

ONLINE CAMPAIGN

8/22/2013

Bay Area mayor fights ban against gay blood donors

By John Woolfolk

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CAMPBELL — Mayor Evan Low knew just what would happen when the Red Cross asked him to help coordinate a blood drive this summer. He could attend but not donate because of a decades-old federal lifetime ban on gay men like him giving blood.

"It's like hosting a party you're not invited to," Low said.

But in a time of rapidly changing attitudes and policies regarding homosexuality, Low used the occasion to challenge that policy in Silicon Valley style. He took to social media to make his case — he's on Twitter at @Evan_Low — and started an online campaign.

Low's petition on the Change.org has gained more than 19,000 signatures since he launched it Aug. 9. Mark Anthony Dingbaum, communications manager for the San Francisco-based online petition platform, said Low's isn't the first online petition seeking to



Low Campbell mayor's online petition "has really taken off."

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lift the lifetime ban on gay blood donors, "but this one has really taken off."

"Evan Low has a story that resonates with people," Dingbaum said.

Low's activism comes as the gay rights community has seen a string of successes. In 2011 the federal government dumped its long-standing "don't ask, don't tell" ban against openly gay military service members. And after the Obama administration in 2011 said it would no longer defend the federal Defense of Marriage Act, the U.S. Supreme Court in June ruled the law unconstitutional. The high court also denied backers of a Cali-

ifornia initiative that banned same-sex marriage the right to defend it in court, letting it fall under a lower-court ruling that it, too, was unconstitutional.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration sets the country's rules for accepting blood donations. Since 1983, the FDA has prohibited men who have had sex with other men at any time since the U.S. AIDS epidemic began in 1977 from giving blood for life.

The FDA last reconsidered the lifetime ban on gay men in 2010. An advisory committee called the lifetime ban "suboptimal," but recommended it remain in place "pending the completion of targeted research studies that might support a safe alternative policy." Those studies remain ongoing.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAROL ROZEN

Campbell Mayor Evan Low greets donors at the blood drive he and Vice Mayor Rich Waterman sponsored.

"FDA's primary responsibility with regard to blood and blood products is to assure the safety of patients who receive these lifesaving products," the agency said

in a prepared statement, noting concerns about the transmission of the human immunodeficiency virus that causes the deadly AIDS.

"FDA's deferral policy is

based on the documented increased risk of certain transfusion transmissible infections, such as HIV, associated with male-to-male sex and is not based on any judgment concerning the donor's sexual orientation," the statement said.

Gay men are hardly the only people barred from donating blood. The Red Cross notes that more people are ineligible than eligible due to restrictions ranging from prescription drug use to international travel, such as having visited the United Kingdom in the early 1990s, a period tied to the deadly British outbreak of "mad cow" disease from tainted meat.

"That's all the more reason for people who are eligible to donate," said Red Cross communications manager Jared Schultzman. The Red Cross and other organizations such as the American Medical Association have urged the federal government to reconsider the lifetime ban on gay men donating blood, as other countries like Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom have done.

Low, who is in his last City Council term and second year as mayor and is running for an Assembly seat, said the timing is right for reconsideration. More than 80 members of Congress from both parties have urged that the lifetime ban get a second look, he said.

"Let us hear the science," Low said.

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