

Pentagon will now pay for transgender soldiers to have gender reassignment surgery - but retirees and family of service members are not covered

Military lifted its ban on transgender men and women serving in June

Now any soldier whose ability to serve is affected by their gender identity will be eligible for reassignment surgery or hormone therapy

Children of soldiers and retirees will also be able to take advantage of the new transgender health benefits but not the operation

Gender-reassignment surgery which can cost between \$7,000 and \$50,000 per operation and could cost up to \$8.4m a year, experts say

Announcement has been met with criticism from equality groups who argue the operation should be available to family and retirees

While conservative military groups claimed it was a waste of military funds

Last month Chelsea Manning, jailed for leaking state secrets in 2013, was told she could have her gender reassignment surgery paid for

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The U.S. military has announced it will now pay for gender reassignment surgery for transgender soldiers.

The move follows the Pentagon's decision in June to lift its ban on transgender troops serving in the military.

Now any soldier whose ability to serve is 'adversely affected by a medical condition or medical treatment related to their gender identity,' they will be eligible for reassignment surgery or hormone therapy, according to the Defense Department.

Children of soldiers and retirees will also be able to take advantage of the new transgender health benefits such as hormone therapy.

However, only active service members will be eligible for gender-reassignment surgery which can cost anywhere between \$7,000 and \$50,000 per operation, as experts say the move could cost up to \$8.4 million a year, Circa Politics reports.



The U.S. military has announced it will now pay for gender reassignment surgery for transgender soldiers (US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter lifted the ban on transgender troops in June)



Chelsea Manning, (left, while living as a man, and right, as a woman) who was jailed for 35 years in 2013 for leaking state secrets, was told she could have her gender reassignment surgery paid for

The announcement has been met with criticism from both sides, with The National Center for Transgender Equality complaining the benefits don't go far enough and that the key operation should be extended to family and retired service members.

Meanwhile the conservative Center for Military Readiness argues that it covers expensive treatments devoid of any military purpose.

'I think this is a gross misuse of military medical dollars,' Ron Crews, executive director of the Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty added. He also complains that military personnel are also getting transgender education which he claims takes up valuable time.

But the move will be life-changing for the the likes of transgender teenager Jenn Brewer whose father is an Army staff sergeant at Virginia's Fort Belvoir.

Until now, his military health insurance refused to anything to do with her transition from male to female, from the \$15,000 hormone blockers to simple private counselling.

The 13-year-old became so frustrated and distraught that she tried to kill herself.

'Nothing was working out for me,' she told The Associated Press. 'And I kind of felt suffocated by all of the rules that had been put in place for people like me.'

The new policy comes in the wake of other transgender-related mandates from the Obama administration.



The move will be life-changing for the the likes of transgender teenager Jenn Brewer whose father is an Army staff sergeant at Virginia's Fort Belvoir (Jenn is pictured with her mother Amanda Brewer and Dr. David Klein)



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Until now, his military health insurance refused to anything to do with her transition from male to female, leaving Jenn very distressed

Lifting the ban on transgender service members is 'the right thing to do, and it's another step in ensuring that we continue to recruit and retain the most qualified people,' Defense Secretary Ashton Carter told reporters in June.

'Good people are the key to the best military in the world.'

Carter has repeatedly stressed the need for the military to modernize to draw from as deep a talent pool as possible.

Driving the changes on transgender troops is the medical community's belief that treatment can be considered medically necessary.

People who identify as another gender can experience various levels of distress, and studies show there is a higher risk for depression and suicide.

The condition is known as gender dysphoria. Until now, the Pentagon lacked a policy that guaranteed coverage for it, said Eric Pahon, an agency spokesman.

LGBT groups say that allowing service members to undergo gender reassignment surgery could reduce the number of suicides among transgender troops.

Last month Chelsea Manning, who was jailed for 35 years in 2013 for leaking state secrets, was told she could have her gender reassignment surgery paid for.

