

Statement of

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of

Black Veterans Empowerment Council Inc. (BVEC)

*Before* a joint hearing of the

Senate & House Veterans' Affairs Committee

One Hundred Eighteenth Congress

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Chairman Tester and Chairman Bost, Ranking Members Moran and Takano, Members of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees.

I am pleased to speak before the Joint Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing today on behalf of the Black Veterans Empowerment Council, Inc. (BVEC).

BVEC is a registered 501(c)3 in the state of Maryland, and I am honored to be leading the re-energized evolution of our organization, executive team, staff, and volunteers to continue providing impact across the broader community with transparency.

Currently, BVEC is working on comprehensive plans to strengthen both the collaboration and transformation of our efforts as we continue to shift long-standing racial inequities suffered by Black veterans in the United States through our non-partisan coalition made up of national, state, local veteran service organizations and the Black veterans community.

BVEC is appreciative of the work that the SVAC and HVAC have completed in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, and we look forward to our continued collaboration in the 118<sup>th</sup>

Congress. We also look to continue advocating to advance sensible and sustainable legislative solutions affecting all veterans – Including:

- **GI Benefits:** Particularly underutilization of and inadequate access to benefits for Black and minority veterans and discharges for Blacks and minorities more broadly.
  - As a host of factors complicate benefit utilization, BVEC supports the work of the black veterans centered organizations in advancing research on racial disparities in access to veterans benefits across the Department of Veterans Affairs. These findings reveal statistically significant racial disparities in disability grant rates and denials suffered by Black veterans and highlight a need for redress and reform.
  - The Sgt. Isaac Woodard, Jr., and Sgt. Joseph H. Maddox GI Bill Restoration Act was introduced last Congress.
- **Economic:** Department of Defense and Federal Contracting to Veteran Owned Small business (VOSB) and Service-disabled veteran owned small business (SDVOSB) is one of the largest issues for veterans.
  - 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.
  - **Startup Capital for VOSBs & SDVOSBs is critical!** There is a number of regulations made by agencies that require significant upfront capital just to be registered to do business. It is cost prohibitive in a lot of cases for veterans to get into business.
- **Housing:** Particularly, significant (and in some cases increased) numbers of homelessness amongst veterans.
  - 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 VA Housing Loan Forever Act was also introduced last Congress and we support this piece of legislation and look to work with Congress on it.

- **Enforcement:** 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.
  - Unfortunately, a lack of effectiveness exists due to the speed of the agencies implementing new legislation.
  - Further, an issue lies on how the federal agencies and subagencies interpret and implement legislation intent without a streamline process across other agencies and divisions of those agencies.
    - A perfect example is Chairman Tester’s quote from the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs site, article dated, November 30,2022. Quote: “I’m disappointed VA hasn’t implemented the law we passed two years ago to end copays for VA health care for Native veterans,” Tester said at the hearing.
    - Black veterans are experiencing similar issues and we would like to start working towards establishing a VA Advisory Committee on African American Affairs. I personally testified to Ranking Member Takano during the Veteran Voices of Color roundtable of this need in July and September of 2020. We as the founders of the BVEC did not do enough to pursue this effort in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress. I ask the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress today to work with the BVEC on this advisory committee.

As the work of the 118th Congress progresses, we understand that that country is at the nexus of multiple crises – real challenges around care for our veterans, global and national security threats, possible economic recession and the tail end of a two-year pandemic. Now, more than ever, we must all work together to ensure the needs of veterans are being addressed during these difficult times. With that in mind, I and the BVEC stand ready and willing as partners in the journey towards sensible, sustainable solutions for veterans.