



Accept transgender troops, allow them medical treatment, Adm. Mike Mullen tells Congress

By Tom Vanden Brook
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WASHINGTON — Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen called on Congress Tuesday to resist dictating policy to the Pentagon on how to treat transgender troops.

Mullen was the highest-profile military leader to oppose the military's policy barring gay troops from serving, lending his considerable prestige to that ultimately successful movement. He oversaw the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in 2011 and compared it today to efforts aimed at limiting funding for medical treatment of transgender troops.

"I led our armed forces under the flawed 'Don't ask, Don't tell' policy and saw firsthand the harm to readiness and morale when we fail to treat all service members according to the same standards," Mullen said in a statement to USA TODAY. "Thousands of transgender Americans are currently serving in uniform and there is no reason to single out these brave men and women and deny them the medical care that they require."

Mullen's call to limit congressional input into Pentagon policy on transgender troops makes him the highest-ranking former or current officer to speak out on their behalf. Last year, then-Defense Secretary Ash Carter rescinded the policy that prevented transgender troops from serving openly and to allow them to receive medical treatment for their condition.

Under the Trump administration, implementation of the policy on recruiting transgender troops has been slowed. The services had been scheduled to begin accepting new transgender troops on July 1, but Defense Secretary Jim Mattis allowed the services another six months to study the issue.

Two weeks ago, the House of Representative narrowly defeated an amendment to the annual National Defense Authorization Act that would have prevented the Pentagon from spending money for surgery on transgender troops. Rep. Vicky Hartzler, R-Mo., introduced the amendment and said it would save taxpayers \$1 billion over 10 years.

"The job of Congress is to ensure that our military is the most effective, efficient and well-funded fighting force in the world," she said in a statement when her initiative was introduced. "With the challenges we are facing across the globe, we are asking the American people to invest their hard-earned money in national defense."

RAND Corp. study

Hartzler's estimate is contradicted by a RAND Corp. study commissioned by the Pentagon last year. The non-profit, non-partisan think tank found that treatment, including hormone and surgery, for transgender troops could cost as much as \$8.4 million per year.

There are as many as 6,630 transgender troops in the active-duty force of 1.3 million, RAND found. The study determined that the effect on treating about 270 transgender troops per year would have a negligible impact on military readiness.

Mullen referred to the RAND report when he said Congress should “not confuse oversight with micromanagement of personnel policy.”

“The military conducted a thorough research process on this issue and concluded that inclusive policy for transgender troops promotes readiness,” Mullen said. “I urge the Congress to respect the military’s judgment and not to breach the faith of service members who defend our freedoms.”

The policy bill approved by the House authorizes nearly \$700 billion in military spending. Another bill to authorize that money contains amendments that would ban the Pentagon from spending money on medical treatment for transgender troops and sensitivity training aimed at promoting their acceptance.