



**Statement of
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**Before the
Committees on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.**

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Chairman Tester, Chairman Bost, Ranking Members Moran and Takano, and Members of the Committees on Veterans' Affairs:

Thank you for your leadership and for providing me the opportunity to deliver the 2024 Legislative Priorities of the Black Veterans Empowerment Council (BVEC). We are a non-partisan coalition of national, state, and local veteran organizations serving as a unified voice for the needs of Black veterans on long-standing racial and economic inequities in the United States.

Our overarching goal is to end chronic homelessness in the veteran community, especially among Black veterans. Through increased advocacy with BVEC's public and private partners, BVEC aims to be both a bottom-up resource to share with federal policymakers discrepancies or successes on the ground of federal action – and likewise, a top-down resource to ensure effective communication of new legislation, VA programs, or others to ensure it gets to folks in the communities that BVEC supports.

BVEC is appreciative of the work that the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) and House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) has completed thus far during this 118th Congress. We also look to continue advocating to advance sensible and sustainable legislative solutions affecting all veterans – including:

BENEFIT UTILIZATION

Last month, The Department of Veterans Affairs released its 2024 Agency Equity Action Plan to help ensure that the VA delivers on its promise to provide world-class care and benefits to all Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. We believe that all those who have served in our armed forces should be able to access the benefits and services earned through sacrificing their blood, sweat, tears, and time for our great nation. However, that has not been the case in the past, and many inequities continue to persist in preventing veterans from accessing the full range of these benefits and services. No servicemember should risk their lives to protect and defend our country, and face homelessness, poverty, or hunger upon completion of their service.

More specifically, BVEC is concerned that underutilization of and inadequate access to benefits for Black and minority veterans is significant and undeniable. Research 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. That is why BVEC supports advancing research on racial disparities in access to veterans' benefits across the Department of Veterans Affairs, and we are more than willing to partner with the respective committees on policy addressing this topic. We believe wholeheartedly that further and deeper research will better inform future policy making and increased access to benefits for veterans that need them. That is why BVEC is proud to support the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act - a package of bills that aims to address the aforementioned and many other gaps in benefits experienced daily by veterans across the country.

HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS

We cannot disregard the sheer numbers of veterans that are currently experiencing homelessness - even within the nation's capital. Because of this, BVEC has reinforced its positioning in fighting for veterans and has set in motion a strategic plan that addresses chronic disparities in benefit utilization, economic opportunity, enforcement, and recognition for contribution to our country. This includes building on the challenges and successes of this year to make meaningful progress on the VA's short and long term goals to better serve Black veterans and military service members, such as increased funding for targeted outreach efforts in communities actively criminalizing the surveillance of homeless encampments, expanding available assistance for at-risk veterans due to job loss, and expanding capacity of communities to move veterans from motel/hotel placements into permanent housing.

To fulfill its mission statement of serving minority and other underserved populations, the Department of Veterans Affairs must improve micro-targeting outreach across the Black veteran community - which BVEC and its affiliate organizations support and stand ready to assist the Secretary in. Therefore, we intend to continue to advocate for the interests and needs of Black veterans as the nature of the political landscape evolves so that our heroes can come home to a house and not be discarded on the streets and left to fend for themselves after their service in our military. BVEC supports extending access to the HUD-VASH voucher beyond the chronically homeless and the most acutely disabled - which would increase access to, and utilization of, these important vouchers. Additionally, BVEC is supportive of the HOME Act (H.R. 3848), and other housing-related legislation, that increases access to transitional housing and the maximum rate of per diem payments provided by the VA to entities to serve veterans.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

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 and incentives for veteran-owned small businesses as well as service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses is critical. There are a number of regulations made by agencies that require significant upfront capital just to be registered to do business - which is cost prohibitive in a lot of cases for veterans to get into business.

BVEC currently serves as a critical touchpoint in advancing education, equity, and economic opportunity in the Black veteran community. Even more, veterans are already highly trained in the many disciplines and transferable skills required to be successful in today's workforce. With all this in mind, we look forward to working with the Joint Committee to support our shared mission of serving veterans, families, and communities across the country and removing barriers to opportunities for them to be self-sufficient. BVEC has been supportive of recent efforts like the legislative hearings on ways to improve Transition Assistance Programs (TAP) - which can significantly help Black veterans from the start as they transition out of service regardless of service branch. BVEC is also supportive of H.R. 7401, the Contract our Veterans Act, which would add veteran-owned small businesses to the Defense Department's contracting

list and set a goal of five percent of the value of all prime contracts and subcontracts awarded each year, similar to the goal already set for service-disabled veteran-owned contracts.

AGENCY ENFORCEMENT

Black veterans disproportionately hail from historically at-risk, low-income, and underserved communities, and join 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, due to the speed of federal agencies and sub-agencies in interpreting or implementing legislation, there have been gaps in resources provided and enforcement of current law that has allowed veterans to go without the assistance they need. Current examples of legislative fixes that address the root of this matter includes: making necessary program adjustments to better accommodate homeless veterans with difficulties accessing services (S. 1436); restoring lapsed VA communications, transportation, and spending authorities (H.R. 645); and extending the HCHV program through the next 5 years (H.R. 2525).

