



# Oregon

Kate Brown, Governor

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TO: House Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee, Senate Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee and the Legislative Administrator

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**Executive Summary and Report: Implementation of SB 946 (2015), establishing the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Veterans Coordinator**

## Overview

The Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs (ODVA) submits this executive summary and report on the implementation and current status of Senate Bill 946 (2015; codified as ORS 406.077) that created the nation's first Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Veterans Coordinator.

SB 946 directs ODVA to submit a Legislative Report on the coordinator position. This two-page Executive Summary and Report fulfills that requirement. There is no additional report. The report must include:

1. The number of veterans served;
2. The type of assistance provided;
3. Recommendations for the improvement/expansion of the services by the coordinator; and
4. Recommendations for legislative changes.

Nathaniel Boehme, the LGBT Veterans Coordinator, joined the ODVA team in May of 2016. He has an extensive background in program management and development serving veterans experiencing homelessness, a Masters in Sociology, is completing a Masters in Social Work, and serves in the Oregon National Guard as a Munitions Systems Technician.

The Coordinator quickly developed and implemented a plan to establish veteran services and outreach efforts for LGBT veterans. In the first two years of the program, direct services have been provided to over 300 LGBT veterans across the state including military records corrections, service-connected claims work, homelessness and housing support, advocacy and empowerment, and establishing regular support groups. Mr. Boehme has been acknowledged by the community for his advocacy and support, including nomination as a 2017 Queer Hero (GLAPN); invitations to participate in the Oregon Military Department's Joint Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council, and to serve on Oregon's Queer Caucus; and is an *ex officio* member of the National Association of State Workforce Agencies' Veterans Committee.

The growth and success of the program is credited to aggressive and coordinated outreach of the LGBT Veteran Coordinator. He has connected and engaged with more than 200 organizations and governmental agencies, most of which had not previously collaborated with ODVA. To demonstrate a strong show of support for LGBT veterans, he participated in over 20 Pride events across the state. The Coordinator was directly responsible for the initiation of new events and outreach including: a "Veterans Basics Training" to the Portland State University School of Social Work and more than 100 Oregon Health Authority Collaborative members; a full-length documentary, "Breaking the Silence," that shared the stories of Oregon LGBTQ veterans and service members; and a military and veteran contingent in the Portland Pride Parade, giving those in the LGBTQ community honor and recognition.

The LGBT Veterans Coordinator has made a number of sustainable links with a veteran-serving and community organizations to better provide comprehensive support for Oregon LGBT veterans. These connections include close working relationships with County Veteran Service Officers across Oregon; the Queer Resource Center; the Veteran Resource Center; more than fifteen public universities and community colleges; services providers for homeless veterans. The coordinator has worked closely with the National Veterans Legal Services Program (NVLSP) and OutServe-SLDN (Servicemembers Legal Defense Network). The NVLSP and OutServe-SLDN are national programs that provide experienced legal services for veterans seeking military records corrections support.

### **LGBT Veterans Coordinator Responsibilities**

The responsibilities of the Coordinator include: a) conducting outreach and providing assistance designed for the unique needs of LGBT veterans; b) providing assistance to LGBT veterans in applying for an upgrade to the character of a discharge from service or a change in the narrative reason for a discharge; c) providing assistance in applying for and obtaining veterans' benefits and benefits available through other programs that provide services and including appeal of any denial of benefits; d) developing and distributing informational materials.

### **Number of Veterans Served and Type of Assistance Provided**

Military records corrections including discharge upgrade

- 35 LGBT veterans received direct military records corrections and discharge upgrade assistance
- 23 LGBT veterans were connected with partner agencies to provide assistance

Service-connected claims work

- 27 LGBT veterans received claims representation from ODVA veteran service officers (VSO)
- 35 LGBT veterans were given a warm handoff referral to county VSO or National Service Organization VSOs

Connection to State and Federal benefits

- 40 veterans were given assistance in connecting with benefits such as VA healthcare, Vet Center services, education and home loan benefits, and homelessness services, and State benefits such as property tax exemptions, permanent vehicle registrations, and more.

Support groups

- In coordination with the Portland, Salem, and Bend Vet Centers, the LGBT Veterans Coordinator set up and facilitated ongoing support groups providing services for more than 150 unduplicated LGBT veterans; the support groups each has LCSW-level clinical services provided by professionals from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Vet Centers

Advocacy and empowerment

- The unique role of the LGBT Coordinator has significantly impacted many LGBT veterans' lives who previously had felt invisible, silenced, and even experienced violence in traditional veteran realms.

### **Recommendations**

The LGBT Veterans Program, a first in the nation, has experienced significant growth and garnered accolades and support from across the state and nation. ODVA supports continued funding for the position and programs for the 2019-21 biennium, with the following priorities: continued support and advocacy for the LGBT veteran community, increased integration with to ensure better representation of this historically underserved community, and increased focus on coordination and collaborated with external partners to better serve LGBT veterans, their spouses, and families. ODVA has no recommendations for legislative changes for the 2019-21 biennium.

This Summary may be found here: <https://www.oregon.gov/odva/Connect/Pages/Reports.aspx>

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