

national news

"Don't ask" at two

"Don't ask, don't tell" has hit the terrible twos. To "celebrate," the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network released its second report on that failed policy at a Feb. 27 news conference in Washington, D.C.

The report "reveals a continuing pattern of abuse that has effectively rendered the current policy as bad as, if not worse than, its predecessors," declared SLDN.

During the first full fiscal year in which it was in effect (fiscal year '95, which ended in September 1995), 722 people were discharged under the policy. That number is a four-year high. The Pentagon has admitted to spending at least \$21 million in pursuing these discharges.

SLDN has documented 703 abuses, including 28 "witch hunts," both stateside and at overseas bases. The abuses represent "blatant disregard of the policy's limits" during the two years of the policy. Three hundred sixty-three of them occurred in the last year alone. Some of the abuses led to discharges, others did not.

The Air Force has become the most aggressive branch in pursuing homosexuals. It now "accounts for 32 percent of all gay discharges," but only 26 percent of total active duty personnel. Discharges are down in the Navy and have held steady in the Army and Marine Corps.



SLDN cited a 1994 Air Force memo that "instructs inquiry officers to question parents about the sexual orientation of their children," as well as an August 1995 Department of Defense memo by General Counsel Judith Miller that "greatly expands the scope of investigations beyond the original intent and letter" of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Charges of homosexuality continue to be "used as a means of retaliation against anyone, regardless of their sexual orientation," the report states. But such charges are particularly used as a weapon against the growing presence of women in all services. Only 13 percent of military personnel are female, yet women constitute 21 percent of all discharges and 30 percent of the cases SLDN has investigated.

The group cited one example of a private stationed in Korea who "reported that male soldiers assaulted and threatened to rape her, then spread false rumors that she was a lesbian." Her commander chose to investigate the latter insinuation rather than the assault. Only a vigorous defense, and perhaps a change in command, brought the Army to drop its discharge proceedings.

SLDN cautioned that its report is but the tip of the iceberg of anti-gay discrimination under "Don't ask, don't tell." Many of those harassed or discharged never contact the organization. Others are removed through less aggressive means, such as denial of re-enlistment.

The front page of the report carried a dire boxed warning to service members who come under investigation. It urged them to say nothing and get legal help: "Saying or doing the wrong thing... could get you thrown in jail."

The Servicemembers Legal Defense Network

coordinates legal assistance for those in the military threatened with charges of homosexuality. It is based in Washington, D.C., and can be reached at (202) 328-3244.

Bottoms down

Sharon Bottoms' losing struggle to maintain custody of her young son will become a made-for-TV-movie. Valerie Bertinelli will play Bottoms in the ABC movie *For Love of Tyler*. Vanessa Redgrave has been signed to play the elder Bottoms, Kay, who won the legal battle and is raising her grandson.

The movie will recount how the toddler was taken from his mother because her lesbian relationship with April Wade would, as the Virginia court ruled, bring "social condemnation" to the child. No date for airing the movie has been set.

Serial killer stalks Tidewater, Va.

Naked, strangled, the bodies of young men are being dumped beside isolated roads and cul-de-sacs in the Tidewater region of southeastern Virginia. It is like the slow drip-drip-drip of a Chinese water torture: 11 bodies in nine years.

Eighteen-year-old Charles F. Smith was first. A school bus driver found him in a ditch on July 17, 1987. The most recent, Jesse James Spenser Jr., 30, turned up on Jan. 27.

According to some reports, which police are unwilling to comment on, many but not all of the victims showed evidence of recent activity as the passive partner in anal sex.

Nobody saw a pattern at first but finally last summer, with murder No. 10, it became official.

"At this point we are considering all 10 homicides to come from the hands of a serial killer," said police spokesman Tony Torres of Chesapeake County, the epicenter of this grim harvest. "All were known to have similar lifestyles and work habits...all were known to associate with the gay community."

"Associate" is an interesting word. The victim profile that has emerged is one of men at the margins of society and also of the gay community. They are low-skilled, often part-time hustlers, not known at gay bars or community organizations. Several families have denied their sons and brothers were gay. In fact some of the victims probably didn't even think of themselves as gay.

"Clues have been almost nonexistent," says Henry Edgar, editor of *Out & About*, a local monthly gay newspaper. "[The police] don't know where they were picked up or killed. There is no indication of any kind of struggle or surprise."

There is no temporal cycle to when the killings occur, nor even common physical characteristics to the victims. They range in age from 18 to early 40s.

"A couple of guys were pretty stockily built, a couple were thin," says Torres.

Four were black, seven white. Autopsies often revealed drug or alcohol use, but not to a sufficient degree to impair judgment.

The gay community reacted with "fear and consternation" when rumors of a serial killer first began to circulate, says Steve Stone, a gay reporter with the *Virginian Pilot*, the major daily newspaper in the region. But that was several years ago. The fear abated as more information about the victims became known, "as people [began to] see the victims as being very marginal."

Kathleen Vickery, editor of *Our Own*, a monthly gay and lesbian newspaper serving Tidewater, describes it as "Ho-hum, here are some more low-income, drug-using, hustling kinds of people who are getting murdered, so big deal."

And so the killer waits to strike again. Perhaps next time leaving clues which will allow police to crack the case.

Reported by Bob Roehr

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