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Report: More Gay Linguists Discharged than First Thought

By The Associated Press
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The number of Arabic linguists discharged from the military for violating its “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy is higher than previously reported, according to records obtained by a research group.

The group contends the records show that the military — at a time when it and U.S. intelligence agencies don’t have enough Arabic speakers — is putting its anti-gay stance ahead of national security.

Between 1998 and 2004, the military discharged 20 Arabic and six Farsi speakers, according to Department of Defense data obtained by the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military under a Freedom of Information Act request.

The military previously confirmed that seven translators who specialized in Arabic had been discharged between 1998 and 2003 because they were gay. The military did not break down the discharges by year, but said some, but not all, of the additional 13 discharges of Arabic speakers occurred in 2004.

‘Still have a language problem’

Aaron Belkin, the center’s director, said he wants the public to see the real costs of “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

“We had a language problem after 9/11, and we still have a language problem,” Belkin said Wednesday.

The military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy allows gays and lesbians to serve in the military as long as they keep their sexual orientation private and do not engage in homosexual acts.

“The military is placing homophobia well ahead of national security,” said Steve Ralls, spokesman for the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a nonprofit group that advocates for the rights of gay military members. “It’s rather appalling that in the weeks leading up to 9/11 messages were coming in, waiting to be translated ... and at the same time they were firing people who could’ve done that job.”

Some complain of hiring in the first place

But others, like Elaine Donnelly of the Center for Military Readiness, a conservative advocacy group that opposes gays serving in the military, said the discharged linguists never should have been accepted at the elite Defense Language Institute in Monterey in the first place.

“Resources unfortunately were used to train young people who were not eligible to be in the military,” she said.

In the fiscal year ended Sept. 30, 543 Arabic linguists and 166 Farsi linguists graduated from their 63-week courses, according to a DLI spokesman. That was up from 377 and 139, respectively, in the previous year.

Experts have identified the shortage of Arabic linguists as contributing to the government’s failure to thwart the Sept. 11 attacks. The independent Sept. 11 commission made similar conclusions.

‘ ... your life under scrutiny’

Ian Finkenbinder, an Army Arabic linguist who graduated from the Defense Language Institute in 2002, was discharged from the military last month after announcing to his superiors that he’s gay. Finkenbinder, who said his close friends in the Army already knew he was gay, served eight months in Iraq and was about to return for a second tour when he made the revelation official.

“I looked at myself and said, ‘Are you willing to go to war with an institution that won’t recognize that you have the right to live as you want to?’” said Finkenbinder, 22, who now lives in Baltimore. “It just got to be tiresome to deal with that — to constantly have such a significant part of your life under scrutiny.”

The Servicemembers Legal Defense Network last month sued the government on behalf of 12 other gay former military members seeking reinstatement. They argue that “don’t ask, don’t tell” violates their constitutional rights.