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'Don't Ask' Costs More Than Expected Military's Gay Ban Seen in Budget Terms

By Josh White
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The financial costs to the U.S. military for discharging and replacing gay service members under the nation's "don't ask, don't tell" policy are nearly twice what the government estimated last year, with taxpayers covering at least \$364 million in associated funds over the policy's first decade, according to a University of California report scheduled for release today.

Members of a UC-Santa Barbara group examining the cost of the policy found that a Government Accountability Office study last year underestimated the costs of firing approximately 9,500 service members between 1994 and 2003 for homosexuality. The GAO, which acknowledged difficulties in coming up with its number, estimated a cost of at least \$190.5 million for the same time period. The new estimate is 91 percent higher.

Although it did not take a stance on the effectiveness of the policy, the California "blue ribbon commission" -- which included former defense secretary William J. Perry and 11 professors and defense experts -- found that the military has put millions of dollars into recruiting and training new soldiers and officers to replace those who were removed from their jobs in the services because they were openly gay. The report also cites the costs of losing service members to premature discharge, because of the loss of training "investment."

"The real issue here is that you have a policy that is costing us money, hurting readiness and is really not fulfilling any national security objective," said Lawrence Korb, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, and a member of the commission. "It just doesn't make sense now, particularly when you're having such a hard time getting people to join the military and retaining them in the right skills."

The "don't ask, don't tell" policy was included in the 1994 Defense Authorization Act, part of President Bill Clinton's efforts to take a step toward lifting the ban on gay people in the military. The law essentially allowed gay men and lesbians to serve in the military as long as they did not expose their sexual preference or exhibit homosexual behavior.

Those who do, however, are swiftly discharged.

"The policy is more expensive than we thought it was, in many ways," said retired Rear Adm. John D. Hutson, a former Navy judge advocate general who was on the panel. "The real cost is the cost in human dignity, in self-respect, and in the image of the military held by the American public, the world community and itself. . . . The dignity of the armed forces is at stake."

Defense Department policies comply with the statute, according to a Pentagon spokeswoman, and have resulted in individual discharges from service. But defense officials also noted that those service members discharged for homosexuality represent just 0.3 percent of all discharges.

According to Pentagon figures provided to the GAO last year, there were 9,501 people separated from the military for homosexuality from 1994 to 2003, compared with 26,446 separated for pregnancy, and 36,513 separated for failing to meet weight standards.

Charles Moskos, a sociology professor at Northwestern University and an architect of "don't ask, don't tell," said in an interview yesterday that he believes allowing openly gay people into the military -- especially combat arms positions -- could cause the services to lose many more recruits who would be uncomfortable living in close

quarters with them. He said the loss in financial costs does not outweigh the costs of forcing people to live in intimate circumstances with openly gay people. He also said he believes many of the discharges are the result of people claiming to be gay to get an honorable discharge from service early.

Rep. Martin T. Meehan (D-Mass.), a member of the House Armed Services Committee, plans to announce the report findings today on Capitol Hill. Meehan, who is sponsoring legislation that would repeal the ban on openly gay service members, said the new cost estimate is more evidence that the policy is inappropriate.

"The Army is facing a recruiting crisis, yet we're turning away volunteer soldiers who are willing and able to fight and willing to make the ultimate sacrifice simply because of their sexual orientation," Meehan said yesterday.

Seaman Apprentice John Graff, 19, of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., enlisted in the Navy a year ago, changing abruptly from being openly gay to hiding it. After eight months on active duty in training at Naval Submarine Base New London in Connecticut, he decided he could not hide his identity any longer and recently came out to his commanders.

"It's emotionally distressing, because you constantly have this weight on you, that someone is going to find out somehow, that you could lose your job," Graff said. "I really do love the Navy, and I love serving the country. They're losing qualified people who want to do the job."