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End to trans military ban celebrated at think-tank symposium



Army. Capt. Sage Fox spoke about being discharged under the trans military ban. (Blade photo by Michael Key).

An event on Wednesday initially planned to prod the U.S. military to lift the ban on transgender service turned into a celebration over the recent demise of the policy.

An estimated 75 participants — transgender service members and supporters — convened at D.C.'s Hyatt Regency on Capitol Hill for the symposium, which was hosted by the San Francisco-based think-tank on sexual minorities in the military known as the Palm Center.

The event followed Defense Secretary Ashton Carter's decision earlier this month to allow transgender people to serve openly in the armed forces ["effective immediately."](#)

Although certain aspects of transgender service are planned for implementation at a later time, including access to transition-related care and accession for openly transgender people not yet in the military, the Pentagon's decision ended a medical regulation barring transgender people across the board from the armed forces.

The top Obama administration official at the event was Acting Under Secretary of Defense of Personnel & Readiness Peter Levine, who said transgender service was one of two major tasks assigned to him upon appointment to the Pentagon.

"I think that we've done the right thing not only for the transgender community, but for our military," Levine said.

Levine recalled a town hall event last year in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in which Carter was asked about transgender service. The defense secretary replied he believes every who's capable of serving should have the opportunity. Although "people tried to talk him out of it," Carter was determined to press forward, Levine said.

Transgender service members — current and former — spoke about their harrowing experiences serving in the military with the ban on transgender service in place.

Sage Fox, a captain in the U.S. Army, said her military career in which she won medals and served overseas was "cut short" after she transitioned and was told she could continue to serve, but then was discharged.

"My command agreed that the policy was outdated and wrong and invited me to return as a female officer," Fox said. "I served for two weeks before the hammer fell and I was transferred to inactive status."

Also at the event was Air Force Lt. Col. Victor Valenzuela, who talked about the fear he experienced serving overseas serving in Iraq under both "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and the transgender military ban.

"Bad things were happening, and I was really afraid that that night would be my last," Valenzuela said. "And as I shared the story with some of you before, that night I knew that if I did not make it to see the morning, my wife and my children would not be the first to be notified because of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell.' The second thing I knew was that I was going to be buried as a female, and that was a crush to me because inside I've always a felt a male that hopefully you see before you."

In one portion of the event, Aaron Belkin, director of Palm Center, held a colloquy with his former colleague and researcher on sexual minorities in the U.S. military Nathaniel Frank, who explained the similarities between the justifications for "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and the trans military ban.

"One of the things that really brings them both together was that both were propped up by what probably were really dishonest national security rationales, or you may say rationalizations, that were serving as cloaks for personal bias," Frank said.

Also speaking at the event were high-profile U.S. House Democrats who support openly transgender military service, including House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Rep. Adam Smith, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee.

House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) was among those who delivered remarks in favor of transgender military service, saying he applauds Carter for making the change.

"Allowing transgender Americans to serve openly strengthens, not weakens, our military," Hoyer said. "We need transgender service members who are talented and driven and experienced to help us meet the national security challenges of the twenty-first century."

Hoyer added the remaining issues in implementing transgender service should be resolved "expediently" and he'll seek to ensure "our military remains the best in the world and one that truly reflects what is best about our nation."

Paula Sophia Schonauer, a transgender former Army soldier and police officer who in 2014 ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the Oklahoma State House, said she came to the event because "she wanted to see being history made."

"I feel, honestly, it's a little bittersweet because I was out ahead of the pack enough that I didn't get to benefit from the gains, even though I blazed a little bit of trail," Schonauer said. "And so, I wish that I could have finished my military career, but I'm glad that these gains have been made and I'm glad that people can serve openly, authentically and actually live into the values of the military, of integrity and loyalty and honesty."



Rep. Steny Hoyer said the Pentagon should implement trans military service "expediently." (Blade photo by Michael Key)

NANCY PELOSI

PAULA SOPHIA SCHONAUER

PENTAGON

PETER LEVINE

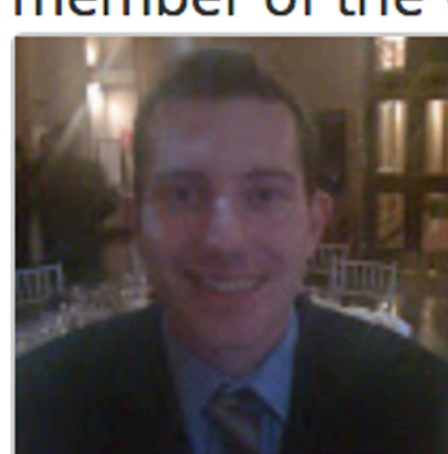
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TRANSGENDER MILITARY BAN

Chris Johnson

Chris Johnson is Chief Political & White House Reporter for the Washington Blade. Johnson attends the daily White House press briefings and is a member of the White House Correspondents' Association. Follow Chris



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