

SLDN honors vets at SF event
Published 11/15/2007
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About 150 people, many of them veterans, gathered Friday, November 9 to help raise money to support the long-running national campaign aimed at ending the military's anti-gay "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which prohibits gays and lesbians from serving openly in the military.

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a national nonprofit that provides assistance to military personnel affected by DADT and is working toward ending the ban, hosted its "Honor Every Veteran" reception at San Francisco's LGBT Community Center.

Mayor Gavin Newsom proclaimed the day LGBT Veterans Day, in advance of Sunday's holiday and Monday's observance of the holiday.

SLDN helped draft the Military Readiness Enhancement Act (HR 1246), a bill in the House of Representatives that would repeal the controversial Department of Defense policy, which was passed by Congress and signed by then-President Bill Clinton in 1993.

Clinton had come under fire by military leaders and conservatives after his election for his earlier promise to allow gays to serve openly; DADT was viewed at the time as a compromise, though since then it has been widely criticized by gay rights groups and many political leaders. Senator Hillary Clinton, who is seeking the Democratic nomination for president, supports ending DADT, as does every other Democratic presidential candidate. No Republican presidential candidate supports ending the policy.

The exact amount of money raised at last week's reception wasn't available at press time, but tickets were \$100 each and more than \$10,000 was pledged, which would bring the total to at least \$25,000 if all pledges are kept. Victor Maldonado, SLDN's senior communications associate, said the organization has not yet determined how much it hopes to raise for the campaign. SLDN's current budget is about \$3 million.

According to SLDN, 11,000 people have been discharged under DADT since it was enacted. The dismissals have truncated promising careers and have included people trained to speak languages such as Arabic – skills that are viewed as crucial in current fight against terrorism.

Aubrey Sarvis, SLDN's new executive director and a veteran himself, said the bill is not likely to pass in this Congress. As previously reported, he said even if it did, it's likely President Bush would veto it.

However, Sarvis said, it's crucial to build support now to ensure the bill's success in the future.

"The next two years is about building a foundation," he said. "When the climate changes, there are more Democrats and a new president, that will be our window."

Sarvis said SLDN is starting to educate lawmakers, constituents, and editorial boards across the country about the issue. It received a big boost in those efforts earlier this year when former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace called gays "immoral" during an interview with the Chicago Tribune. His comments were widely reported and led to a round of editorials in many newspapers calling for the repeal of DADT.

Those SLDN hopes to reach include "a core group" of senators on both sides of the aisle, though officials declined to name them. And as previously reported, the group hopes to have a companion bill introduced in the Senate by the end of the year.

SLDN is also mindful of communicating with people in small- and mid-size cities, not just large cities, Sarvis said. Though he noted that the Los Angeles City Council voted unanimously Wednesday, November 7 in favor of a resolution calling on Congress to repeal DADT. San Francisco's Board of Supervisors passed a similar resolution in June 2005.

Sarvis said the organization has a lot of work to do. Awareness of the issue is "fairly low," even in the LGBT community, he said.

The bill, which was introduced in February, was originally sponsored by Representative Marty Meehan (D-Massachusetts). Meehan left Congress this summer to become chancellor of the University of Massachusetts at Lowell. The bill is now being sponsored by Representative Ellen Tauscher (D-Walnut Creek).

The bill has 136 co-sponsors, including Mike Thompson (D-Napa Valley) and four other representatives who joined the effort in October. However, Sarvis noted the bill still lacks Republican support, and he said bipartisan support is necessary for repeal.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco) was invited to the reception but wasn't able to attend. Dan Bernal, an aide to Pelosi, read a statement from her in which she said she's "proud to support" the bill to end DADT because it "would acknowledge the tens of thousands of [LGBT] service members who serve honorably and allow them to do so openly."

Sarvis said the discharges have slowed down "significantly" over the past two or three years. He said while it shows many commanders want to hold on to men and women who are doing a good job, it also shows the arbitrary nature in which the policy is enforced.

Veterans such as Patrick English, a Korean linguist and intelligence specialist who served in Iraq, say the policy isn't working. He said the policy's presumption that gays and lesbians serving openly could harm unit cohesion is false, and the policy is making the country less safe.

English said he was met with "overwhelming support" each time he came out to other service members, but he eventually decided not to re-enlist because of the military's ban. He is currently studying biochemistry at Western Washington University and serving as director of the Gay & Lesbian Servicemembers for Equality Forum.

English spoke at the fundraiser about being attacked by a suicide bomber. He said that in the aftermath "I wasn't worried about how my sexuality was going to affect my unit, and I can guarantee you my comrades weren't, either."

To donate to the campaign or for more information, visit www.sldn.org