

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 23, 2016

The Honorable Mac Thornberry
Chairman
Committee on Armed Services
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Thornberry:

We write today to request the House Committee on Armed Services hold a hearing on the challenges faced by gay, lesbian, and bisexual service members who were discharged from the military on the basis of their sexual orientation and who seek to have their discharge characterization upgraded to “honorable.” Specifically, we request the Committee examine undue difficulties in the current review process and evaluate bipartisan solutions to address these problems.

The repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in 2011 represented a significant step forward for our military and brought justice to thousands of gay, lesbian, and bisexual service members. This change allowed all individuals wishing to serve our country the opportunity to do so without being forced to hide who they are, and signaled to those discharged due to their sexual orientation that their service is deeply valued. Our military readiness and national security are stronger and we are closer to the American ideals of fairness and equality due to the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

Unfortunately, too many service members still bear the scars of this discriminatory policy. Since World War II, more than 100,000 individuals are estimated to have been discharged from the military due to their sexual orientation. Today, the records of thousands of gay, lesbian, and bisexual veterans are tarnished with discharge statuses other than honorable. This status affects both their access to benefits they have earned from their service and their opportunities in civilian life, potentially hindering employment opportunities and the right to vote. Even those discharged under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” who received an honorable discharge status risk facing discrimination and a violation of privacy because the Narrative Reason for their discharge may include “Homosexual Conduct,” “Homosexual Act,” or “Homosexual Marriage.”

In response to the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the Department of Defense (DoD) took an important step by implementing a process for service members to appeal their discharge status and change their discharge narrative. However, this can be a burdensome course of action for service members, who often need to obtain legal counsel to navigate the process and provide paperwork they may no longer have.

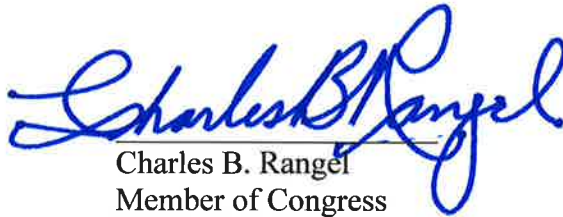
We have introduced the *Restore Honor to Service Members Act* in order to streamline and codify the current DoD policy, ensuring all gay, lesbian, and bisexual service members have the opportunity to correct their record and affirm their honorable service. This legislation simplifies the paperwork requirement for a service member to initiate a review and clarifies that a review cannot be denied solely based on a lack of documentation. Further, the bill moves the burden to produce relevant documentation from the service member to the DoD. Lastly, the legislation requires military service historians to review the circumstances of these discharges, helping service members prove they were discharged solely due to their sexual orientation. The *Restore Honor to Service Members Act* has gained broad, bipartisan support in the United States Congress – 113 cosponsors in the 114th Congress – and offers a strong path forward to address current difficulties.

Our service members deserve a straightforward and accessible process to ensure their honorable service is reflected in their records. For these reasons, we urge the House Committee on Armed Services to schedule a hearing on this issue in the near future. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



Charles B. Rangel
Member of Congress

Cc: The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515