



**Testimony of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Action Fund
For the Hearing: Don't Ask Don't Tell Review
Subcommittee on Military Personnel
United States House of Representatives
Room 2118
Rayburn House Office Building
July 23, 2008**

Chairman and Members of the Committee:

We would like to thank the House Subcommittee on Military Personnel 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 necessity and urgency of repealing this ineffective and discriminatory policy. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” is antithetical to the founding principles of our nation and undermines our country’s commitment to equal opportunity. This policy actually 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. There are at least 65,000 lesbian, gay and bisexual Americans currently serving in the U.S. Armed Forces, and over one million gay veterans. Their sacrifice for our country should earn them our respect and admiration, not second class citizenship.

Traditionally the United States has led the world in granting rights to minorities and protecting victims of discrimination. However, in the case of gays and lesbians in the military our policies are behind those of our allies. At least 24 foreign militaries, including Israel, Great Britain, France, and Australia allow gays to serve openly with no detriment to readiness or morale. U.S. troops carry out joint operations in Iraq and Afghanistan with allied troops who are openly gay, lesbian and bisexual every day.

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.

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% of Americans believe that gay people should be allowed to serve openly in the military. ¹

Not only is “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” discriminatory, it is also harmful to the military. It discourages thousands of qualified Americans from entering and staying in the military. Further, it is estimated that if the law is eliminated, an additional 41,000 Americans would seek to join the military. ² A 2007 study shows the United States has lost an average of 4,000 service members per year to this policy, including patriotic Americans who choose to leave the military because they feel they simply cannot live under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”³ We have lost over 58 Arabic linguists and 800 other service members in critical specialties, such as medics who save lives and technicians who dismantle IEDs, to this policy. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” often forces commanders to discharge people they would rather retain, solely because they are found out to be gay, lesbian or bisexual. Discharges are down 50% since our country went to war in 2001.⁴

In addition, 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.

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” is both necessary and the right thing to do and will bring our country’s military policies in alignment with those of 24 other nations, several of which deploy troops in the Middle East, side by side with our own.

¹ Effects of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” on Retention among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Military Personnel. The Williams Institute, 2007.

² Williams Project's Gary Gates Estimates Impact of U.S. Armed Forces Lifting "Don't Ask/Don't Tell" Policy. *The Williams Institute*. 2005.

³ *Effects of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” on Retention among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Military Personnel*. The Williams Institute, 2007.

⁴ “*Why Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Should Be Repealed*”. Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, 2007.

http://www.sldn.org/binary-data/SLDN_ARTICLES/pdf_file/3195.pdf