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Leaked report shows military discharges up sharply

by David Stout Q-Notes Staff

WASHINGTON, DC—According to information uncovered during a Department of Defense review of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue" policy, discharges of gay servicemembers are up significantly. The preliminary findings, which were leaked prior to the release of the report, did not surprise representatives of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the nation's largest gay civil rights organization.

"Any policy that asks people to lie is bound to fail," said Winnie Stachelberg, HRC's Political Director. "The policy itself is not being followed down the chain of command and the core problem of anri-gay bias goes completely unaddressed."

The leaked information indicates that there has been a 67 percent increase in the number of gay-related discharges since "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue" was implemented in 1994 as a compromise between President Clinton and Congress. As written, the policy allows gays to serve so long as they do not reveal their sexual orientation and forbids military personnel from asking recruits or enlistees about the subject. The new regulations were intended to reduce the number of gay discharges, but as the report shows, that is not how

the policy is working.

However, the Department of Defense has a different perspective on the increased number of discharges, which spiked from 850 in 1996 to nearly 1000 in 1997. Military spokespeople claim that the surge is due to enlistees using the policy as a means of opting out of service. Since separations for homosexuality carry an administrative, rather than dishonorable, discharge, they say it is an attractive option for those who want out.

Gay leaders are not buying the party line. "The policy is not working because command-

ers in the field are continuing to ask and pursue, hunting down gay servicemembers unabated," said Stachelberg. "The military's explanations for the dramatic increase in discharges are self-serving and disingenuous. Antigay bias continues to be the core issue and the Pentagon has done nothing to address it."

The internal review was ordered by Defense Secretary William Cohen in response to pressure from Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN), a military watchdog group that has monitored the armed forces for compliance with the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy since it was instituted. The group's annual reports have lambasted the Pentagon for the continuous upswing in discharges and the improper handling of investigations at US military installations

C. Dixon Osburn, co-executive director of SLDN, asserts that the increases are continuing for a simple reason: "They are not following their own rules."

"We think there is a huge amount of harassment going on. Commanders are asking questions they are not supposed to be asking," he stated.

Osburn said the number of servicemembers who were kicked out of the military for homosexuality in 1994, the policy's first year, was 597. That figure nearly doubled last year.

In its most recent annual report, released in February, SLDN documented 563 "command violations" in 1997, including instances where servicemembers said they were asked about their sexual orientation or harassed in direct violation of the administration's policy.

While one could argue that all of these problems stem from a lack of integrity on the parts of some military leaders, Stachelberg observed that the roots go much deeper. "Lying cannot be the cornerstone of any US policy. We need a policy that respects performance, ability, commitment and privacy," she said.

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A minority within the gay minority

by Dan Van Mourik Q-Notes Staff

CHARLOTTE—Being a member of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community is not always easy. Whether asked for or not, membership comes with a certain amount of opposition and resistance from those who do not, or choose not, to understand the many facets of being gay. As a strongly opposed minority, many of us remain in the closet. Often, it takes great strength to come out in the face of such adversity.

But there is a segment of the GLBT community that has a doubly hard time opening that closet door. They are black and they are gay — a minority within a minority.

One of the major hurdles for black gays and lesbians to overcome is finding the support to give them the courage to speak up for who they are. In Charlotte, there are no local black gay leaders or role models, nor any black organizations to address their specific concerns. The white gay community has numerous organizations and role models as well as a public image and several spokespeople, all in place to support coming out.

James Wise and Eric Norman are on their way to changing that situation. They have launched an organization called the Westside Project to create a community among black gays and lesbians and they are not reticent about sharing their views on everything from history to religion to politics to the future.

"The cornerstone of the black community is the church," Norman said. "A lot of black ministers keep telling their congregations that homosexuality is a sin. And they know that there are gay people in their churches. Black gays and lesbians still stay in the closet because they hear those things and they don't go out into the gay community...."

Wise stated the problem for black gay men is compounded by the crisis of the black straight man. Straight black men are embattled over family, social and economic issues every day. "When all those things tie in and you throw in sexual orientation and you're talking about a group of men who don't deal with their own

sexuality on an open basis, they're not going to be too apt to deal with us and to relate to us as black men. The black community thinks that we're not men, that we're less than men." PRIDE

"Being a black gay man, we're being put on the fence by the white gay community and the black straight community," Norman said. "Both communities say I need to choose: either be gay or be black; we cannot be black and gay. Most black gay people see these gay pride festivals and parades and things like that — they think that's just a white gay thing. It's not a gay thing; it's a white gay thing. When the black community sees that — and I agree with James — we are not totally men; we are not totally women. We are subordinates."

"In Charlotte, NC, we don't have an African-American gay community," Wise said. "A lot of it has to do with the issue of being out. We don't have many black gays and lesbians who are publicly out, or in the forefront. There aren't any examples for anyone to follow. It's in everyone's best interest to be 'in the closet,' so to speak."

Wise tried to work with the Charlotte Housing Authority a few years ago to raise awareness about AIDS. "I wasn't well received by the administration and I wasn't well received by the communities themselves," he said of that experience. Part of the mission of the Westside Project is to reach African-Americans with the message: AIDS kills and it is particularly deadly for the unprepared and the uninformed.

The black community has to wake up to some political facts of life, Wise said. "The black community loves our money. We patronize their businesses. They want us to vote for them. But they will not accept us. Well, we're going to put them on the burner. That's what we're going to do at Westside Project. We're going after these direct issues.... We want to go into the arena of political issues. We want to go into the arena of social issues, religious and spiritual issues and community outreach."

The Westside Project is just getting started, with only a mission statement, a mailing list and a phone number for now. To become involved, call (704) 527-8826.

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