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Executive Summary

California Department of Veterans Affairs
California LGBT Veterans Leadership Forum (Sept. 26-27, 2014)
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Though more than 136,000 gay and lesbian veterans live in California–the largest number in any state–little is known about their specific needs. Until recently, lesbian, gay and bisexual Americans could not serve openly. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"–the federal policy that allowed members of the military to serve as long as they hid their sexual orientations–only ended in 2011, and federal law still prohibits transgender individuals from serving.

To ensure these veterans receive the benefits they have earned, the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet), together with a planning committee, and with support from the California Research Bureau, convened lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) veterans, spouses and support organizations to identify, explore and discuss the needs of this diverse group.

Over a two-day period in September 2014, participants (32 on the first day and 36 on the second day) identified:

- Needs, gaps and exclusions in service
- Legal and programmatic remedies
- Local programs that can serve as model initiatives

The outcomes of these wide-ranging discussions include local, state and federal policy recommendations. In some instances, participants highlighted needs, such as housing to better accommodate veterans experiencing trauma, that are critical to all veterans, not only those in the LGBT community. While participants developed an extensive catalogue of recommendations, listed below are ideas that participants identified as most important across the following categories: housing, employment, healthcare, education and legal. The accompanying white paper, "Better Serving Those Who Serve: California LGBT Veterans Speak Out," contains a complete description of all recommendations and additional ideas for policymakers to consider.

Housing. Top housing needs encompassed those specific to LGBT veterans and those that impact the broader veteran community:

- Provide housing that accommodates trauma associated with military service.
- Upgrade federal discharge paperwork so veterans and their families have access to housing benefits associated with military service.
- Include LGBT families in the definition of family.
- Collect data from LGBT veterans and use that to inform policy. Listening to LGBT veterans about who they are and what they need will better address their concerns.
- Implement training to educate housing service providers about LGBT veterans.

Employment. Employment recommendations focused on protections against discrimination as well as counting military service as job experience:

- Create explicit and strengthen federal LGBT nondiscrimination employment protections.
- Encourage employers to count military service as employment experience when hiring and setting salaries.
- Certify veteran service organizations that include specialized support for LGBT veterans.
- Support sensitivity training for employers who want to hire veterans.
- Upgrade LGBT-related discharge paperwork so veterans are not outed when employers request proof of military service.

Healthcare. Healthcare recommendations included culturally-sensitive staff and services relevant to LGBT veterans:

- Require LGBT cultural sensitivity training and certification for U.S. Veterans Administration (Veterans Affairs) staff and contractors.
- Provide veterans with an easily accessible and updated list of service providers who are certified in LGBT healthcare.
- Provide veterans with staff specifically trained to assist with LGBT healthcare and services.
- Include Veterans Affairs healthcare services that are relevant to LGBT veterans.
- Standardize Stand Down services. Stand Downs are events that take place to provide basic needs such as clothing, shelter, health screenings etc. to homeless veterans.

Education. Participants focused on access to education benefits, expanded training opportunities and making information available:

- Provide resource centers on every campus that address veterans' educational needs.
- Allow LGBT veterans to transfer GI Bill benefits to same-sex spouses regardless of the state in which they were married or the state where they lived when a veteran's right to benefits began.
- Implement training for education staff across all colleges and universities to accurately translate a military transcript into education credits.
- Implement cultural competency training and certification for all staff and faculty on campuses where veterans attend.
- Encourage county-level collaboration and training for LGBT veteran education needs.

Legal. Legal recommendations focused on correcting past service-era discrimination:

- Correct discharge papers from the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and previous service eras, and allow transgender veterans to change their names to match their gender identities. This upgrade should appear on the discharge papers rather than on corrected discharge papers to avoid "outing" LGBT veterans for their sexual orientations or unconventional gender expressions.
- Encourage or require veterans' resource centers to make available consistent and updated legal information about housing, employment, health and education benefits for LGBT service members.

- Change federal policy to allow spouses of deceased LGBT veterans to receive death benefits regardless of the state in which they were married or the state where they lived when a veteran's right to benefits began.
- Update Federal Status of Forces Agreements so that LGBT service members and their families have access to all military benefits when stationed overseas.
- Provide healthcare specific to transgender veterans, such as hormones and surgical care that is standardized across healthcare-service locations.

While these recommendations proved to be the most popular among forum participants, there are numerous other ideas in the accompanying white paper. For example, stakeholders suggested institutional partnerships to develop stronger wraparound services for LGBT veterans as they transition from military to civilian life. Participants also provided lists of model programs and organizations. Taken together this feedback from LGBT veterans, spouses and support organizations creates a comprehensive view of the myriad challenges veterans face. However, it also reveals a potential road map for meeting the needs of this population.