



## **Rep. Davis leads first congressional hearing on ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’**

Local legislator supports repeal of current policy

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The House Military Personnel Subcommittee, chaired by San Diego Rep. Susan Davis, listened to testimony Wednesday during the first congressional hearing in 15 years on the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy.

The hearing included testimony by three former military officials who want to overturn the policy, and two witnesses who oppose gays serving in the military.

“Since 1993, the Department of Defense has removed approximately 12,600 service members from the military under Section 654, Title 10 U.S. Code, commonly known as the ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy,” Davis said in her opening statements Wednesday. “With this policy comes the loss of service members with critical skills needed in the field right now, including much needed language expertise. In my opinion, we must carefully review a policy that rejects otherwise well-suited individuals for military service. This is especially true at a time when the military is trying to reduce the strain on our military by growing the force.

Before testimony began, Davis said she supports a repeal of the current policy.

“While the focus of the hearing is to provide a fair and balanced forum for debate, I think it is only fair to share my personal belief that the current policy should be repealed,” Davis said. “I came to this position after talking with many service members, active duty, reserve and retired and concluded that the open service of gay men and women need not present an operational problem. Many Americans who happen to be gay or lesbian want to answer our nation’s call to service, and allowing them to serve in an open and honest manner would uphold the ideals of military service.”

Former Marine Sgt. Eric Alva was among those who testified against the current policy, saying unit cohesion wouldn’t be hurt by gays and lesbians openly serving.

“My being gay, and even many of my colleagues knowing about it, didn’t damage unit cohesion,” said Alva, a 13-year Marine veteran. “They still put their lives in my hands, and when I was injured, they risked those lives to save mine.”

Retired Army Maj. Gen. Vance Coleman, a black man who joined the Army when it was segregated, said the current policy creates a “second-class citizen” status among service members, and undermines military readiness.

“It undermines our commitment to being a nation where we are all equal in the eyes of the law, and it ties the hands of commanders who want to welcome and retain America’s best and brightest into the military fold,” he said.

Witnesses who support “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” said allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly would be disruptive to units and could hurt recruiting.

Elaine Donnelly of the Center for Military Readiness said allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly would subject other service members living in close quarters to “inappropriate passive/aggressive actions common in the homosexual community, short of physical touching and assault.”

Retired Army Sgt. Maj. Brian Jones said, “Allowing homosexuality in the military would cause unnecessary sexual tension and disruptions to good order, morale, discipline, and unit cohesion. This would erode the very qualities of military service that presently appeal to potential recruits.” Tuesday, on the eve of the hearing, leaders from the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, the Human Rights Campaign, the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, the National Stonewall Democrats, Log Cabin Republicans, and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays hosted a conference call to urge a repeal of the policy, but the bill’s Tauscher said it’s not likely to happen with President Bush in office, or if John McCain is elected president in November.

“We need a new president in order to get this passed” — specifically, a President Obama, Rep. Ellen Tauscher, D-Calif., told reporters on a conference call Tuesday convened by the Human Rights Campaign and the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network.

Obama wants to repeal “don’t ask, don’t tell” and will work with military leaders to get it done, his campaign Web site says. Republican opponent John McCain supports “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” which was enacted during President Bill Clinton’s first term.

Though McCain supports the status quo, there is “growing Republican support” for repealing the law, said Patrick Sammon, president of the Log Cabin Republicans, said “‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ weakens our national security by preventing qualified men and women from serving our country,” he said, adding the Republican GLBT organization will continue to seek GOP support for the repeal.

Tauscher’s legislation to overturn the policy has 133 co-sponsors. But key Democrats including House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ike Skelton, D-Mo., support the status quo, and there are no plans to bring the bill to a vote this year.

The hearing Wednesday in the Armed Services Committee’s military personnel panel was meant to draw attention to the issue and to the growing public sentiment in favor of gay people serving openly in the military, Tauscher said.

In a Washington Post-ABC News poll over the weekend, 75 percent of respondents said openly gay people should be allowed to serve, up from 62 percent in early 2001 and 44 percent in 1993. “We believe that this is a good first step to have this hearing, but we don’t believe that this bill will come forward until we have a new president,” Tauscher said.