



An Oklahoma Where Everyone is Equal

MEDIA STATEMENT

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White House Staffers Brief Statewide LGBT Leaders, Stress Advances

Oklahoma-based LGBT Group Participates in Historic National-Level Meeting

WASHINGTON, DC – August 7, 2010 – Yesterday, a state equality group did what most of Oklahoma’s D.C. lawmakers have failed to do – represent the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) population on a national level.

Laura A. Belmonte of [The Equality Network](http://theequalitynetwork.org) participated in a far-ranging White House discussion between members of the Obama administration and the [Equality Federation](http://equalityfederation.org), the national umbrella organization for statewide LGBT advocacy groups.

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act

[Tina Tchen](#), director of the White House Office of Public Engagement, opened the gathering by asserting that the administration fully expects the provisions of the Defense Authorization Bill ending the Pentagon’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) policy to win congressional approval by year’s end. The U.S. House of Representatives has already [passed the legislation](#) and the U.S. Senate will soon consider the bill.

Tchen said that the administration was prioritizing DADT over the [Employment Non-Discrimination Act \(ENDA\)](#) because it could attach DADT to other legislation, making it much easier to move through Congress. By contrast, ENDA – which would outlaw employment discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity and expression - is stand-alone legislation that faces more congressional hurdles. In the current political climate, securing a firm commitment of 60 Senate votes to support ENDA is proving far more difficult than the administration anticipated. These obstacles have not, Tchen claimed, diminished President Obama’s support for the legislation.

Acknowledging that some LGBT advocates are quite frustrated with the president's progress on equality issues, Tchen urged statewide leaders to let the White House know when their constituents are displeased.

"When you are frustrated," she stated, "you should speak out and hold our feet to the fire."

LGBT Health

[David Hansell](#), acting assistant secretary for children and families at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), provided an overview of the work currently being done on LGBT health. Through a coordinating group, the agency is including LGBT concerns in decisions made by its 10 divisions.

Hansell outlined provisions of the [Affordable Care Act](#) that will benefit LGBT Americans including expanded access to health coverage and abolition of insurance companies' practices barring those with preexisting conditions and imposing lifetime caps on pay-outs. As HHS adopts the thousands of forthcoming mandates and policy statements needed to implement federal health care reform, LGBT health and family advocates will have extensive opportunities to shape outcomes.

Hansell then offered a status report on [President Obama's April 2010 memorandum](#) directing hospitals receiving Medicare and Medicaid funding to allow patients to decide who can visit them. The memo also bars discrimination based on a variety of characteristics including sexual orientation and gender identity.

The public comment process on the proposed visitation policy ends on Aug. 27. A draft policy outlining HHS regulations that would guarantee that hospitals honor advanced directives will soon be posted for 180 days of public comment. The subsequent regulatory change will make much clearer who is allowed to make decisions on a patient's care if he or she is unable to do so.

In upcoming months, Hansell stressed, there will be unprecedented opportunities for LGBT advocates to offer recommendations on a number of concerns including adoption, youth, homelessness, seniors, and sex education. The federal government has not historically tracked data identifying the needs of LGBT youth or seniors, Hansell asserted, but is now implementing processes to do so in order to ensure that these vulnerable populations receive adequate funding and services.

Hansell said the LGBT community can best ensure that these new directives are enforced by working with the local or state office administering the specific program. If that doesn't resolve the problem, advocates should contact the HHS Office of Civil Rights.

Hansell then fielded questions pertaining to transgender people. When the public comment process determining what federal benefits insurance companies must provide begins, he called for the LGBT community and health care advocates to vocalize the need to include gender reassignment surgery. Hansell claimed that HHS is already determining how best to assist homeless transgender youth.

[Raphel Bostic](#), assistant secretary for policy development and research for the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), then detailed current administrative efforts to redress housing inequities in the LGBT community. 2010 marks the first time that HUD is including this issue in its once-a-decade study on housing discrimination. Because the [Fair Housing Act](#) does not include sexual orientation or gender identity, it is important to determine how federal policies and practices must be modified to ensure that all Americans are treated fairly in the housing and mortgage policies and funding.

DADT Repeal

Gauram Raghavan, deputy White House liaison to the Department of Defense, provided a status report on the repeal of the DADT policy. He repeatedly stressed that the core issue is not whether the policy will be changed, only when and how DADT will be ended. An interagency working group is currently conducting forums and surveys at numerous U.S. military installations in the United States and abroad. The group will submit its final recommendations to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates by December 1st.

When Equality Federation representatives challenged Raghavan on the content and methodology of the surveys being used to gauge military attitudes on LGBT people, Raghavan said that he understood why LGBT servicemembers have taken offense to some of the questions and have raised concerns about whether confidentiality is properly protected. He assured the audience that the data will only be used to determine how the Pentagon needs to structure its post-DADT training programs to combat stereotypes and fears about LGBT people.

After Mo Baxley, executive director of [New Hampshire Freedom to Marry Coalition](#), questioned why LGBT soldiers continue to be expelled during this process, Raghavan responded that the law is still in effect and therefore must be enforced. He claimed, however, that Gates has taken [steps to ensure that the law is no longer abused](#). For example, military officials are no longer permitted to accept third-party testimony against an

accused soldier. In the past, the use of such evidence created situations where jilted lovers or disgruntled colleagues could railroad or blackmail a comrade.

Bostic added that the Pentagon is exploring how qualified soldiers who were expelled under DADT could reenter the armed services. When asked whether policy changes that would permit transgender citizens to serve are also being considered, Bostic said that might be the case in the future and asked for contact information from advocates who can advise the Pentagon on this issue.

Family and Medical Leave, HIV/AIDS Policy

Jeremy Bishop, special assistant to Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis, explained forthcoming changes to the Family and Medical Leave Act that will benefit LGBT families. Jeffrey Crowley, Director of the Office of National AIDS Policy, followed with an overview of the 2010 national strategy on HIV and AIDS.

Marriage Equality

In the meeting's closing stages, [Brian Bond](#), Deputy Director of the White House Office of Public Engagement and liaison to the LGBT community, took questions from the audience. Given recent statements reaffirming [President Obama's opposition to same-gender marriage](#) in the wake of a [decision striking down California's Proposition 8](#), Equality Federation members pressed him on the contradictions posed by the president's call for the repeal of the [Defense of Marriage Act \(DOMA\)](#) and his support for civil unions instead of full marriage equality.

Bond asserted, "There is still a lot of work to do" before DOMA will be repealed. "Look at the trouble we're having with ENDA," he added. But Bond conceded that there are inconsistencies in President Obama's positions.

In response, Morgan Meneses-Sheets, executive director of [Equality Maryland](#), stated, "Respectfully, we need President Obama to push for full inclusion of the LGBT community on ENDA, on marriage – we need the full get, not the lesser get. The highest office in the land sets the tone for the whole country." Bond agreed, but expressed frustration at the often intense criticism levied, particularly by bloggers, against an administration that is "99 percent supportive of your issues."

Following the briefing, Belmonte asserted, "It was a remarkable and thought-provoking discussion. But while it is inspiring to see the many fronts on which the Obama

administration is working to help LGBT Americans, it is disappointing to see legislative obstructionism and political calculations impeding the realization of full LGBT equality.”

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[The Equality Network](#) works to achieve equality and to secure legal protection for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Oklahomans through advocacy, coalition building, and individual empowerment in the political process.