The announcement followed a suicide attempt in July which the 28-year-old's lawyers claim was directly linked to her gender dysphoria.



The 13-year-old became so frustrated and distraught that she tried to kill herself



The teen would now be covered under the new health insurance for hormone therapy for transgender children of servicemen and women

In Jenn's case, she said her feelings of being born into the wrong body began when she was just three or four. She came out at 11, and teachers and students at her middle school mostly supported her, although not everyone, she said.

Under the Pentagon's previous policy, the family was unable to get counseling for Jenn at a private LGBT youth center.

Her only option was a psychologist interning on the base. Unfortunately, the woman eventually left, leaving Jenn without access to a therapist for months because of staffing shortages, her mother said.

After Jenn's suicide attempt, she was referred to another base therapist, who is supportive, her mother said. But the family faced an additional barrier when Jenn decided she wanted to begin to physically transition to female.

The teen would now be covered under the new health insurance for hormone therapy for transgender children of servicemen and women.

But the new policy stops short of surgery for retirees and dependents.

A federal statute from the 1980s specifically bans military insurance from covering surgery for 'sex gender changes.'



Republican Congressman Mac Thornberry (pictured) who chairs the House Armed Services Committee, had hit out at the move in June, claiming it could lead to troops not being ready to deploy for medical reasons

The law allows the defense secretary to make exceptions for active-duty members but not military dependents or retirees, said Pahon, the Pentagon spokesman.

Harper Jean Tobin, policy director for the National Center for Transgender Equality, said the Pentagon misinterprets the law. She said cosmetic surgery is banned, not operations that many doctors now consider medically necessary.

'They're trying to do the right thing,' Tobin said. 'But they've gotten the interpretation wrong.'

Republican Congressman Mac Thornberry, who chairs the House Armed Services Committee, had hit out at the move in June, claiming it could lead to troops not being ready to deploy for medical reasons.

'This is the latest example of the Pentagon and the president prioritizing politics over policy,' Thornberry said.

'Our military readiness - and hence, our national security -- is dependent on our troops being medically ready and deployable.'

But Democratic Senator Dick Durbin argued the new policy allows transgender troops 'to continue to serve without living a lie, and provides much-needed clarity to commanders who for years have been stuck in the middle of a confusing policy.'

Air Force retiree Shari Zabel of Colorado Springs plans to fight the Pentagon's policy. She has scheduled male-to-female reassignment surgery for February. Her military insurance has already denied covering the \$36,000 bill from a private facility, she said.

'You have a group of people who can get the surgery, but you're excluding another group of people who are very similar, and that's discriminatory,' Zabel said.

The Department of Defense says there is a military reason for the changes in the new policy.



Democratic Senator Dick Durbin (file picture) argued the new policy allows transgender troops 'to continue to serve without living a lie'

'If service members are concerned about their family members' health, they can't possibly be functioning 100 percent to fight a war,' Pahon said.

A RAND Corp. study in July 2016 estimated that there are between 1,320 and 6,630 transgender troops on active duty.

Of those, between 30 and 140 would prefer hormone treatment, while between 25 to 130 would seek surgery.

The surgery could be conducted at a military hospital or a private hospital if the military option is not equipped for the job.

As recently as five years ago, the US military still banned gay troops from openly discussing their sexuality under a 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy.

Today, the Army has an openly gay man, Eric Fanning, working as the service's highest civilian leader.

The new transgender policy will be phased in during a one-year period, but the military can no longer discharge or deny reenlistment to troops based solely on their gender identity, effective immediately.

By July 1 next year, the services will begin allowing transgender personnel to sign up, assuming they have met the necessary physical and mental standards to do so, the Pentagon said.

Under the new policy, the Pentagon will cover medical expenses related to being transgender, including gender reassignment surgeries when these are deemed 'medically necessary.'

At least 18 countries already allow transgender personnel to serve openly in their militaries, Carter said, including Britain, Israel and Australia.

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