



Statement of Richard Brookshire
Before the House & Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
March 18, 2021

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Co-Founder & Executive Director
of
Black Veterans Project
before a joint hearing of the
Senate And House Veterans' Affairs Committees
One Hundred Seventeenth Congress

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Chairmen Takano and Tester and Ranking Members Bost and Moran, I'd like to begin by expressing my appreciation for the invitation to provide a written statement for the 2021 Joint House and Senate Veterans Service Organization (VSO) hearing.

The Black Veterans Project (BVP) was founded in 2018 to cultivate and amplify a racial equity agenda by advancing research, historical preservation and public education to build the case for restitution and restorative justice within the Department of Veterans Affairs and to propel a cultural shift around equal opportunity and racial justice across the Department of Defense.

BVP holds an expansive view of the Black veteran community, recognizing that it is not monolithic, but composed of patriots with ethnicities representing the breadth of the African diaspora. We are deliberate in centering the voices of Black veteran women, Black veteran immigrants, and Black LGBTQ veterans -- understanding the ways these individuals are doubly-marginalized across the veteran landscape.

Our project is not alone in the fight for fostering racial equity among military recruits, cadets, servicemembers and veterans. We have the privilege to work in partnership with and build on the legacy of numerous Black veterans organizations whose contributions cannot be overstated.

Fifty-two years ago, seven combat veterans of the war in Vietnam founded the National Association for Black Veterans. Their convening was a direct response to a lack of equal treatment and consideration by VA following the Vietnam War. Their testimony today is a stark shift from the historical norms of this joint session, where the appearance of Black VSOs have been noticeably marginal. Steps toward remedying this failure begin with the presence of multiple Black VSOs testifying and submitting statements for before you today.

Our exclusion, benign or not, has led to few and futile attempts to proactively foster racial inclusion and to confront the harms of systemic racial discrimination. BVP's commitment to actualizing equity is thus woefully necessary given this lack of due diligence toward, or prioritization of, the distinct challenges facing Black veterans in the United States.

And though our invitation to participate is welcomed -- mere superficial representation cannot replace substantive redress.

Black veteran history has long been ignored. Let me take this opportunity to deliver a reminder.



Racism against Black veterans reaches back to the denial of pensions following the Civil War.

It includes the retraction of healthcare benefits under the Veterans Bureau in the years after World War I, exacerbated by obstruction baked into the inception of the GI Bill which catered to the will of southern states rife with segregation.

It extends to the disregard levied on those returning from Vietnam to inner city ghettos, whose economic, physical and psychological devastations were left to fester -- a catalyst for decades of racial inequities in veterans' homelessness, joblessness and incarceration.

It manifests today in the insidious legacy of racially biased bad paper discharges that continue under an inequitable system of military justice.

The collective weight of this bigotry culminates in a VA whose recent leadership pedestalled the Klu Klux Klan and the offensive erroneous conspiracy of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy.

This bigotry is exemplified through research conducted by the American Federation of Government Employees National VA Council, where an internal survey revealed 3 out of every 4 VA staff have directly witnessed racism at work and 65% of VA staff believe racism makes their job harder.

If VA is a racist place to work, the marked implications for the Black veterans it is legally bound to serve are undeniable.

As the respective committees represented here today lay a foundation for legislative efforts in the 117th Congress, Black veteran history cannot serve as a footnote in a repertoire of American life. That history must be reckoned with.

VA Racial Data

On February 22, 2021 -- Yale Law School's Veterans Legal Services Clinic filed Freedom of Information Act requests on behalf of the Black Veterans Project to glean disaggregated racial data from the Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Health Administration, and Board of Veterans Appeals on post-9/11 adjudication of service-connected disability claims and appeals, benefit allocation and denial and internal reviews of racial bias and racial discrimination complaints made by employees and veterans.

For decades, Black veterans throughout the United States have decried unscrupulous and unrelenting racial discrimination at VA facilities alongside racial bias in VA disability claims processes and procedures. Their concerns have largely fallen on deaf ears, viewed as anecdotal and therefore irreflexive of the wider cultural norms across the Department. Jasper Craven's February reporting in the New York Times captured in vivid detail the VA's shocking and deadly anti-Black racism, once and for all exposing a truth too many Black veterans have known.

Ascertaining comprehensive racial data from VA is a requisite to adequately measuring the breadth of its storied race problem. Wide-reaching VA race data provides essential baselines for future accountability. Most concerning to our project is VA's refusal to track racial data through the disability claims process, a tacit smokescreen for continued discrimination.



