

'Don't Ask' repeal a 'long time coming'

Gay rights group says major battle still ahead with same-gender relationships

By Laura Dignan • Staff Writer • December 27, 2010

REHOBOTH BEACH -- If you ask CAMP Rehoboth Executive Director Steve Elkins, the U.S. Senate's vote to repeal the military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy couldn't have come at a better time.

"It's the best Christmas present I could imagine getting," said Elkins, of the Rehoboth Beach-based nonprofit that aims to promote cooperation and understanding. "It's an important piece of equal rights legislation that's a long time coming."

On Dec. 15, the House passed the vote 250-175, and on Dec. 18 it was passed by the Senate 65-31. The repeal was signed by President Barack Obama on Dec. 22.

The policy was put into place in 1993 under the Clinton administration, stating that gays and lesbians were allowed to serve in the military, but not openly. Since then, close to 14,000 people have been discharged due to their sexual orientation.

Douglas Marshall-Steele, a veteran who created a website to support the gay community, said he thinks the repeal was long overdue.

"After 17 years of outright discrimination, it was high time for the law to be changed," said the Milton resident, who served in the U.S. Army in the 1970s and was honorably discharged.

While the ban has been repealed, it will be more than two months until it is in full effect, as military advisers must ensure that lifting the ban will not affect the troops' fighting ability.

But according to a yearlong study ordered by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, about two-thirds of 400,000 active-duty forces and 150,000 family members who were surveyed don't think changing the law will have a large affect.

"Many detractors have said that the world is going to end when this goes into effect and terrible things are going to happen," Marshall-Steele said. "The p

erspective should rather be that lesbian and gay people are on the front lines and fighting in our place. They're defending us and should be respected as such."

Elkins believes the generation shift -- in which younger folks in support of gay rights are outnumbering those who aren't -- is to thank for the repeal.

"You're not worried about whether the soldier next to you is gay or straight, you're worried about whether they have your back and they can shoot straight," he said.

Marshall-Steele said those who are representing the gay service members are warning them to not come out until the repeal is officially put into place.

"Until it's a done deal, it's not a done deal," Elkins said. "Yogi Berra said, 'It ain't over 'till it's over,' and that holds true in this case as well."

While the ban on Don't Ask, Don't Tell has been lifted, marking a great milestone in the fight for gay rights, Marshall-Steele said there are still many battles ahead.

"Of course, the major battle that we will have to fight and continue to fight is relationship recognition," he said. "My strong belief is that same-gender relationships are as valid as opposite-gender ones, and that the government and state have no right to prefer heterosexual over homosexual ones."

- The Associated Press contributed to this report. ldignan@dmg.gannett.com 302-537-

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