



HONORING OUR VETERANS

Despite a continuing ban on open military service by transgender people, many have made extraordinary personal sacrifices to serve their country. Estimates put the number of transgender veterans in the hundreds of thousands, and the National Transgender Discrimination Survey found that 20% of transgender adults are veterans¹. However, many of these veterans have been denied access to medical care and other services guaranteed through the Veterans Administration (VA), and have faced discrimination and harassment at VA facilities.

The VA has taken important steps to address these discriminatory practices and improve treatment of trans vets. In June 2011, the VA issued a directive to all its facilities directing them to provide competent and respectful care for trans veterans and maintain a zero-tolerance policy for harassment on the basis of gender identity or expression. The VA directive also clarifies that veterans' medical benefits include all non-surgical, medically necessary transition-related care, including hormone therapy and pre- and post-surgical service. Finally, the Directive requires improvements in VA recordkeeping, permitting veterans to provide preferred names and self-identified gender to be reflected on their documentation and medical records, promoting privacy and respect for trans veterans. NCTE played a key role in securing this critical policy statement, and in 2012 will release a model policy to help local VA facilities fully implement the national guidance.

¹ *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, at 30.

There is still more that needs to be done to ensure that transgender people receive equal access to benefits. The VA has so far maintained arbitrary and outdated regulations prohibiting coverage for transition-related surgeries for veterans. Veterans also continue to encounter difficulty obtaining employment and public benefits because they have difficulty amending military service records. While the law allows for records changes necessary to avoid unfairness, current service procedures are often unclear and produce inconsistent results for transgender veterans.

Policy steps

- The Department of Veterans Affairs should eliminate outdated regulations prohibiting coverage for medically necessary transition-related surgeries for eligible veterans and dependents.
- The Department of Veterans Affairs should develop and implement training on LGBT cultural competence for VA staff, including clinicians.
- The Department of Defense should adopt a uniform policy for updating gender in military service records, comparable to existing policies for U.S. passports and federal civilian personnel records.