



Gay firefighter Tom Ryan (right, with son Timmy and partner Scott Arigot) outlined disparities in line-of-duty death benefits during meetings with New York lawmakers

NEW YORK

Gay rights activists began a campaign with lawmakers last month to extend New York's safety net of crisis-related benefits and programs to same-sex partners on a consistent basis.

In a series of meetings with the chairpeople of relevant committees, Larry Courtney and Bill Valentine told their stories of how state government treated them differently, despite the fact that both of their longtime partners were killed on the job Sept. 11, 2001. A gay firefighter also talked about the many ways same-sex partners of those killed in the line of duty are shut out of all benefits intended to help surviving families rebuild their lives.

"I was shocked to find out that I could be

killed tomorrow on the job and that my partner would not receive the line-of-duty death benefit paid by the state to surviving spouses on my pension or any other benefit," said Tom Ryan of Ladder Company 12 in Chelsea. He also let lawmakers know that, unlike other same-sex survivors, partners of firefighters who died on 9/11 were forgotten.

New York state passed a bill last summer providing line-of-duty death benefits to domestic partners but only by name. All were heterosexual.

Courtney, Valentine and Ryan had registered their domestic partnerships with New York City, which they assumed would provide them with these benefits. State law, however, superseded city law on these matters and explicitly states who is eligible for survivor benefits; domestic partners are not among those listed.

"These meetings...opened the eyes and hearts of many lawmakers about the inconsistent treatment of our families and how unfair that is," said Ross Levi, Empire State Pride Agenda legislative counsel. "We now have commitments in place from lawmakers and staff in

both chambers and on both sides of the aisle to work with us further on these two very important issues."

NATIONAL

According to Pentagon statistics, during fiscal year 2002 the armed services reported 906 "don't ask, don't tell" discharges, down from 1,273 in 2001 and the fewest since 1996.

"During any time of war or conflict, gay discharges have dropped," notes *Conduct Unbecoming*, a report released March 25. "Gay discharges decreased during the Korean War, the Vietnam conflict, the Persian Gulf War and now again during Operation Enduring Freedom."

Though the specific reasons for the reported decrease in discharges is unknown, the report finds that two factors may be responsible:

1. Commands are increasingly reluctant to discharge openly gay, lesbian and bi personnel. A recent memo from 29 Palms Marine Base states that "Homosexuals can and do serve honorably in the Marine Corps. Homosexuals can and do make some of the best Marines. Homosexuals are capable of military service and can and do perform as well as anyone else in the military."

2. More and more servicemembers are serving openly, undermining arguments that known gay men and lesbians undermine unit cohesion and morale. The report cites the case of Marine Corps Capt. Kira Zielinski, whose command learned she is a lesbian in April 2001 but delayed her discharge for more than a year. In another case, the Navy attempted to retain gay Hospitalman Roy Hill after learning about his sexual orientation.

Discharges continue, however, at a rate of nearly three a day. The report cites the recent

case of Cathleen Glover, a lesbian Arabic linguist who faces discharge despite the Army's critical shortage of such experts.

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network also revealed that, while reports of anti-gay harassment have declined as well (from 1,075 in 2001 to 802 in 2002), the serious problem persists across the branches. Spc. Brad Powell says a noncommissioned officer instructed his unit during hand grenade training to visualize "blowing up a gay bar." He also heard NCOs tell soldiers that "the only way to decrease our nuclear arsenal is to put all fags on an island and nuke it" and that "the only thing a good fag needs is a good fag-bashing."

"Equal opportunity...continues to be withheld from uniquely qualified American patriots," the report says. "The time has come to lift the ban and welcome all qualified patriots to our struggle for freedom, regardless of their sexual orientation."

When asked in a recent survey how much confidence they have in President Bush and his administration to "make the right decisions" regarding the use or nonuse of the U.S. military to attack Iraq, six out of 10 heterosexual adults nationwide stated they are somewhat or very confident. In sharp contrast, only 31 percent of self-identified gay, lesbian, bi and trans adults felt the same.

These are highlights of a nationwide poll of 2,271 adults, of whom about 6 percent were queer. The survey was conducted online between Feb. 19 and 25.

Strikingly, almost seven out of 10 (68 percent)

Continued on Page 24



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