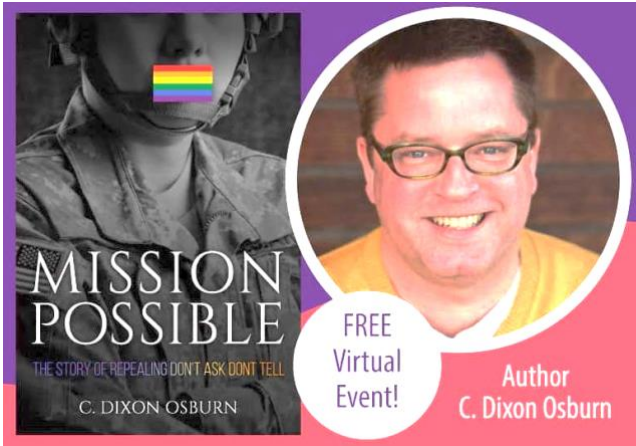


N.S. Vol. 26 No. 4 April 2022 #374



Online with Dixon April 7, 7pm



Dr. Aaron Belkin and Ray Mulliner



Lindsay Church



Transgender Pride Flag in DC



Xavier Becerra



Rachel Levine



Loyce Pace

In Celebration

Ray Mulliner was recognized with the *Lifetime Impact Award* by the Palm Center on Thursday evening, March 31 in a virtual event. The reception, led by Dr. Aaron Belkin, Director of the Palm Center, recapped the history of the efforts by many individuals and organizations, including the Palm Center, to repeal the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. Ray has worked with the Palm Center for over 24 years. Speaker Nancy Pelosi, of the U.S. House of Representatives, reflected on the contributions by Ray, Ambassador James Hormel, and scores of others individuals to promote LGBTQ equality over decades. Some of these included in the program were the Honorable Barbara Lee, Honorable Tammy Baldwin, Honorable Sean Patrick Maloney, Secretary Pete Buttigieg, Jim Obergefell, Evan Wolfson, Michael Fleming, and Ray’s husband, Rod Willie. It was truly an inspiring event.

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). Dixon co-founded SLDN, Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, that led the successful effort to repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” He is an expert at the intersection of civil and human rights, national and international security, and democracy. He received his AB with distinction from Stanford University and JD/MBA from Georgetown. The book describes the strategy that he and SLDN devised to overcome incredible odds. It’s a story about the politics of fear and the consequences of a government that tries to muzzle its citizens. 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!

Changes Coming to Chicago Area VA Hospitals

As part of a national overhaul of the healthcare system of the Veterans Administration, the Biden Administration has proposed to replace part of the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital. Under the plan, the Chicago area would keep its three main VA healthcare facilities open: Hines, Jesse Brown VAMC, and the Captain James A. Lovell Federal Healthcare Center. Hines would be renovated to increase administrative office with the addition of a new building to house all of healthcare services. The VA has also recommended to build a new outpatient facility at JBVAMC. These recommendations would reduce high maintenance and operating costs associated with the 100-year-old building, to comply with modern healthcare standards, and provide a better facility for both inpatient and outpatient healthcare. Hines was originally built to support veterans returning from World War I, and needs well over \$500M for renovation.

Veteran Utility Bill Assistance in Illinois

The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity has funded the Help Illinois Families Program with \$150M that encourages families, including veterans, to seek utility bill assistance. All those who meet the criteria and provide required documentation are eligible to receive assistance for natural gas, propane, and electricity through the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). Call the hotline (833) 711-0374 or visit www.helpillinoisfamilies.com to apply. In addition to bill assistance, an additional \$80M is available for the Utility Disconnection Avoidance Program for those in imminent threat of utility shut-off. This helps to support over 50,000 resident accounts currently on disconnect lists across the state of Illinois. Special thanks go to State Senator Craig Wilcox, 105D State House, Springfield, IL 62706, (217) 782-8000.

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*.

International Transgender Day of Visibility

March 31 is Transgender Day of Visibility, and even in 2022 we continue to see prejudice, abuse, and barriers to those who are trans including active servicemembers and veterans. The impact of this prejudice is evident from the high rates of suicide, military sexual trauma, and an overwhelming mental health crisis for LGBTQ+ veterans and servicemembers. The VA is struggling to make improvements in healthcare policy but it is slow and frustrating. **Lindsay Church**, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Minority Veterans of America, suggests that

- VA facilities must ensure that all patients and visitors are treated without harassment or harm. All veterans, staff, and visitors should be welcome and comfortable.
- The VA must ensure that all restrooms are safe and can accommodate all transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming individuals. No one should feel threatened or dread confrontation or humiliation.
- The VA must collect comprehensive demographic data including gender identity and sexual orientation. This isn't currently being collected and signifies a huge problem if the VA wishes to achieve true healthcare equity.
- The VA must allow veterans the options to designate "X" as their gender in VA records. Without this option, non-binary veterans continue to be challenged every time they seek healthcare.

The VA must acknowledge that transgender healthcare is just healthcare. Gender affirming surgery should be included as part of a culturally competent medical benefits package. (Adapted from *Military Times*, 3/30/2022.) For more information, check out <https://minorityvets.org/>. MVA, based in Washington DC, was founded in 2017.