As benefit obstruction remains a grave concern for Black veterans and their families, the refusal to capture accurate and transparent data cannot continue. The recent passage of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 provides much needed policy shifts in VA's capture and disaggregation of racial data relating to veterans who receive VA benefits. We applaud the committees' effort here. But more can still be done.

GI Bill Repair Act

The introduction of the G.I. Bill Repair Act by U.S. House Majority Whip James E. Clyburn (SC-06) and Congressman Seth Moulton (MA-06) — 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 the ways the United States government has willfully stripped Black veterans and their families of benefits which provide opportunities to build generational wealth. We implore the support of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees to ensure its passage into law..

6888 Congressional Gold Medal

Black Veterans Project unequivocally supports the Senate passage of bipartisan legislation introduced by Senator Jerry Moran (R-Kan) 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.

We also second the American Legion's call to “lift the statutes of limitations and other obstacles that may impede proper investigation and expand the review of minority veterans from all wars and conflicts whose military records and official descriptions of combat actions support consideration for the Medal of Honor and other military citations or medals.”

Medicinal Cannabis

Another matter of consideration can be best exemplified by a contemporary Black veteran story:

In November of 2020, Iraq war veteran Sean Worsely exited the front doors of Alabama's Draper Correctional Facility. Met by the embrace of his wife, Eboni and supporters who'd long fought for his release, his 11-months of incarceration — the beginning of what was supposed to be a five-year sentence, had come to an abrupt end.

Sean's story gained national attention in the wake of racial strife and protest that consumed the public imagination in the months following the death of George Floyd. A chance encounter with Alabama deputies in the fall of 2016 would unravel Sean's life, leaving the Army veteran — deemed totally and permanently disabled by our nation's military and whose PTSD overtook an otherwise promising career — to fight for his freedom in an Alabama prison cell.

The charges? Possessing prescribed medication to treat his nightmares and seizures and failing to pay a \$250 renewal for a medical marijuana card.

The need for this body to expand, champion and pass the VA Medicinal Cannabis Research Act is dire. As suicide rates for veterans continue unabated, risks to Black veterans psychological and physical safety is exacerbated by a



racially biased criminal justice system coupled with an unwillingness by VA to contend with the benefits of medicinal cannabis. The lives and mental health of untold numbers of veterans of all stripes and backgrounds hang in the balance as VA lags far behind modern policy developments relative to medicinal cannabis use. Legislative action is required to move VA forward on this issue.

Department of Defense / VA

While this joint session hearing has no purview over the Department of Defense, the powerful ties that bind service members -- future veterans themselves, to the work of the Senate and VA Veterans Affairs Committees are undeniable.

Black Veterans Project is unwavering in its present commitment to gain access to DOD's wide-reaching racial bias survey data, collected since 2013. The release of segments of DOD's 2017 racial climate survey data in December was compelled in part by staunch advocacy by BVP. Though incomplete, this data has provided damning evidence of the negligible failures of the military's equal opportunity apparatus as well as the troubling effects of racial discrimination on the psychological welfare, safety and careers of Black military personnel.

The continued stain of anti-Black racism toward those who answer this nation's call to serve is shameful. The repercussions of persisting racial discrimination in the military will inevitably be left at the feet of VA, as it has historically for generations. There must be proactive coordination to address these concerns if we are to truly foster an inclusive veterans affairs agenda.

Lastly, on a personal note -- I have yet to receive my COVID-19 vaccine.

I am a seven-year veteran of the U.S. Army, having served as an enlisted Infantry Combat Medic in Afghanistan. I, like many veterans, have relocated during the COVID pandemic from New York City to Baltimore in search of more affordable housing.

Unlike most veterans, I run a veterans organization with the privilege to submit written testimony directly to members of Congress.

Unlike most veterans, I also hold an advanced degree, paid for by the GI Bill -- which provides me leverage in navigating the bureaucracy of VA.

Though I've communicated numerous times with the Baltimore VA, enrollment requires snail mail -- precluding me from being able to receive the vaccine expeditiously -- and a barrier to veterans who may be homeless or otherwise displaced.

The Senate must pass the VA VACCINE ACT to ensure veterans of all status' and backgrounds can access VA for the life-saving COVID-19 vaccine.

If I am struggling to receive this treatment, I can only imagine the barriers other veterans with less privilege and access must be facing.

Members of both Committees', Black Veterans Project appreciates the opportunity to provide a candid and forthright written statement to this joint session. It is our hope that our remarks today might assist in informing the work of the 117th Congress and your efforts to foster a more inclusive and equitable VA.