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Testimony of Jennifer Hogg

Good afternoon members of the Committees. My name is Jennifer Hogg. I am a former New York Army National Guard Sergeant and a co-founder of Service Women's Action Network (SWAN), an advocacy and direct services organization for service women and women veterans. I am also a student at the City University of New York (CUNY) School of Law and a graduate of Hunter College.

I wish to express my gratitude to the Committee on Veterans and the Committee on Civil Rights for inviting SWAN to comment on Resolution 0169, supporting passage of H.R.1283, the first step to repealing the law known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT).

SWAN is on the forefront of examining the impact of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) and preparing for a post-repeal military. SWAN has created and implemented an LGBT military peer counseling helpline, an important step especially when you consider the disproportionate impact the DADT policy has on women and specifically women of color. I have been fortunate to be a part of an organization such as SWAN and to be surrounded by people who understand the real impact of DADT is however not in numbers, but in people. While over 13,000 people have been discharged under DADT, hundreds of thousands more have never been accounted for. We suffered in silence. I am one of the uncounted.

Countless LGBT people join the military for nearly as many reasons. One thing we all have in common, no matter what our sexuality, is the recognition that we are willing to put our lives at risk for the country. What is harder to imagine is that when we sign our names to the dotted line, a policy known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" will ask us to pretend we do not have a life to risk.

Recently on a website for soldiers, a lesbian in the 10th Mountain Division bravely commented: "Could you heterosexuals imagine not being able to say anything about your partner? What if the policy said no one discusses their relationships, period? I bet the suicide rate would skyrocket. Don't discuss your wife's new attitude or husband's infidelity. Don't talk about your girlfriend getting pregnant or boyfriend proposing. Imagine going throughout your entire career not being able to discuss your relationships and not being able to bring your loved one to any military function. I bet you couldn't."

This statement instantly resonated with me. The 5 years I served in the National Guard it was like I had two lives, the real Jen and military Jen. While I knew about DADT when I enlisted, I could never have predicted how it would feel standing on the steps of my armory on 9/11. I stood watching everyone else say goodbye to their families before we were to spend the night in the armory and drive from Buffalo to New York City the next morning. I was willing on a moment's notice, no questions asked, to serve my country. My country however, asked that I not hug my partner as tightly or as long as other soldiers. It asked that I say "you too" rather than "I love you" anytime I was on the phone. It asked that I keep all my fellow soldiers at a distance never allowing us the full benefits of military camaraderie. It asked that I lie when asked about my personal life. Some people seem to think "not telling" is easy. These are usually the same people who talk about wives or husbands, wear wedding rings and expect benefits for their partners. One

can only realize how many ways we “tell” our sexuality when you make the conscious effort not to, and when that effort is coupled with the palpable fear that you could lose everything you have worked for, because of one kiss or instance of hand holding. LGBT servicemembers are only seeking to “tell” the same things their straight counter parts are allowed to.

We all make sacrifices when we join the military. The ability to make those sacrifices is predicated on the shared experience of that sacrifice. DADT singles out LGBT servicemembers to sacrifice without the benefit of the bonding it usually elicits. We compare the length of the runs we did in basic training, how hard our drill’s punished us and how bad the chow was. *We all* have these experiences and they bond us together. No one eats food that bad without the expectation of some benefit. The policy turns a potential bonding experience into one that strips you of your sense of self-identity and self worth.

For myself the most frustrating aspect of the policy are the lies used to create and perpetrate DADT. There is the idea that discriminating against LGBT servicemembers who are physically able to serve is exactly like discriminating against people physically unable to serve. If this were true LGBT people would not be able to serve even while closeted. There is also the idea that open service will directly relate to an increase in sexual assault. Some claim DADT is “working” without ever explaining what exactly forcing people to lie has to do with military service. And, as I said above, the idea that it is easy to just “not tell”. Most people can see though these lies, but statements that are lies don’t hurt any less when they are about you, your integrity and your willingness to die for a country and in a military that openly treats you like a second-class citizen.

Beyond personal insults, these lies also have dangerous consequences. Shortly after repeal language was attached to the Defense Appropriations bill there was a flurry of accusations that open service will directly result in sexual assaults. Sexual assault is already a problem in the military. SWAN is an organization on the forefront of providing direct services to heal survivors as well as informing national policy addressing sexual assault and harassment in the military. The organizations making these claims are not experts on sexual assault within or outside the military. They have not expressed concern that DADT is used to blackmail LGBT servicemembers into silence. Perpetrators use the sexuality of their victims as a bargaining chip to blackmail victims into not reporting the crime. DADT shames straight people into not reporting same-sex assaults for fear that they may be accused of being gay. Rather than increasing sexual assault, lifting DADT will increase reporting of the estimated 80% of unreported sexual assaults.

DADT seems a dying relic of a bygone era of open discrimination against LGBT people. We are seeing executive statements, laws and opinions change. But DADT is discrimination enshrined in law in 2010. Repeal of 10 U.S.C. §654 is a first step in reminding our LGBT servicemembers that they are worthwhile. Taking this policy away will give back a voice to those who serve and served. Having that voiced affirmed by people such as you, representing New York City- one of the greatest cities in the world, reaffirms that worth.

I’d like to close with a quote from Rob Smith, an Iraq war vet who, even after he left the military, spent years being silent. He has found a very beautiful voice:

“For every gay veteran's story you do hear, there are hundreds if not thousands of soldiers' stories you won't. Stories of isolation and fear, mental distress, sexual assault, and all of the other poisons bred by the "don't ask, don't tell" policy. But maybe now, the next generation of gay soldiers will have stories different from mine: stories of open and honest service, where they can feel free to be themselves, love in any way they desire, and trust that they have the backing of the people and the leaders that they're sworn to protect. Ask any of the gay veterans in this movement and they'll tell you: That's worth fighting for.”

Thank you all for your leadership.