by the Policy Institute of National Gay and Lesbian Task Force shows that 70 percent of U.S. residents support the right of gays and lesbians to serve in the military, up from 55 percent in 1992. This figure includes 57 percent of self-identified conservatives, 70 percent of moderates and 91 percent of liberals. Recent polling shows that about 79 percent of Americans believe that gay people should be allowed to serve openly in the military.<sup>4</sup>

Our organization is also deeply concerned about current military practices that also discriminate against transgender individuals. While the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” law only applies to gay, lesbian and bisexual service members, transgender military personnel are negatively affected by a number of regulations. We are working to end discrimination against transgender service members through regulatory change.

Despite the existing policy, gay and lesbian individuals continue to serve in the military. Many service members who are “out” as gay and lesbian to their colleagues did not face problems while deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact a poll of service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan shows that 23% of them know someone openly gay or lesbian in their unit and 73% said they are comfortable around gays and

lesbians. This sentiment is also reflected in a recent Joint Force Quarterly article which describes “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” as a failure and found no evidence supporting the claim that allowing openly gay men and lesbians to serve would undercut unit cohesion.<sup>5</sup>

At this time, when our nation can ill-afford to squander the contributions of brave and loyal Americans who volunteer to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces, we urge the repeal of an ineffective and unsupportable policy that calls for the discharge of service members for no other reason than their sexual orientation. The repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” lifts this unjust restriction and promotes the attraction and retention of those who are dedicated to serving in our nation’s military.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/state-union-viewer-s-guide>

<sup>2</sup> Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Men and Women in the U.S. Military: Updated Estimates. The Williams Institute, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Men and Women in the U.S. Military: Updated Estimates. The Williams Institute, 2010

<sup>4</sup> Effects of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” on Retention among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Military Personnel. The Williams Institute, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The Efficacy of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. Om Prakash JFQ issue 55, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2009 available at [http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Press/jfq\\_pages/editions/i55/14.pdf](http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Press/jfq_pages/editions/i55/14.pdf)