

“We Need Every Patriot In Order To Win”  
Statement of Rep. Gary L. Ackerman to the  
Joint Hearing of the Committee on Veterans and the Committee on Civil Rights  
New York City Council  
January 25, 2008

I am pleased to have the opportunity to share with the New York City Council my views on what must be considered one of the most stupid, self-defeating and immoral policies perpetuated by the United States government: the ongoing prohibition on open service in the United States armed forces of gays and lesbians. This policy hurts our national security, weakens our armed forces in time of war, and makes a mockery of our national commitment to equality, human dignity and freedom.

The current Defense Department policy is sustained only by a studied refusal to consider rational argument and evidence, open bigotry, and nasty partisan politics. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King reminded us that the “Moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” And when it comes to overturning the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, I believe we are coming closer to justice every day. This joint hearing of the Committees on Veterans and Civil Rights is just one of many efforts being made across America to realign the practices of our government with values of our nation.

How, after all, can the current policy be sustained? When Americans hear that gays and lesbians can’t serve, but the U.S. Army is so desperate to fill the ranks that they’ve begun recruiting thousands of people with criminal records, including convicted felons, they know that something has gone wrong.

When they hear that since 1993, our armed forces have fired more than 11,000 gays and lesbians under the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, including nearly 800 with skills deemed ‘mission-critical’ by the Department of Defense, and at least 322 language specialists, 58 of whom spoke Arabic, they know something has gone wrong. When they hear that their government has ejected from military service outstanding doctors, combat engineers, pilots and military police officers whose capabilities and commitment were never in question, they know something in Washington needs to be fixed, and they know that firing the patriotic men and women who volunteered to serve their country, for being homosexual is not the solution.

The American people understand the simple truth that has not penetrated enough minds in the Congress: in the middle of a difficult war, in which we are losing heroic men and women every day, we are removing from our armed forces volunteers who have absolutely vital, life-saving skills because they happen to be gay or lesbian.

Consider the case of former Army Sergeant Bleu Copas, an Arabic linguist stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Sergeant Copas had a stellar service record, and the respect of his fellow soldiers, but his command became suspicious about his sexuality after someone sent an anonymous email to a Bragg official. When his superiors learned

that Copas had regularly participated in community theater, the curtain came down on his career. Seeing no reason to retain a highly-skilled, highly-regarded Arabic speaker, who had done nothing wrong but happened to be gay, the U.S. Army fired Sergeant Copas. While the lives of our troops depend on reliable real-time intelligence that requires first-rate Arabic translators, the Army is firing first-rate Arabic translators because they are gay or lesbian.

And while the blow to Sergeant Copas was severe, the harm to the United States goes further still. Sergeant Copas and countless other gay service members dismissed under the current law can, and often do, continue to serve our country as civilian government employees, or through government contractors. How do they qualify for these jobs, which require high-level security clearances, and often pay double the wages received by those in uniform? Thanks to the extensive background check and costly training provided by the American taxpayer. The American people get to pay for the security clearance process, pay for the specialized training and then buy—typically at a 100 percent mark-up—the services of the very same people who were fired by the Department of Defense.

This absurdity can't continue. The "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy is not only wasteful and inefficient, it's unfair and un-American. In the middle of a war we are throwing out good people who have volunteered to put their lives on the line for their country. Every day, another two service members are fired because of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and unlike the crooks we're now reduced to recruiting, for them, there is no second chance.

It used to be argued that service by openly gay and lesbian patriots would undermine the efficacy of our armed forces. This risible claim is collapsing in the face of the ugly reality of war. It is simply inconceivable that our soldiers and marines—who go on daily combat patrols carrying 60 pounds of gear and ammo in 120 degree heat with the real prospect of death or dismemberment—are going to collectively lose their nerve if the gays and lesbians who are already serving in uniform are allowed to do so openly.

If they're tough enough to tackle Al-Qaeda, I think they'll manage to serve with an openly gay or lesbian colleague. There is in fact ample evidence to back up this belief. Canada, Australia, Israel and every country in Europe allows open service by gays and lesbians. There is absolutely no evidence that any of these countries' armed forces have consequently suffered either reductions in readiness or capability, or disruptions in morale or esprit de'corps. And unlike our military, these nations' forces haven't been compelled to recruit ex-cons to fill their ranks.

Until this backward, stupid and regressive policy is consigned to the trash heap with other indefensible forms of bias, more critical intelligence will go un-translated, more wounded service members will go untreated, and more recruitment slots will go unfilled. I am proud to be a co-sponsor of the Military Readiness Enhancement Act, H.R. 1246, a bill to dump "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." If this nation is serious about winning the war on terror, we need to roll out the welcome mat for every patriot, gay or straight, who

wants to serve. I strongly commend the New York City Council for taking up this issue and I look forward to working with you to strengthen our armed forces, and win justice and equality for every American.