

THE

ETPRIDE

AMERICAN
VETERANS
FOR

EQUAL RIGHTS

— AVER NEWSLETTER —

CHICAGO ILLINOIS CHAPTER

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**HONORING
BLACK
HISTORY**

**MISSION
POSSIBLE**
THE STORY OF REPEALING DON'T ASK DON'T TELL
C. DIXON OSBURN

**FREE
Virtual
Event!**

Author
C. Dixon Osburn



McDonalds Launches the
"Marine Corps Burger"

Virtual Book Club Discussion, April 7!!

President's Column

Staying optimistic feels can be challenging. We have the evolving pandemic, frustrating politics, rising crime in Chicago, a looming Russian invasion into Ukraine, and also the natural process of aging. For me, the art and skill of mindfulness seem more practical than ever before when I balance all of this. I do not think you have to be specifically spiritual or religious to practice this—it's about your present moment. Presently, AVER Chicago is doing well; we have adapted to the current conditions and maintain a very consistent virtual connection, we continue to plan for the future, other organizations continue to reach out to us, and we strive to support servicemembers, veterans, and other support organizations. February is Black History Month, and I want to acknowledge the struggles of some LGBTQ+ leaders that have faced racism and inequalities as they disrupt the status quo: Bayard Rustin, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Barbara Jordan, and Marsha P. Johnson. I am grateful for their activism and their influence that led us into a brighter future. Organizations, like AVER, need to maintain optimism in their ability to lead, support the marginalized, and pass on the legacy. Thank you for staying with us and supporting us!

Brandon Chong

Surviving Partner's Benefits

The Biden Administration is paying out substantial sums of money to the surviving partners of same-sex couples who were denied the right to marry. No one knows exactly how many people are eligible, though the best estimates reach into thousands. Unfortunately, few of these individuals know that they're entitled to this payout, and many are elders. So LGBTQ groups are helping to identify and assist this population before it's too late.

How did this come about? Lambda Legal, the organization that led this effort, laid out the groundwork in two lawsuits filed during Donald Trump's presidency. Both challenged the Social Security Administration's denial of survivor benefits since the Supreme Court found them unconstitutional in 2015's *Obergefell v. Hodges*. The first suit was filed on behalf of widows and widowers who could never marry because their same-sex partners died before same-sex marriage was legalized. The second suit was filed on behalf of widows and widowers who were married for less than nine months before their same-sex partner died. Typically, survivor benefits are only available if the marriage lasted more than nine months. However, if an unconstitutional law prevented the couple from marrying until the end of one partner's life, Lambda argues, the government had an obligation to alter this rule. In each case, a Federal judge agreed that the denial of survivor benefits violated the Constitution. As a result, immediate payouts were ordered to the individual plaintiffs and every LGBTQ person affected by the exclusionary policy through a class action suit. The previous Administration delayed the payout and appealed the rulings but failed. On November 1, 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice, under a new Attorney General, dismissed the appeals and settled the cases. The head of the Social Security Administration (SSA) was replaced, and the federal government has moved to start paying out the benefits.

Contact the SSA to see if you are eligible. Survivors can start collecting benefits at age 60, or age 50 if they are disabled. Survivors applying for the first time will receive monthly payments moving forward, based on the deceased partner's earnings, or roughly around \$1250 a month. If a survivor applied previously and was denied, they will be paid a lump sum upfront from retroactive benefits relating to their date of application, in addition to the monthly check. As an example, based on a New York Times report, Anthony Gonzales and Mark Johnson lived together in New Mexico for sixteen years before they were married in 2013. Johnson died in 2014. Gonzales had applied for benefits six years before and was denied. Recently, thanks to the settlement, Gonzales received a \$90,000 retroactive payment in addition to a monthly check of \$1800. Some survivors assume that they aren't eligible because they never actually got married, but the SSA has trained its staff to gauge whether a survivor *would have been married* but for the unconstitutional marriage ban. Among other factors, they look at whether the couple was in a committed relationship, lived together, or held a commitment ceremony. No single factor determines the outcome in an effort to be more flexible. Only about 700 people have been identified and clearly thousands are potentially eligible. Contact the SSA if you think you might be eligible to apply for benefits.

Upcoming Virtual Book Club Event

Dixon Osburn, author of the book “*Mission Possible: The Story of Repealing Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell*,” will join us in a virtual book club Zoom meeting on Thursday, April 7, at 7pm (Central time zone). Check our website for further information! The repeal of DADT was a milestone in the fight for equal rights so it will be a fascinating discussion!

Suicide Prevention

Jessica Heise, Community Engagement and Partnership Coordinator at Jesse Brown VA Medical Center, met with the Chicago Chapter AVER Board in January. Her program is working to identify servicemembers, veterans, and their families as suicide risks and improve their healthcare options. For more information, please contact Jessica via email (Jessie.Heise@va.gov) or telephone (773-996-2297). Mental health services are accessible via the JBVAMC website: <https://www.va.gov/health-care/apply/application/introduction>.

