

Statement of
Victor LaGroon, Chairman
of
Black Veterans Empowerment Council
before a joint hearing of the
Senate And House Veterans' Affairs Committees
One Hundred Seventeenth Congress

Wednesday March 2, 2022

Introduction

Chairman Takano and Tester and Ranking Member Bost and Moran, I am pleased to speak before the Joint House and Senate Veterans Service Organization (VSO) hearing today on behalf of the Black Veterans Empowerment Council (BVEC).

BVEC is a non-partisan coalition of national, state and local veterans organizations seeking to shift long-standing racial inequities suffered by Black veterans in the United States. Since its inception, BVEC has grown to represent 15+ organizations, representing more than 20,000 members with the ability to reach hundreds of thousands more in communities across our nation.

BVEC has been greatly appreciative of the opportunity to collaborate robustly with HVAC and SVAC in advancing sensible and sustainable solutions to the issues affecting all veterans.

As the work of the 117th Congress progresses, we understand that that country is at the nexus of crises -- political discord and unrest, rising military conflicts, economic recession and the tail end of a two-year pandemic. We must all work to ensure no veteran is left behind during these difficult times.

Benefits Usage

Black veterans disproportionately hail from at-risk, low-income and underserved communities, joining the military in the hopes of serving our nation while seeking economic mobility and access to housing, education and healthcare benefits often lacking in their respective environments.

Though underserved communities are heavily recruited, many Black veterans return to resource-poor neighborhoods and withstand frequent denials, deterrence or misinformation on how to appropriately utilize the veterans benefits they've earned. To that end, BVEC is piloting an initiative to train 500 Black veterans service officers across the country to ensure veterans benefits are widely understood and adequately accessed.

To address historical disparities, VA must contend with the ways dishonorable discharges have adversely affected Black service members, impeding their ability to attain crucial veterans benefits and job placement post-service. A

legacy of stark disparities in punishment under the Uniform Code of Military Justice continues to fuel a pipeline of Black veterans who fall victim to homelessness, joblessness and mental health crises which place undue burden on under-resourced municipalities and nonprofits. BVEC calls for the convening of a Taskforce to formulate recommendations to confront the legacy of discriminatory Bad Paper Discharges with an emphasis on their disproportionate impact on Black and minority veterans to ascertain and codify VA's role in mitigating this harm moving forward.

To fulfill its commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion – VA must also improve micro-targeting outreach across the Black veterans community. BVEC and its affiliate organizations stand willing to assist VA leadership in this effort. The looming homelessness crisis coupled with persisting unemployment and underemployment reflects a bleak series of crises on the horizon. BVEC is pleased that there is a continued push to expand eligibility for VA homeless programs for those who hold other than honorable discharges. We firmly support expanding eligibility for benefits programs broadly, including education and VA home loans. BVEC applauds the implementation of a rapid retraining program for veterans who have exhausted their G.I. Bill benefits during the pandemic. We ask for the dissemination of demographic data of participants to-date to ensure Black veterans are being engaged at adequate rates.

As a host of factors complicate benefit utilization, BVEC supports the work of the Black Veterans Project (BVP) in advancing research on racial disparities in access to veterans benefits across the Department of Veterans Affairs. BVP's findings to date reveal statistically significant racial disparities in disability grant rates and denials suffered by Black veterans and highlights a need for redress and reform. BVEC commends the recent passage of S. 1031 – a bill requiring the Government Accountability Office to conduct its own independent study of racial disparities in the allocation of veterans benefits. To date, BVP's FOIA requests seeking historical data on racial disparities in VA disability benefits (from 1920 to 2000) remain unfulfilled. We thank Chairman Takano and his team for assisting BVP in attaining these critical data sets and for the willingness of committee members to engage in formulating recommendations and solutions once full findings become public later this year.

Black Women Veterans

BVEC commends the passage of the Deborah Sampson Act which provides much needed reforms to VA to accommodate the care of women veterans, we also applaud the implementation of a zero-tolerance policy around sexual harassment at VA facilities championed by Chairman Tester.

BVEC affiliates, Kappa Epsilon Psi Sorority Inc. and the National Association of Black Military Women have shared a number of concerns that directly affect Black women service members and veterans. We urge this committee and the VA to develop a plan of action to address these issues.

Women of color continue to be the fastest growing segment of our homeless veteran community. We ask that the VA prioritize a plan centered on preventing and aiding our women members with stable housing suitable for them and when applicable, their children.

Black women face higher rates of breast and gynecological cancers. We implore VA to expand early screening options and the acquisition of the latest screening technologies to ensure robust care across VA facilities nationwide.

BVEC also supports the expansion of current gynecological and reproductive services to *all* women veterans to include coverage of in vitro fertilization, intrauterine insemination and oocyte cryopreservation. Women veterans continue to suffer long-wait periods and inadequate health coverage in spite of the recent reforms.

6888 Congressional Gold Medal

BVEC supports the immediate passage of bipartisan legislation to award the Congressional Gold Medal to the members of the Women's Army Corps, who were assigned to the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion – the “Six-Triple-Eight” – during World War II. Given the increasing age of surviving 6888 veterans, time is of the essence to provide these heroic and groundbreaking women this well-deserved, overdue recognition.

The women of the 6888th count among thousands of Black veterans denied military honors over the course of America's wars. BVEC requests the lifting of statutes of limitations and convening of a Taskforce to investigate and review of Black veterans from all wars whose military records and official descriptions of combat actions support consideration for the Medal of Honor and other military citations or medals.

GI Bill Repair Act

The introduction of the G.I. Bill Repair Act by U.S. House Majority Whip James E. Clyburn and Congressman Seth Moulton — which seeks to provide GI Bill benefits to the surviving spouse and descendants of Black World War II veterans alive at the time of the Bill's enactment — is profoundly necessary legislation that begins a process of amends for 900,000 Black WWII veterans and their families. We implore the bill's passage into law.