



Statement of Victor LaGroone
Before the House & Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
March 18, 2021

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

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I am pleased to speak before this joint session on behalf of the Black Veterans Empowerment Council (BVEC). BVEC was indirectly formed by the actions of Chairman Takano in the 116th Congress when he convened a roundtable to hear the issues facing the Black veteran community following the unrest and national reckoning sparked by the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. After the roundtable, participating Black veteran organizations recognized a need to convene with greater frequency to collectively propel a transformative Black veteran agenda. And thus BVEC was formed. The council has since grown to include additional groups who advocate for and serve Black veterans on the local, state and national level.

BVEC greatly appreciates the opportunity to share with this joint session some of the needs and priorities of the Black veteran community. We look forward to a collaborative relationship with all congressional members represented here today to advance sensible and sustainable solutions to the issues affecting the veteran community-at-large.

While this statement centers on disparities adversely affecting Black veterans, many of the issues raised stretch the breadth of the veteran community.

As the work of the 117th Congress presses forward, we understand that that country is at the nexus of crises -- political discord and unrest, economic recession, and a global pandemic. We must all ensure that no veteran is left behind during these unprecedented times.

Benefits Usage

Many Black veterans join the military in the hopes of serving their country and communities while seeking to gain much-needed resources and benefits that may not exist in their current environments. As we know, Black veterans disproportionately hail from at-risk, low-income and underserved communities across the United States.

Underserved communities across our country are heavily recruited. Many of these veterans return to their communities after service to face difficulty attaining timely access to the life-changing benefits they have earned.

Historically, Black veterans have frequently been denied, deterred or ill-informed on how to appropriately utilize education, healthcare, housing and job placement benefits, fueling the disparate impact felt within the Black veteran



community. While BVEC recognizes that many of the narratives regarding benefit utilization are anecdotal, we understand that a lack of data collection and analysis by VA makes these disparities more ascertain -- and therefore rectify.

The infrequent cursory analysis that is intermittently done is often not followed by substantive action. To that end,

- BVEC asks that both the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees' support the FOIA request of our affiliate, Black Veteran Project (BVP)
- BVEC appreciates Secretary McDonough's public statement in support of the FOIA effort. We ask that this committee also publicly support the release of this racial data and its full transparency
- BVEC requests that members actively participate in the analysis and formation of recommendations following the release of this data

That being said, present data alone is quite revelatory.

The 2017 Minority Veteran Report states 9% and 11% of Black and Native American veterans respectively live-in poverty, but there remains a lack of outreach to these communities. Only 54% and 42% of Black and Native American veterans respectively have access to at least one benefit program or health care at VA. Benefit access helps veterans transcend the economic strata. Though BVEC applauds VA's solid-state program, it does not assist the millions of veterans who have transitioned before the program implementation.

Issues of racial inequity have been magnified by the effects of COVID-19. Veterans of color in underserved communities have been hit hardest. This reality highlights the importance of a more equitable approach to VA access broadly.

BVEC calls on the VA to perform an annual analysis on the state of veterans benefit access across racial and gender lines and that VA makes its analysis public. To that end, VA must improve its micro-targeting outreach going forward. BVEC avails itself and its affiliate organizations to assist VA leadership in ensuring broader veteran accessibility.

There are additional factors that further complicate benefit utilization that are not under the jurisdiction of the SVAC and HVAC. I would be remiss if I did not paint the whole picture for you.

Disproportionate rates of other than honorable discharges alongside UCMJ actions for Black service members have been and continue to be a barrier preventing benefit utilization. Black Veterans are being disciplined through UCMJ at a rate two times higher than their white counterparts. The House Armed Services Committee Military Personnel Subcommittee held a hearing on "Racial Disparity in Military Justice" in June of 2020 to analyze this issue.

Since that hearing, thousands of veterans of color have become victims of this identified problem. The broader implications of these disciplinary actions are that the burden of supporting many of these returning veterans falls on local communities, municipalities and nonprofits that remain under-resourced. Non-profit and public entities struggle to meet the varied needs of many of these individuals, especially under present circumstances.



As we know, Black, Latino and underserved populations have been hardest hit by the primary and secondary effects of COVID-19. The looming homelessness crisis coupled with the recent unemployment/underemployment statistics reflect a bleak series of crises on the horizon.

Veterans from these underserved communities already exhibit the effects of the housing crisis as well as growing difficulties addressing existing health needs, alongside food scarcity. The entire veteran community will continue to need special considerations:

- BVEC asks that SVAC and HVAC establish a comprehensive approach informed by the Secretary of the VA, on how it is to address racial disparities borne out of COVID-19
- BVEC recommends that Secretary McDonough convene a taskforce to address the lack of equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for Black and minority veterans
- BVEC recommends that SVAC and HVAC require frequent updates from VA to ensure that there is continued progress in the areas of diversity, equity and inclusion

We are pleased for a continued push to expand eligibility for VA homeless programs that serve veterans with other than honorable discharges, but we would also recommend expanding eligibility for broader benefits programs, including education and VA home loans.

BVEC applauds the VA Committee's effort to implement a rapid retraining program for veterans who have exhausted their G.I. Bill benefits during the pandemic, this should be expanded to include a wider range of veterans.

Health Disparities

An additional issue that has come to the attention of BVEC is the growing health disparities amongst Black Veterans -- specifically disparities in veterans' cancer mortality and access to specialty care. We have seen no progress on this issue. The Biden administration has expanded the efforts and partners of the Moonshot Program. How can veterans, especially those exposed to chemical agents and burn pits, benefit from this initiative?

In Southern California, there is a cancer program building a partnership with VA in the Foothill Region to impact cancer deaths and improve treatment access.

- BVEC recommends mandating cancer treatment partnerships with VA nationally
- BVEC recommends encouraging a more collaborative approach across government and public and private partnerships to address the varied health needs of our veterans
- BVEC asks that the VA make health equity and inequities a larger priority for veterans especially those in cities across the nation

Women Veterans



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Members of the council, Kappa Epsilon Psi Sorority Incorporated and the National Association of Black Military Women have shared a number of concerns that directly affect Black female service members and veterans. BVEC stands in solidarity with this segment of our veteran community. We urge this committee and the VA to develop a plan of action to address these issues.

- Women, in particular 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 female veterans with suitable and stable housing, and for -- when applicable, their children.
- BVEC asks that Sec. McDonough communicate a plan of action that will facilitate safe access to healthcare at VA void of gender bias and sexual harassment
- Reproductive care is a concern many servicewomen sacrifice for the opportunity to serve and excel while in uniform. BVEC requests that VA provide for the timely care and support of women veterans who postpone or have issues with reproductive health connected to their service.

In conclusion, BVEC asks that the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees join the 10,000 members of the BVEC in our support of H.R.8889 - Sgt. Isaac Woodard, Jr. and Sgt. Joseph H. Maddox GI Bill Repair Act of 2020. This bill is designed to right a long acknowledged wrong around benefit obstruction affecting Black World War II veterans and their families and should be passed by the 117th Congress. Thank you for your consideration.