

# The New York Times

## Discrimination in the Military (Editorial, May 14, 2014)

Three years after the demise of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” an estimated 15,000 members of the military still must lie about themselves in order to go on risking their lives for their country. When Congress eliminated the law against gay men and lesbians serving openly in the military, the Pentagon left in place an equally unfounded prohibition on transgender people.

It was gratifying, then, to hear Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel [say](#) in an interview on ABC’s “This Week” on Sunday, “Every qualified American who wants to serve our country should have an opportunity if they fit the qualifications and can do it.” After all, unlike the ban on openly gay soldiers, the rule on transgender people is just a rule. There is no law prohibiting them from serving openly.

But, inexplicably, Mr. Hagel said only that he was “open” to reviewing the policy. He did not say whether he favored lifting the ban and when — or even whether — such a review might take place. There is none underway, and Mr. Hagel currently has no plan to start one. On Monday he told reporters he would prefer to learn more about the issue rather than begin a formal review.

In the ABC interview, Mr. Hagel repeated the standard excuse for this discrimination — that complex medical and logistical issues could preclude transgender people from serving in “austere” combat conditions. That excuse does not hold up, as a panel of former military officers and experts on gender and health led in part by former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders concluded in March.

“There is no compelling medical rationale for banning transgender military service,” and “eliminating the ban would advance numerous military interests, including enabling commanders to better care for their service members,” the panel said. Its report belongs at the top of Mr. Hagel’s reading list, along with the psychiatric community’s decision a year ago to finally stop mislabeling transgender identity as a mental disorder.

As with gay and lesbian soldiers, the issue is not whether transgender people can serve in the armed forces. The point is that they — including the estimated 15,000 of them now serving — have to cover up their identities. Some refrain from seeking necessary hormone treatment or other medical care, suffering anguish and risking their physical and emotional health.

And for what? There is “no medical reason to presume transgender individuals are unfit for duty,” the panel wrote. Transgender medical care “is no more specialized or difficult than other sophisticated medical care the military system routinely provides,” even in combat zones. As for gender-changing surgery, the panel noted that some elective cosmetic surgeries allowed at military medical facilities require similar leave time and risk more serious postoperative complications.

At least 12 countries, including Britain, Australia and Israel, allow transgender military service, with no apparent decline in readiness. Lt. Col. Cate McGregor of the Australian Defense Forces, former director of the Land Warfare Studies Center, is now speechwriter for the army chief of staff, who would not accept her offer to resign when she decided to undergo surgery in 2012.

Addressing issues like privacy and housing is not rocket science. It happens in civilian workplaces all the time. With the right leadership, outbreaks of intolerance can be minimized. If Mr. Hagel is still trying to make up his mind, his boss, President Obama, can make it up for him. The question is how fast can the armed forces join the modern world on this issue, not whether they should. The time for lame excuses is long past.