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RICHMOND IRAQ WELCOME HOME EVENT LGBT INCLUSIVE Military Family Group interacts with Richmond area residents

Grassroots effort filled Richmond, Virginia streets with red, white, and blue as the city stepped up to host an Iraq Welcome Home Our Heroes Parade. The Military Partners and Families Coalition (MPFC), a support organization that connects lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgendered and military families with non-governmental military service organizations, proudly walked in the parade to honor sacrifices of Iraq veterans and their families.

Countless parade goers photographed the sign that stated "Strong Families=Strong Military." The MPFC participants received knowing smiles and "thumbs up" along the parade route from LGBT veterans and families.

All military families merit the community support demonstrated by Richmond area residents. President Obama's Presidential Proclamation for Army Forces Day 2012 honored families by reminding citizens that "the members of our Armed Forces are also parents, spouses, partners, sons, and daughters. Their families are just as vital to their success as their brothers and sisters in arms, and our debt of gratitude extends to them as well."

"It was an honor to participate" stated Tracey Hepner, MPFC co-founder. "We not only welcomed home Iraq war veterans, but we welcomed home a segment of the military who struggled with feeling excluded from military life due to living under Don't Ask/Don't Tell." The law prohibiting military service by homosexuals, commonly known as Don't Ask/ Don't Tell (DADT), was repealed on September 20, 2011. Servicemembers are no longer discharged solely for being gay or lesbian.

Veterans, parents and family members welcomed the opportunity to discuss unique military family challenges with the MPFC representatives at the resource village information table. Despite the repeal of Don't Ask/Don't Tell, Servicemembers are blocked from access to many entitlements offered to heterosexual peers due to the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). MPFC seeks to educate military supporters about blocked entitlements and to guide military families to national support organizations who are not limited by DOMA.

Hepner noted that, "We are military families who happen to be gay, not gay families who happen to be military. The outreach from non-governmental military support organizations has been tremendous. The welcome mat is out for our military families."

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If you'd like more information on this event or would like to interview a participant, please contact Tracey Hepner (above), or Meg Mapelye at rapelye@usc.edu or 707-290-3941.