As a result, BVEC has identified areas of opportunity to improve efficacy, efficiency, and efforts to streamline processes, improve performance, and provide more targeted outreach to the sects of the veterans being underserved. For example, one of BVEC's top legislative priorities that echoes feedback from our on-the-ground partners and Black veterans that we engage with is a push to create an Advisory Committee on African American Affairs at the Department of Veterans Affairs. This advisory committee can directly assist in improving implementation of legislation across agencies and divisions and promoting fair access to benefits and resources. This is just one of the ways that BVEC hopes to work together with your respective committees to provide comprehensive, sustainable solutions to better serve the Black veteran population.

CONCLUSION

The platform for BVEC's success is and has been a public-private partnership that effectively brings together community-based non-profit organizations, federal and local government agencies, and other private business entities - utilizing industry leading best practices and resources - towards achieving our mission of better serving the Black veteran population through housing, workforce development, and many more of the aforementioned topics. We would like to continue in that same vein of partnership, not just with the numerous organizations that we work alongside to serve millions of veterans across the country, but with each and every member of the Committees on Veterans' Affairs within both the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives.

Chairman Tester and Chairman Bost, Ranking Members Moran and Takano, thank you for the opportunity to provide our testimony today. We share your goal of eliminating chronic homelessness and strengthening the self-sufficiency of each veteran within our community, and seek to further bridge the gap between the various veteran communities, government, philanthropy and the private sector to better serve the needs of Black veterans. And we are prepared to answer any questions you may have.

Appendix A

Supported Legislation

Veteran Package - *Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act*

BVEC **supports** the inclusion of language from the Senate's CHARGE Act and the House's HOME Act in any final legislation. Final bill text has yet to be released and CBO scores have only recently been received by the joint committees. The VSO community has been heavily invested in the passage of this package of veteran support and priorities from the outset of the 118th Congress and BVEC urges consideration without further delay.

House of Representatives

H.R. 491 - *Return Home to Housing Act*

BVEC **supports** this legislation (House companion of the GPD language included in the Senate's Charge Act) that resumes Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program reimbursement rate flexibility at 200% the state home domiciliary rate of \$59.69, or \$119.38 a night for shelter, food, security, staff, and provision of all supportive services. Funding for this program goes directly to veteran services as it is reimbursed for supports already provided to a veteran in need of housing.

H.R. 645 - *Healthy Foundations for Homeless Veterans Act*

BVEC **supports** this legislation (House companion of the flexible VA authority language included in the Senate's Charge Act) to restore lapsed VA communications, transportation, and spending authorities. VA will once again be able to get veterans to and from their medical appointments back to their housing, facilities, or unsheltered locations rather than traversing both rural and urban settings without the assistance of mass transportation.

H.R. 2525 - *Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Act*

BVEC **supports** this legislation. The bill extends the HCHV program through 2029 and provides that under the HCHV program, *a veteran* means a person who served in the active military, naval, air, or space service and was discharged or released from service, excluding those who received a dishonorable discharge or were discharged or dismissed under a general court-martial.

H.R. 3848 - *Housing our Military Veterans Effectively Act of 2023 (HOME Act)*

BVEC **supports** this legislation, and was pleased to see that the House passed this bill in December of 2023. The bill would adjust the cap on reimbursement for transitional housing veterans at 133% of the state home domiciliary rate. There would also be a waiver available for up to 50% of the providers for up to 200% of the state home domiciliary rate. More simply, the rate would go from \$68.64 to just over \$79.38 for the next three years.

H.R. 3900 - To establish certain rights for spouses of members of the uniformed services

BVEC **supports** granting employment and reemployment rights to spouses of service members, which helps them maintain income through the curveballs of military life (deployments, moves,

and mobilizations) thrown at military families. Dual incomes are seen as a protective factor for military families when service members are in transition.

H.R. 5416 - Ensuring Veterans' Smooth Transition Act

BVEC supports automatically enrolling transitioning service members into VA healthcare to ease the transition process and ensure continuity of care considering that service members are allowed to opt-out.

H.R. 6225 - Expanding Home Loans for Guard and Reservists Act

BVEC **supports** expansion of grants eligibility for the VA Home Loan program to Reserve component service members who serve 30 consecutive days of active duty for training that is not basic training. This effectively allows Guard/Reservists to become eligible for the VA Home Loan program as they are in their military occupation specialty training after basic training.

SENATE

S. 1436 - *Critical Health Access Resource and Grant Extensions (CHARGE) Act*

BVEC **supports** the CHARGE Act's goal to make necessary program adjustments to better accommodate homeless veterans with difficulties accessing services, as requested by *both* VA and service providers - which would again allow VA transportation, communication and purchasing authorities providing veterans access to care, communication with case management, and stable housing supports. BVEC urges the Senate's consideration and passage of this legislation's more comprehensive language without delay.