HHS Flies Trans Pride Flag

The Transgender Pride Flag was flown below the American Flag in front of the Hubert H. Humphrey Building, the headquarters of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on March 31 to celebrate International Transgender Day of Visibility. This is the first time that a federal agency has flown the pink, white, and blue striped banner at its headquarters. HHS Secretary **Xavier Becerra**, Admiral **Rachel Levine**, Assistant Secretary for Health, and **Loyce Pace**, Assistant Secretary for Global Affairs, held a press conference to commemorate the event. "Discrimination against transgender people and their loved ones has no place in this country," said Secretary Becerra. "Here at HHS, we will continue to do everything in our power to protect the healthcare of transgender people, including access to gender-affirming care. On this International Transgender Day of Visibility, I say to our transgender communities: we see you, we stand with you, and we will be there for you." Admiral Levine noted that "Together we must strongly advocate for the most underserved and marginalized in our community, including our trans youth and their families." "We all deserve a future free of gender identity discrimination, said Assistant Secretary Pace. "In the Office of Global Affairs, we are committed to protecting and advancing that future by standing up for transgender rights here and abroad." HHS outlined a number of actions in early March; see <https://www.hhs.gov/programs/topic-sites/lgbtqi/index.html>.

AVER Chicago Chapter Hits the Streets in 2022

We look forward to marching in the Memorial Day Parade in Chicago with the Lakeside Band and others in May. In addition, we look forward to marching in the Chicago Pride Paradex. We are always looking for help in carrying our AVER banner and flags. Please join us if you can! *You don't have to be a veteran or servicemember to join!*

More Support in 2022

President Biden signed the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act which expanded veteran and servicemember benefits. Included was funding for increased research and improved treatment options for veterans with mental health conditions, expanded prostate and breast cancer care and prevention treatments, military sexual assault reform, lifetime access to national parks, health records modernization, expansion of treatment options for those exposed to burn pits, and expansion of the GI Bill.

Addressing the Mistreatment of LGBT Veterans

Earlier this year, U.S. Representatives Mark Takano, Chair of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Adam Smith, Chair of the Armed Services Committee, and Jackie Speier, Chair of the Subcommittee on Military Personnel, issued a request to the Department of Defense to "conduct a historical review of service by LGBTQ+ military personnel," including the effects of policies requiring discharge of these troops. This followed changes in the Department of Veterans Affairs in late 2021 that would restore access to benefits for veterans who were honorably discharged because of their sexual orientation. The review and changes could potentially affect hundreds of thousands of veterans. According to a report published in 1992 by the General Accounting Office, between 1986 and 1990, the armed forces conducted an average of 732 criminal investigations related to homosexuality each year. The ban disproportionately affected women, whose representation was growing during this period. From 1980 to 1990, women represented 10% of all military personnel but 23% of those discharged as homosexuals. The impact was involuntary loss of careers, income, retirement benefits, and the stigma of being discharged. While sexual orientation is no longer a valid reason for discharge, there is still a substantial veteran population that have suffered. The hope is that the study will more fully disclose the history and ramifications of this mistreatment, and lead to a holistic resolution.

Commentary by Lee Reinhart

Lee Reinhart was a Past President of the Chicago Chapter of AVER and re-enlisted after the repeal of DADT. He shared the following commentary with us on Veterans Day event in 2021. "Greetings fellow AVER members and friends. An entire generation of today's soldiers, sailors, coast guard, marines, and our civilian counterparts have grown up not living through the events that happened on September 11, 2001. That said, an entire generation of Lesbian and Gay military members have never experienced what so many of you have endured. They will never know the battle fought—the visits to every political leader across the spectrum. They will not have to experience the mockery, the shower talks, and making us all look like we are sick individuals designed to weaken out Armed Forces. They have entered a service that has become more welcoming, accepting, and willing to even promote Gay Pride month. Many of today's members couldn't imagine what we went through. Many of your journeys were far worse than my situation. This is what we all were able to do for those serving today. Our transgender brothers and sisters are now the target and we must be there for them. They supported us to repeal DADT knowing that their service was still in question. We saw how easily the climate can change as we look back on the past four years. I was honored when I got my 'spark' from Jean Albright years ago who introduced me to AVER, and cherish the years we all worked together to see the end to DADT. I'm forever grateful for those who stood with me in 2011 when I took the oath again. You inspired me and have given the Chicago LGBT veterans a place at the table that no one can take away. March on, keep the torch lit, and don't forget anyone."

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](http://www.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.*

AVER Board of Directors

President Brandon Chong
VP/Treasurer Larry Simpson
VP/Secretary Ben Saucedo

Social Media: Heather Yang

President-Emeritus: Jim Darby

Senior Board Members

Patrick Bova
Stanley Jencyk

VetPride: Bernie Santarsiero/Jim Darby

Parliamentarian: Larry Simpson

Junior Board Members

Bernie Santarsiero
Heather Yang

Web page: Heather Yang

American Veterans for Equal Rights, Chicago Chapter, P.O. Box 29317, Chicago, IL 60629, Telephone: 773-752-0058, www.aver.us and www.averchicago.org. You can email any of the Chicago Chapter officers with the following address: president@averchicago.org, secretary@averchicago.org, or treasurer@averchicago.org.