



Service Women's Action Network (SWAN)
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Service Women's Action Network launches new Don't Ask, Don't Tell telephone helpline for servicewomen, veterans

NEW YORK – The Service Women's Action Network is launching a new telephone helpline to provide peer counseling for servicewomen and veterans, who are serving or served under the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy.

“The Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy is a discriminatory law that hurts military readiness and national security,” said Anuradha Bhagwati, SWAN Executive Director and former Marine captain.

This policy currently prevents gay service members from serving openly. According to the Williams Institute of University of California – Los Angeles School of Law, there are an estimated 66,000 gay service members in the military today.

“This policy not only impacts gay service members, but it is also a women's issue – both gay and straight. Women are often times victims of lesbian baiting (where they are accused of being lesbian when they rebuff sexual advances by men or if they report abuse). Often times women have no one talk with about the pressures they face serving under this policy. This is why we are starting this helpline.”

SWAN, an organization dedicated to serving military women and veterans (www.servicewomen.org), began outreach work with gay servicewomen and veterans after the Department of Defense released data last year highlighting the disproportionate impact Don't Ask, Don't Tell had on women.

The data released by DOD last September highlighted that women made up 34 percent of discharges in Fiscal 2008 despite only being 15 percent of the overall military. These numbers continued the trend from 2006 and 2007.

“I applaud the leadership of (Navy)Admiral Mike Mullen, who testified at the Senate Armed Services Hearing earlier this month and pointed out that repealing this policy is the right thing to

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do,” Ms. Bhagwati said. “But what happens to those serving in silence now? Or those veterans who have been traumatized by living in silence or being unjustly kicked out of the military? Who do they turn to? Our confidential helpline gives callers access to peer counselors, who are women veterans who were directly impacted by Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

Those calling into the helpline are contacted by a veteran within 48-hours. The veteran provides peer counseling and referrals and all information is confidential. All veterans staffing the helpline have experience serving under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.

Passed in 1993, the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' law allowed gay, lesbian, and bisexual service personnel to serve in the armed forces as long as their sexual orientation was not publicly disclosed or discovered. As of 2008, more than 13,000 men and women have been discharged from the military because of their sexual orientation, including more than 60 Arabic linguists and nearly 800 other service members in critical occupational fields.

LGBT Women in the Military Helpline:

1-888-729-2095

This is a free and confidential peer counseling help line for women impacted by the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Policy.