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SW 13th & Burnside
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For full info on metro area HIV/STD testing clinics:
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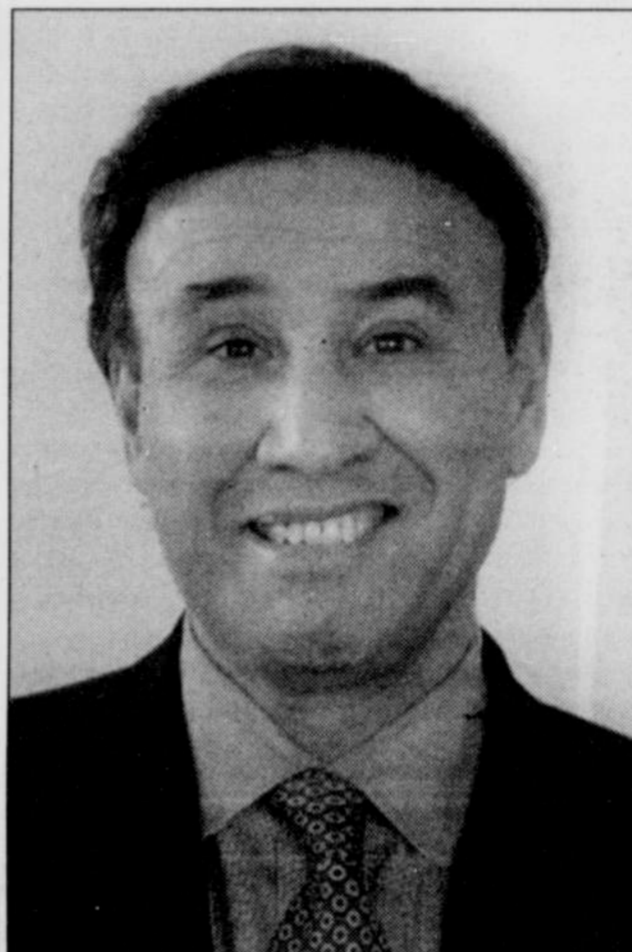
NATIONAL news

VIRGINIA LEGISLATURE DEALS HARSH BLOW TO GAY COUPLES

The Virginia Legislature gave preliminary approval Feb. 26 to a proposed state constitutional amendment that would not only restrict marriage to opposite-sex couples, but would also prohibit legal protections for same-sex couples and their families through civil unions or similar relationships.

"Virginia says it's for lovers, but that slogan should be retired as false advertising," said Ralph G. Neas, People for the American Way president. "In a state whose legal code is already filled with laws discriminating against gay people, this proposed amendment would cement into the state constitution second-class citizenship for gay and lesbian Virginians."

Neas noted that this is not the first time the Legislature has voted to mandate inequality.



People for the American Way president Ralph Neas calls "Virginia Is for Lovers" false advertising.

Years ago the state enacted a law prohibiting recognition of the marriages of same-sex couples and declaring such marriages void. Last year's "Marriage Affirmation Act" prohibits partnership contracts for same-sex couples.

In order to be adopted, the proposed constitutional amendment must be passed by another session of the Legislature and then approved by a public referendum. (The approval of the governor is not required.) If the amendment passes during next year's legislative session, it could be on the statewide ballot as early as November 2006.

"A bipartisan majority of Americans support some form of legal protection for gay and lesbian Americans and their families," said Neas. "We hope Virginia legislators will reject this amendment the next time it comes before them and will reconsider their assault on the basic American ideal of equality under the law for all people."

The proposed amendment passed the state Senate 30-10 and the House 80-17: "That only a union between one man and one woman may be a marriage valid in or recognized by this commonwealth and its political subdivisions. This commonwealth and its political subdivisions shall not create or recognize a legal status for relationships of unmarried individuals that intends to approximate the design, qualities, significance or effects of marriage. Nor shall this commonwealth or its political subdivisions create or recognize another union, partnership or other legal status to which is assigned the rights, benefits, obligations, qualities or effects of marriage."

—Sarah Dougher

"DON'T ASK" DISCHARGES DOWN

The number of service members discharged from the military under the anti-gay policy known as "don't ask, don't tell" continued to decline in fiscal year 2004, which ended Sept. 30. In a statement released Feb. 11, the Pentagon said discharges totaled 653.

Discharges peaked at 1,227 during fiscal year 2001, the transition from the Clinton administration to the Bush administration, and have declined every year since then to about half the peak number. They are at their lowest level since the policy went into effect in 1994.

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, while working to overturn the ban, also has pushed hard for training and fair implementation of the regulations as they are written. They credit the Pentagon for having made progress on these counts during the past four years.

However, it is difficult to tell how much of the drop in discharges is attributable to changing attitudes and practices within the military and how much of it is because of the manpower needs of the services tied to the conflict in Iraq.

Historically, anti-gay administrative actions have declined during wartime only to re-emerge with the end of hostilities and a lesser demand on available personnel. That pattern was seen in World War II, Vietnam and the first Persian Gulf War.

"The continued drop in 'don't ask, don't tell' discharges at a time of war clearly shows that it is a law we don't need," said Kathi Westcott, an attorney with Servicemembers Legal Defense Network. "These numbers clearly show that military commanders value good service members during a time of war, whether the service members are gay or straight."

The numbers once again lay to rest the contention that allowing gays to serve in the military is a threat to good order, discipline and unit cohesion.

Charles Moskos, a sociologist who has studied the issue intensely, told *The Washington Post* that may be part of the explanation. Most of the discharges under "don't ask, don't tell" come from soldiers declaring their sexual orientation; fewer than 20 percent are the result of investigations or actual sexual activity.

It may be that in the current patriotic climate, fewer individual soldiers—heterosexual as well as homosexual—are claiming to be gay as their ticket out of the military. It also may be that fewer commanders are willing to accept such declarations as grounds for discharge, or that discharges are occurring under other provisions of the regulations.

"These falling numbers point to an erratically enforced law that needs to go," said David Smith, vice president for policy and strategy at the Human Rights Campaign.

Westcott concurred. "Who can support a law that is irrelevant, unnecessary and harmful? The fact is that gay and lesbian service members don't harm unit cohesion, and the continuing decline in discharge numbers clearly illustrates this fact."

The military has continued to discharge personnel who have language and technical skills that are in short supply, which further undermines the contention that "don't ask, don't tell" is a necessary or sound policy.

—Bob Roehr

STATE DEPARTMENT CHALLENGED ON DISCRIMINATION

Lambda Legal has filed a federal lawsuit accusing the U.S. State Department of hiring practices that are not just antiquated, but illegal.

A team of lawyers will argue March 4 that the department's ban on hiring anyone with HIV as foreign service officers, regardless of the applicant's qualifications or health status, is discriminatory.

The fight is led by Lorenzo Taylor, who