

US Military Extends Many Benefits to Same-Sex Partners

The Pentagon announced on Monday it would extend more of the benefits offered to spouses of heterosexual troops to those of gay personnel but acknowledged some key benefits, like housing, would still be off-limits, at least for now.

The step came 17 months after the Pentagon scrapped its **“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”** ban on openly serving homosexuals in the U.S. military and will affect the day-to-day lives of their spouses in ways big and small—from allowing them to finally get military I.D. cards to granting hospital visitation rights.

But outgoing Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, in a memorandum explaining the move, noted his actions were limited by U.S. law, specifically the Defense of Marriage Act, which is now being reviewed by the Supreme Court and which defines marriage as a union between a man and woman.

“There are certain benefits that can only be provided to spouses as defined by that law,” said Panetta, who is expected to retire in the coming days.

“While it will not change during my tenure as secretary of defense, I foresee a time when the law will allow the department to grant full benefits to service members and their dependents, irrespective of sexual orientation.”

Pentagon officials estimated the cost of the policy change would be negligible, since it would only affect around 9,000 spouses of active duty and reserve members and another 8,000 retirees. They hoped the changes would go into effect by the end of August.

The announcement came on the eve of President Barack Obama’s State of the Union address and just weeks after he made

history by becoming the first U.S. president to praise progress on gay rights in his inaugural address.

“Secretary Panetta’s decision today answers the call President Obama issued in his inaugural address to complete our nation’s journey toward equality,” said Allyson Robinson, head of the advocacy group OutServe-SLDN and an Army veteran. The moves will substantially improve the quality of life of affected spouses, she said.

Definition of a Spouse

Pentagon officials, briefing reporters on the decision, explained that other sensitivities, bureaucratic considerations and even the spirit of the U.S. law were also taken into account. But the big problem Defense Department attorneys ran into were legal ones, when a benefit was limited to a “spouse” as formally defined by the Defense of Marriage Act, or DOMA.

The Pentagon said it was still reviewing whether certain benefits could still be extended to the spouses of gay and lesbian servicemembers, even under existing law, like some housing benefits and burial at Arlington National Cemetery.

A *USA Today*/Gallup poll published in December found that approval of **same-sex marriage** among the general public had risen to 53 percent in 2012 from less than 40 percent in 2005. Young adults were the most supportive.

Nine states and the District of Columbia have legalized same-sex marriage. Last November, Maryland, Maine and Washington became the first states to do so through the ballot box.

But opposition still runs deep in parts of the country. The *USA Today*/Gallup poll found **gay marriage** opposed by a majority in the South. North Carolina in 2011 added a voter-approved ban to its constitution. Some 30 states have passed constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage.

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