

Statement of Victor J. LaGroon

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Before the U. S. House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON VETERAN AFFAIRS

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

Introduction

I am pleased to speak before this committee on behalf of the Black Veterans Empowerment Council (BVEC). BVEC was indirectly formed by the actions of Chairman Takano this summer when he convened a roundtable to hear the issues facing the Black veteran community in the aftermath of the untimely death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and unfortunately so many others this year and the preceding years. After the roundtable, the participants recognized that there is a need to convene again and more frequently to discuss the state of Black Veterans and thus BVEC was formed. Since then, the council has grown to include additional groups who also advocate for and serve Black veterans on the local and national level.

BVEC greatly appreciates the opportunity to share with the committee some of the needs and priorities of the Black Veteran community. We look forward to building upon our relationship after this hearing and having further discussions with each Congressional Member on this Subcommittee and the Committee as a whole. While today I would like to mainly to speak with you regarding a growing disparity effecting black veterans of the United States Military, there are also several issues that need to be addressed that can also benefit all veterans. We at the nexus of crisis's, political discord and unrest, economic recession, and a pandemic, we must make sure that we are providing the necessary assistance to all adversely affected veterans, particularly our most vulnerable veterans.

Benefits Usage

Many black veterans join the military in the hopes of serving their country and communities and often seeking to gain much needed resources and benefits that may not exist in their current environments. As we know, many of these service members come from at risk and underserved communities.

These underserved communities are often resource poor and heavily recruited. Many of these veterans return to the same or similar communities. There is a significant issue with the disparity of these veterans having timely access to much needed benefits that these veterans have earned, but have frequently been denied, deterred or ill-informed on how to appropriately utilize these well-deserved benefits. We recognize that many of the narratives regarding the utilization are anecdotal, but this is due to a lack of data collection and analysis by the VA. The infrequent cursory analysis that is done often does not come with follow on action.

For example, the 2017 Minority Veteran Report, the latest report, states 9% and 11% of Black and Native American veterans respectively live-in poverty, but there is lack of outreach to these communities or any community for that matter. Only 54% and 42% of Black and Native American veterans respectively have access at least one benefit program or health care at VA. The programs under the purview of this Subcommittee if accessed can help veterans transcend the economic strata. We applaud VA's solid-state program, but it does not assist the millions of veterans who transitioned before the program came online.

We call on the VA to perform annual analysis on the state of veterans across racial and gender lines and make the outcome of such analysis public. VA must also improve its micro targeting outreach to disparate

going forward. I think I can comfortably speak for most VSO's when I say that we are willing to assist VA in this effort.

There are additional factors that complicate benefit utilization that are not under the purview of this Subcommittee, but I would be remiss I did not paint the whole picture for you. Disproportionate rates of other than honorable discharges and UCMJ actions for Black service members is a huge barrier that prevents benefit utilization. Black Veterans are

being disciplined through UCMJ at a rate that is two times higher than the rate that of their white counter parts.

House Armed Services Committee Military Personnel Subcommittee held a on "Racial Disparity in the Military Justice - How to Fix the Culture" in June to analysis this issue, but thousands of veterans of color have already become victims of this identified problem and the repercussions precludes those veterans from receiving benefits and the ability obtain certain jobs. The broader implications of these disciplinary action are that the burden of supporting many of these returning service members falls on local communities, municipalities and nonprofits. Non-profit and public entities struggle to meet the varied needs of many of these individuals, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we know, Black, Latino and underserved populations have been hardest hit by the primary and secondary affects brought on by the covid-19 virus. The looming homeless crisis coupled with the recent unemployment/underemployment numbers spell out a bleak series of crisis on the horizon. Veterans from these communities are already exhibit the effects of the housing crisis as well as growing difficulties addressing existing health needs, and food scarcity as related to the covid virus. The veteran community will continue to need special considerations, especially black veterans from both HUD and the VA.

BVEC is pleased that this Subcommittee has continued to push expanding eligibility for VA homeless programs for veterans with OTH discharges, but we would also recommend expanding eligibility for benefit programs, including education and VA home loans. BVEC also 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.

Another barrier to benefit usage, particularly the VA Home Loan program, is credit score. Again, while this is not in the jurisdiction of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, we must make sure that the Committee understands the historical context.

Military service is often generational and so is wealth accumulation. After the Civil War, descendants of Black veteran were denied pensions if their family died in combat, while surviving families of White veterans given this benefit. Approximately, 1 million Black veterans served in WWII and the overwhelming majority of them were denied the original G.I. Bill, which provided housing and education benefits. Many Black Vietnam-era veterans came home and were denied disability compensation for clear and apparent injuries they suffered in combat, which led to the creation of the National Association for Black Veterans by veterans who were willing to fight VA to ensure that all veterans can obtain the benefits that they earned through their service.

These historical events are significant because they limited the generational wealth building of millions of black veterans, their families, and their descendants. Unfortunately, credit scores often lock communities, individuals, and veterans in cycles of poverty. DoD is slowly coming around to the necessity of financial literacy in the service, but we would like to see the VA bolster its portfolio of financial literacy tools for veterans. We also support the unreleased GI Bill Repair Act of 2020 from Rep. Moulton and Rep. Clyburn.

Another Issues of Concerns

BVEC is also concerned about food insecurity of veterans, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. We would like to see funds from VA not be calculated as part of a veteran's income in regard to qualifying for food assistance. We believe this is especially crucial during this pandemic.

We do applaud the Committee's efforts to provide additional waivers and resources to VA's homeless programs. We would like VA to provide public updates on the state of homeless veterans during the pandemic. We understand that many of the normal donations and resources have stopped during the pandemic, but VSOs and the overall community knew these vulnerable veterans needed we could step up and fill void where possible. We also like to see VA and PHAs utilize more project-based HUD-VASH vouchers across the nation to house as many veterans as possible during the pandemic.

We greatly displeased with VA's new enforcement of the 85/15. One of our partners, the VETS Group, is a small IT training provider, who now must find two non-supported students for every ten supported students in their course. Normally, these courses at capped at 15 participants. With COVID-19 already diminishing the number of students enrolling in their training program, VETS Group no longer has the luxury of an abundance of non-supported applicants to balance to allow the full participation of veterans who apply. Now because of the 85/15 rule veterans have to be turned away from VET Groups training programs. BVEC calls on the Committee to address this new interpretation of 85/15 with VA to prevent more veterans from being needless barred from training programs.

BVEC would also like to see the VET TEC permanently authorized to help meet the need of veterans who would like to transfer to a vocation that can be done remotely.

BVEC calls on Congress as whole to recognize the heroic struggle of segregated who performed above and beyond by-passing legislation like H.R.3138 and S.633 "Six Triple Eight" Congressional Gold Medal Act of 2019 in the 117th Congress.

Partners

(list out who reconfirmed partnership)