

Gay Troops Know Not to Tell Yet

Despite ruling, gay troops not telling

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When word came down of a judge's ruling that gays could serve openly in the military, an Air Force officer received joyous congratulations from a comrade. Realizing there was someone in the room who didn't know his sexual orientation, the officer pretended it was a joke and laughed it off.

He figured it was too soon - and too risky - to celebrate.

Yesterday, the Pentagon agreed, warning gay troops that in this "legally uncertain environment," coming out now could have "adverse consequences for themselves or others." The warning came a day after the Obama administration asked a federal judge in California to stay her ruling overturning the Clinton-era "don't ask, don't tell" policy while the government prepares an appeal.

Like the Air Force officer, many gay service members interviewed by the Associated Press didn't need to ask if it was okay to tell.

"I'm not coming out yet because of the repercussions I might get," said an Army specialist at Fort Bragg, N.C., who, like others reached by the AP, did not want his name used. "I've got a year and a half left . . . and I don't want just one day of me coming out to destroy all of what I worked for. I still want my benefits. I still want the military to pay for my college when I get out."

On Tuesday, U.S. District Judge Virginia Phillips ordered the Pentagon to stop enforcing the 17-year-old ban on openly gay troops. The military promised to abide by the order as long as it remains in place, but gay rights advocates cautioned service members to avoid revealing their sexuality in the meantime.

The Air Force officer was at work on his military computer when news of Phillips's ruling flashed up on CNN. A friend who knew his secret ran in and said, "You can come out of the closet now."

"I had to push him out and kind of laugh it off with the other person there in the office," the officer recalled. "It made me really, really nervous at first, because my first thought was, 'Oh, crap. I just was outed, and I know that the policy is probably coming back. What do I do?' "

For the rest of the day, the officer - co-founder of a support group called OutServe - was worried some other friend might inadvertently say something. He wondered if he should go home until things calmed down.

Then he thought to himself: "This is probably happening across other bases as well."

President Obama has made it clear that he wants the policy to end on his watch. But he wants Congress to make the change, not the courts. And when - or even if - that might happen is unclear. Repeal legislation has passed the House but run into Republican resistance in the Senate.

Under the 1993 law, the military cannot inquire into service members' sexual orientation and punish them for it as long as they keep it to themselves.

Jarrold Chlapowski, co-founder of Servicemembers United, said his office has received dozens of calls from closeted gay military members since Tuesday's ruling.

"We've had people calling us asking us, 'What should I do? Can I come out now?' " said Chlapowski, a former U.S. Army Korean linguist who decided not to re-enlist because of the policy. "All the organizations, including ours, are cautioning service members not to come out of the closet, because everything is still in flux. This injunction could be stayed or not be stayed, and it probably will be stayed. We just don't know when."

Even before Phillips issued her order, the Air Force had agreed to delay the discharge of Lt. Col. Victor Fehrenbach.

An F-15 fighter pilot from Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, Fehrenbach sued in August to block his discharge. Given his legal challenge, he said he doubts the Air Force will be able to discharge him before his retirement next year, but he wants to see the policy buried for the sake of others.

The soldier from Fort Bragg said he believes the ban is on its way out. But until then, he plans to continue "living a lie."

"The day that that does happen, then that's when I'll walk out of the darkness and say, 'This is who I am. I've been serving my country for seven years, and I've done it just fine - being who I am,' " said the 23-year-old, who returned last weekend from a nine-month tour in Iraq.

"I just want to shout out to America to open your eyes and know we do serve America. We do fight for your freedom."