S. 3728 - *Veterans Housing Stability Act of 2024*

BVEC **supports** this legislation. Veteran mortgage delinquencies were not forgiven during the PHE but were placed in forbearance. the PHE lapsed and those bills came due or refinance into much higher rates. This bill would halt veteran foreclosures through a partial claim program, which is severely limited for veteran borrowers who took on high interest loans.

Draft Bill Text and Language

Draft Bill - *Basic Need Allowance/Hunger bill*

BVEC **supports** the provision for basic needs if service members are receiving the Basic Need Allowance the month before transition, the Services will continue to pay it to service members/veterans the 6 months after transition.

Draft Bill - *End Veteran Homelessness Act (HUD-VASH)*

BVEC **supports** this legislation which would extend HUD-VASH voucher access beyond the chronically homeless and the most acutely disabled, to all *homeless* veterans and those *at risk* of homelessness, or that are already participating in other rental assistance programs. The bill would increase access to, and utilization of, HUD-VASH vouchers, and BVEC urges swift consideration of this legislation along with additional incremental funding in 2025 to cover these intended expansions.

Draft Bill - Guard/Reserve VA Homelessness Program Eligibility

BVEC **supports** this legislation which fixes issues that have arisen between homeless programs for the Guard and Reserve components when eligibility was expanded for veterans with Other Than Honorable discharge statuses.

Draft Bill - Homeless Eligibility

BVEC **supports** this language, which would standardize eligibility for VA homeless programs and would add veterans of the Military's Reserve Components as eligible for homeless services. Programs have naturally evolved and expanded independently in different Congresses, causing a patchwork of eligibility regulations and rules for accessing support.

Draft Bill - Setting the Table for Transition Act of 2023

BVEC **supports** granting SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) eligibility for all service members for 100 days post transition, in order to reduce food insecurity in transitioning veterans.

Draft Bill - Veteran Rental Assistance Guarantee

BVEC **supports** this language which would guarantee all veterans a one-time upstream rental assistance of up to \$4,000 for first and month's rent, back rent, landlord incentives, or lease-up fees, paired with a longer-term housing voucher. The language was intended to:

- (1) realize the President's 2024 Budget Request of a multi-billion-dollar upstream homeless prevention proposal for homeless veterans and those at risk of homelessness.
- (2) prohibit discrimination against the source of the funds while also barring veteran disability from being included in eligibility calculations.

Appendix B

Overall Funding Recommendations for Fiscal Year 2025

BVEC estimates a total increase of \$175 million for veteran homelessness programs in Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25), with the need spread across several major VA accounts, and programs external to the VA also requires an increase of \$175 million across the Departments of Labor and Housing & Urban Development accounts. The remaining VA program calculations are made based on the current 2024 VA program spending rates while we continue operating under a FY 23 Continuing Resolution. Furthermore, BVEC recommends continued support above current funding levels to ensure that sufficient support for housing unstable veterans is available.

Department of Housing & Urban Development

BVEC appreciates previous allocations that Congress has made toward eradicating homelessness within the veteran population, and we look forward to continuing to work with both sides of the aisle and chambers of Congress to fund these critical program improvements for the next fiscal year and beyond - including:

\$100 million for HUD-VASH incremental funding to increase the capacity of communities to move veterans from motel/hotel placements into permanent housing.

- i. **\$40 million** for HUD to provide 4,500 new Project Based Vouchers, that are not counted against PHA utilization rates and caps on project-basing of vouchers.
- ii. **\$52.5 million** for HUD to provide for new incremental vouchers and additional Public Housing Authority incentives, to mirror the incentives offered with HUD's Emergency Housing Vouchers.
- iii. **7.5 million** for Tribal HUD-VASH

\$7.5 million increase to \$75 million for DOL's Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP) aimed at expanding available assistance for at-risk veterans due to job loss. The program intends to continue expanding access nationwide and include spouses and dependents. HUD Data indicates positive effects on program metrics for programs paired with HVRP grants as there are savings in administrative costs between programs with a single grantee.

Department of Veterans' Affairs

Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program (HCHV) - \$25 million increase and reauthorization for temporary housing for homeless veterans - which would significantly reduce social distancing and provide targeted outreach efforts in communities actively criminalizing and surveillance of homeless encampments.

Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) \$25 million increase to \$800 million, removal of grant cap, and reauthorization to provide flexible assistance targeted at specifically addressing rental and other eligible arrears, and continued implementation of the inadequate subsidies expansion. Further, BVEC recommends making the SSVF program permanent to increase grantee confidence and to align with other HPO programs.

\$35 million increase for the Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Case Management Program for VA to provide additional VA or community contracted case managers. To increase the quality of services and increase voucher utilization and decrease case manager loads, increasing hard to fill location-based and specialty hiring incentives, as well as retention and rapport building capabilities.

Restore \$44 million to the Grant and Per Diem Program (GPD) to \$350 million, for removal of grant and reimbursement rate caps & Special Needs reauthorization to maintain system capacity and allow for additional facility renovations - which would also assist with the additional rounds of capital grants needed to extend the capacity of service providers begun during the recent Public Health Emergency.