

TELECONFERENCE MINUTES

291400Aug 2013 EST

1. SUBJECT: The implications of the recent Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruling concerning the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) on the Strong Bonds program
2. PURPOSE: To encourage Command Chaplains to initiate discussions with their subordinate chaplains in order to ensure we, as a Corps, are proactive to identify any challenges and solve those challenges at the lowest level.
3. GUIDANCE: The Chief of Chaplains directed that discussions with subordinate chaplains are to occur during the normal course of events, i.e., during UMT training sessions, team meetings, or another structured settings.
4. CH (LTC) James Boggess opened the discussion by providing a synopsis of the guidance received to date. The take-a-ways from the guidance are:
 - a. Benefits become available to legally married same-sex couples on 3 September 2013.
 - b. As a Corps, we are to hold discussions at the local level with the intent of allowing maximum participation and creative problem-solving.
 - c. Every chaplain is expected to engage his/her endorser or the ordaining Religious Organization, as appropriate, to receive doctrine, policy and guidance in relation to issues and challenges resulting from the extension of benefits to married same-sex couples.
 - d. The CCH will release his final guidance for the Strong Bonds program in FY14 on or before 1 Oct 2013.
 - e. We ask that all chaplains inform CH Moeller, or the appropriate member of her staff, of any significant successes or major challenges associated with or resulting from this change.
5. After opening the meeting CH Boggess asked each participating command to comment. Below is a synopsis of the discussion. (Q/C = question or comment from a participant; R = response from USARC Chaplain Directorate)

Q/C. A chaplain expressed concern that there would be a lack of chaplains able to provide Strong Bond's instruction. He asked if a formal survey could be sent to chaplains in an effort to identify instructors who can instruct at Strong Bonds events with same-sex couples.

R. The CCH has asked that we begin informal discussions while waiting for his final guidance for the FY14 Strong Bonds program. Some chaplains have voiced concern

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that a formal survey may result in pressure or discrimination and other chaplains have not received clear guidance from their endorsing agency. We need to identify challenges early in order to ensure continuity of the Strong Bonds program with minimum disruption.

Q/C. Will the Strong Bonds curriculums be changed or tailored to accommodate same-sex couples?

R. The Operational Process Team (OPT) is reviewing all curricula. The initial guidance is that the current material is acceptable; however, instructors should ensure they use inclusive language. Also, the OCCH has decided to stop certifying instructors in the Laugh Your Way curriculum. No other changes in curriculum have been announced and current stocks of Laugh Your Way may be used.

Q/C. Will attendees be notified that a same-sex couple will be attending the event?

R. The OPT is reviewing this question along with the DA JAG. In the interim, we need to be sensitive to the needs of all attendees and if an attendee is uncomfortable and chooses to leave the training, the sponsoring RSC is to accommodate the attending couple by helping to arrange transportation, amending orders, etc. Strong Bonds attendance is voluntary.

Q/C. A concern was raised over specific cultural as well as religious reactions to same-sex couples attending Strong Bonds training events; especially from a same-sex couple looking to "push the system." There is the possibility for negative public reaction in some cultures and settings.

R. Strong Bonds attendance is voluntary. The concern over heterosexual reaction to same-sex couples attending Strong Bonds events have been considered by the OPT. The concern will be forwarded to OCCH for further consideration. The sponsoring RSC/MSC will accommodate attendees who are uncomfortable and choose to leave the training.

Q/C. Has consideration been given to holding separate events for heterosexual couples that are uncomfortable with same-sex couples?

R. The OPT is considering several COAs and no specific guidance is available at this time.

Q/C. It might be helpful, as well as raise awareness, to conduct a survey of past Strong Bonds participants to see if they would participate in a Strong Bonds event with a same-sex couple.

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R. The comment will be forwarded to the OCCH, the lead agency on the Strong Bonds program.

Q/C. A chaplain expressed concern that instead of the current system of perform and provide, that in the future a chaplain who is theologically opposed to same-sex marriage might be required to facilitate or ensure that a couple in his/her command is afforded the opportunity for a military marriage ceremony instead of simply providing the Soldier with a list of contacts who might be able to accommodate the request.

R. The concern was noted. As the policy changes are implemented the USARC Chaplain Directorate will consider if additional guidance is needed to ensure that the "expectation to provide" does not rise to a level where an undue burden results in a violation of the chaplain's conscious.

Q/C. Concern was expressed that Strong Bonds would be considered an administrative function, instead of a religious function, and therefore the chaplain would not be afforded the right to withdraw as a matter of conscious IAW the National Defense Authorization Act. One endorser has issued guidance precluding their chaplains from participating, at any level, in a Strong Bonds event with same-sex couples in attendance.

R. The OCCH is expected to issue guidance for the execution of Strong Bonds events before the beginning of the new fiscal year. OCCH has directed command chaplains to hold discussions with their staff. Chaplain Assistances will not be required to instruct; however, they can be required to support a Strong Bonds event in an administrative function even if their chaplain cannot.

Q/C. What if a chaplain takes a public position that same-sex marriage is a sin and refuses to provide counseling, classes or chapel services to same-sex couples? What limits are there on a chaplain's freedoms of religious and speech? When might the chaplain be subject to UCMJ?

R. Currently all chaplains have complete freedom of speech during activities that are clearly religious such as preaching in a religious service however, there are some limitations on speech during secular activities such as staff meetings. Additional clarification will be sought.

Q/C. The FY14 OCCH Strong Bonds guidance memorandum now says that Strong Bonds is a faith-based activity. How does this affect the freedom of religious speech during Strong Bonds events? Can chaplains espouse their personal, theological opinion on same-sex relationships?

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R. The OCCH will provide additional guidance for Strong Bonds by 1 October. Additional guidance will be requested from OCCH if this concern is not addressed.

Q/C. Command chaplains should also address the possibility of openly homosexual chaplains and chaplain assistants either joining our ranks or making their presence known while discussing the impact of extending benefits to same-sex couples.

R. All discussion relevant to this issue should be discussed.

Q/C. If some chaplains are able to instruct but not provide counseling or conduct a vow renewal, perhaps consideration should be given to increase the chaplain staff at Strong Bonds events to prevent burning out the few chaplains who have no theological restrictions.

R. Once the OCCH has released the updated Strong Bonds guidance the restrictions on the size of the support staff will be re-assessed.

Q/C. One chaplain expressed concern over holding two simultaneous events, one that allows same-sex couples and one that does not in an effort to accommodate heterosexual couples who are uncomfortable with same-sex couples. This could be seen as discriminating against same-sex couples.

R. The OPT is reviewing several COAs and separating couples at events is not authorized.

Q/C. Appreciation was expressed for the OCCH keeping the Strong Bonds in the chaplain arena.