

THE POLICIES



Shane Ortega, a retired Army sergeant, was one of the first transgender service members to serve openly.

JORDAN RING

BANNED NO MORE

Pentagon allows transgender troops to serve openly

By Matt Alderton

IT'S IN THEIR TITLE: Service members join the military because they want to serve. No one knows this better than Marine veteran and retired Army Sgt. Shane Ortega, one of the first openly transgender men to have served in the U.S. armed forces.

Although he's among trans service members' most outspoken advocates,

Ortega didn't enlist because he wanted to change the system. Rather, he enlisted because he wanted to be a part of it. Having grown up in a military family, he'd never even considered another career.

"I joined the military because I wanted to be an active citizen," said Ortega, 29, now a college student at the University of California-Los Angeles. "I believe in helping our nation, and I wanted to give back to it the best way I could."

Now, due to efforts by Ortega and other activists, transgender service members can also serve without limits. After a year of study and review, Defense Secretary Ash Carter on June 30 officially repealed the Department of Defense's ban on transgender service members.

"This is not about bringing transgender individuals into the service. It's about the fact that we already have them in the service," said Peter Levine, acting

undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness. "If we acknowledge the fact that they're already here, the question is: How do we treat them?"

"It's in the best interest of the force, in our view, to provide the medical care they need and to treat them with dignity and respect, as we treat other members of the force," he said. "As long as they can meet our standards, we want them to be able to serve, and we want them to be able to serve well."

The Pentagon's new policy states that transgender service members may serve openly; can no longer be involuntarily separated or discharged solely for being transgender; must meet all applicable military standards for their identified gender; may use berthing, bathroom

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— Aaron Belkin, Palm Center

and shower facilities associated with their identified gender; and are entitled to receive all medically necessary care related to their gender transition, including hormone replacement therapy and gender reassignment surgery.

"DOD and the services put a lot of time, thought and energy into getting the regulations right, and they did a great job," said Aaron Belkin, director of the Palm Center, a San Francisco-based research institute that studies sexual minorities in the military. "The regulations are outstanding because they follow the key principle that any military policy should follow, which is treating all service members the same."

According to the Rand Corp., which studied transgender integration for the DOD, the new policy will have "minimal impact on readiness and health care costs (and) no ... effect on operational effectiveness, operational readiness or cohesion."

"As important as those values are, this was never about equality or fairness. In a military context, the most important thing is readiness," Belkin said. "The ban on transgender troops was undermining military readiness in two different ways. The research shows that forcing people to serve dishonestly compromises readiness, as does failing to provide medically

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U.S. Navy Secretary Ray Mabus speaks at a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Pride Month event at the Pentagon in June.

necessary care to troops.”

The Rand report estimated that out of approximately 1.3 million active-duty service members, 1,320 to 6,630 are transgender. The Palm Center, meanwhile, estimates the total transgender force — including both active-duty and reserve personnel — at 12,800.

“At this point, we’re not seeing anything like those kinds of numbers,” Levine said. “We’re seeing a handful of transgender members in each service, but not anything more significant than that.”

Of course, it’s still early. While the ban on transgender service members was lifted effective immediately in June, the rest of the policy is being rolled out gradually. In late September, for example, DOD issued a training handbook, released medical guidance for providing transition-related health care, opened its personnel management systems to official gender changes and commenced transition-related care across the military health system.

Through June 30, 2017, each of the services will conduct training around the new policy. And as of July 1, each branch will begin admitting new transgender recruits, provided a doctor has certified them as being stable in their identified gender for at least 18 months.

“The Army is in accordance with DOD policy and is in the process of training

leaders and soldiers on DOD and Army policy allowing open service of transgender soldiers,” said Army spokeswoman Lt. Col. Jennifer Johnson. “The Army will continue to sustain force readiness by continuing to implement policy changes that support recruiting, developing, employing and retaining the best talent unrelated to an individual’s gender identity.”

The other services did not comment.

While each of the services has developed its own training plan, Levine said all troops will be educated about “the nature of transgender individuals” and “the principle of dignity and respect.”

So far, things are going well, said Levine: “We’ve seen no problems in terms of compliance, objection to the policy or anything like that.”

Added Belkin, “I do not have concerns. We’re still monitoring the situation very closely to see how things go, but so far we’re hearing good things. ... Trans inclusion is not a problem.”

Ortega also has heard positive reviews,



Army Capt. Jennifer Peace, a transgender woman who serves in the active-duty military, hopes that speaking openly will help others to understand transgender men and women.

but also “a lot of friction points,” he said. Among them: soldiers who encounter roadblocks and delays when seeking transition-related health care and personnel authorizations. “There are still some (transit) issues going on, because they’re still doing construction on the highways.”

And the highways are also cultural, according to Ortega. The former sergeant, who medically retired in June, said successful integration of trans service members requires a longer-term commitment to education and inclusion.

“When we recruit new troops and put them into barracks, they need to be exposed to people from the (trans) community,” he said. “Leadership giving a slide presentation isn’t going to be enough. People have complicated questions that leadership can’t answer, so trans military people need to be the ones who

are actually teaching the classes.”

For Belkin, at least, it’s enough that they’re among those protecting the country — openly, at last. “The moment Secretary Carter made his announcement,” he said, “a huge burden was lifted off the shoulders of transgender service members.”

Ortega can speak to that. He knew early on that he wanted to serve his country, just like his parents and uncles before him, and joined the Marines while he was still

a junior in high school. Two days after he graduated, he left for boot camp.

Ortega subsequently served as a military police officer in the Marines, then a helicopter flight engineer in the Army. During his 11 years of service, he served three combat tours — two in Iraq and one in Afghanistan — and was considered a model soldier by all with whom he served. That is, until 2014, when officials in charge of granting Army flight credentials received the results of his latest physical.

Born female, Ortega had enlisted as a woman but began taking hormones in 2010 to assist with his transition to being male. His commanding officers were aware of his transition, but because of his superior performance, allowed him to continue serving despite the Pentagon’s official policy. Since the 1970s, the DOD had explicitly banned trans men and women from military service, deeming them “unfit” to serve on the premise that their condition was the result of a mental disorder.

His commanders’ blessing proved moot. When Ortega’s blood work showed elevated levels of testosterone, the Army stripped the helicopter crew chief of his wings and consigned him to desk duty pending review of his case.

So commenced two and a half years of administrative purgatory during which Ortega came out as trans and became an activist on behalf of transgender integration, sacrificing a career in the process.

“Activism nearly killed me,” explained Ortega. “But I’m really glad I did it, because if I didn’t, this fight could have taken decades.” ●

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