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## Franklin Crabtree: Allow gays in the military

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- In the days to come, Congress will decide a critical issue: whether to repeal the unfair policy of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." The amendment ending this destructive policy is within the National Defense Authorization Act, which Congress will debate during its lame duck session.

The American Civil Liberties Union of West Virginia favors repealing "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

At a time when service members willingly put their lives at risk to preserve our rights and freedom, it is deeply troubling that lesbian, gay and bisexual service members are forced to hide and deny their very selves. This policy is unjust, unfair and should be repealed. Congress now has the historic opportunity to overturn it and end official sanction of its unconscionable discrimination.

Since 1994, more than 14,000 qualified and committed service members, both men and women, have been fired under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," simply on the basis of their sexual orientation.

The statute, passed by Congress and signed by President Clinton in 1993, states that openly lesbian and gay individuals pose "an unacceptable threat to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion that are the essence of military capability." It prevents gay and lesbian individuals from serving openly in the military. An act of Congress is needed for a full repeal of the law.

This policy is unacceptable in a country where we value the equal treatment of all Americans. Gay and lesbian Americans have been fighting and dying for their country alongside straight soldiers without being able to live their lives openly. They have lived with the unacceptable threat of being discharged under this policy simply for being who they are.

The House of Representatives has already passed a bill to repeal this unconstitutional policy. It is now time for the Senate to act. The Department of Defense is expected to release a report Tuesday on how best to implement a repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Early indications say that the report -- which included a poll of service members -- will illustrate that a vast majority of those serving in the military have no objection to serving and living alongside gay and lesbian troops. The Senate will also hold hearings during the next few days to learn more about ending the policy and to gain support for its repeal.

The Pentagon's practice of ignoring "Don't Ask Don't Tell" when convenient reveals that the government itself does not believe the premise behind the statute. Recent court cases have shown that the military suspends DADT investigations of service members once they are deployed to a combat zone, when their presence is needed most. It is only when that service member returns from deployment that the investigation resumes. Keeping gay and lesbian service members in combat positions directly contradicts the statute's contention that they disrupt morale and unit cohesion.

It is time to end this counterproductive policy which has served to undermine the military and is a disservice to the millions of men and women who serve in it with pride and distinction. President Obama, the secretary of defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have all roundly rejected "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Now it's up to Congress to grab this historic opportunity and make it happen.

These next few days will be crucial and may be the last chance for this important issue to be addressed for some time to come. Congress must act now to ensure we provide those service members who are lesbian, gay or bisexual the opportunity to serve their country with honesty and integrity.

*Crabtree is state director of the American Civil Liberties Union.*