Black History Month

Each February, Eighth Army joins our nation in observation and reflection of the tremendous contributions of Black Americans to our country and our history. Black Soldiers, who have defended our nation since the Revolutionary War, have built a legacy of courage and professionalism by serving the U.S. Army with great honor and distinction. The U.S. Army story cannot be told without reflecting on the historical achievements made by Black Americans and preserving those memories. Black Americans have served and sacrificed in every conflict in our nation’s history, with more than 245 years of honorable service. Today, more than 90,000 Black American Soldiers serve in the active U.S. Army, with 39,000 in the U.S. Army Reserve and 52,000 in the National Guard. Black History month was proposed in 1969 and started to be celebrated in a year later. Check out <https://www.military.com/history/black-history-month-overview.html> or the New York Times article on racism in the military <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/magazine/army-veteran-racism-protest.html>.

Venezuela’s Supreme Court

Venezuela’s highest court has announced that it will weigh the constitutionality of the law banning gays in the military. This comes five years after the advocacy group Egalitarian Venezuela filed a lawsuit asking for repeal of the policy. “It’s a fight for a social transformation,” said **Giovanni Piermattei**, the organization’s President, “that perhaps we will eliminate that stigma, the belief that we’re less male, less female, or less courageous.” Venezuela’s Supreme Court of Justice is not an independent judicial body and can be easily manipulated by the President Nicolás Maduro. This is why it took five years for the court to decide to take up the case. The court has voted to expand some gay rights in the past so there is some hope that they will favor repeal of the policy.

British Review the Impact of the Ban on Gay Military Service

Until 2000, it was illegal to be gay in the British military, and individuals were imprisoned if their sexuality or gender identity was revealed; countless veterans lost financial compensation and healthcare support. The law was changed in 2000 after four service men and women, who were dismissed for being gay, won a case in the European Court of Human Rights. The full scope of the review, which is now underway, will evaluate the potential impact of the ban on LGBT+ veterans, including the consequences of their future lives, accessibility of veterans’ services for LGBT+ people, and changes that will ensure that LGBT+ veterans are recognized and fully accepted as member of the armed forces. Once it is completed, there will be recommendations made to the government.

Please help us reduce publication costs!

A **digital** version of *VetPride* is also now available. If you wish to receive a **PDF file of the newsletter by email**, instead of a printed copy by U.S. postal mail, **please send an email message to avernewsletter@gmail.com**.

Thanks! You get less postal mail and it *helps to reduce our newsletter printing and postage costs*.

McDonalds Introduces a Military Burger?

McDonalds traditionally honors veterans with free meals on Veterans Day and food discounts. They have now introduced the "Land, Air, and Sea" burger which combines a Big Mac, McChicken, and Filet-o-Fish into a single 1,330-calorie burger. Sold separately, the components need to be unwrapped and built before consuming. This is part of a marketing campaign where menu items are suggested by patrons. For more information, check out <https://www.mcdonalds.com/us/en-us/product/land-air-sea.html>.

Gays and Lesbians Polls Up

The percentage of Americans who say they are satisfied with the acceptance of gay and lesbian people in the country has reached a new peak of 62% according to the Gallup's Annual Mood of the Nation poll. This is the highest level since Gallup started tracking the trend in 2001, and up from 55% in 2021 and 56% in 2020. Jeff Jones, Senior Editor at Gallup, stated that gay and lesbian people are "being considered not an outsider group but normal, mainstream group of people in the U.S." Politically, 59% of the Democratic survey respondents said that they were very or somewhat satisfied with the acceptance of gay and lesbian people, up from 48% in 2021; among Republican respondents, 64% said that they were satisfied, an increase from 62% in 2021. Relatedly, the acceptance of marriages between same-sex couples is now 70%, up from 67% in 2020. An estimated 20M U.S. adults identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, according to an analysis of government data by the Human Rights Campaign. At 8% of the nation's total adult population, that's nearly two times larger than prior estimates. Bisexual adults comprise the largest contingent of LGBTQ+ people in the U.S.

New Movie about Finding Love During WWI

The movie is based on the short story by **Ben Shattuck**, "The History of Sound," which won a Pushcart Prize. The plot focuses on two young men, Lionel and David, who begin recording the stories and songs of contemporary Americans during World War I on phonograph cylinders and developed a romance during the summer of 1916. Production will begin this summer. Check out <https://www.thecommononline.org/the-history-of-sound/>.

Monthly Stipend for Caregivers

Check out <https://www.caregiver.va.gov> or <https://veteranlife.com> for information on monthly stipends to a primary family caregiver or other types of caregivers. In particular, check out the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers. A review by the USVA is currently underway.

All AVER meetings at the Center on Halsted postponed until further notice

Remember that we meet up every month on **First Thursdays** via Zoom, so come join us to say hi and share gossip. Everyone is welcome to attend our monthly Board meetings at 7pm. *Check the averchicago.org website for the link (click on the highlighted "Zoom" link near the bottom of the webpage) to get to the Zoom meeting. To call in: 312-626-6799 with meeting ID 488-863-384 and passcode 328090.*

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