



**Statement of
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For

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Oversight Hearing on
"Exploring the Use of Data-Driven Methods and Community
Collaboration to Reduce Veteran Homelessness"**

June 27th, 2024

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and Members of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee:

Thank you for your leadership and for providing me the opportunity to share perspective on addressing issues faced by veterans across the country, on behalf 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.

BVEC's vision is very simple: to rapidly house our Black veterans and any and all veterans in need of housing, and to provide those veterans with the necessary resources to not only get back on their feet but stay on their feet. 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 the veteran and the veteran's family in the communities that BVEC supports.

One of the ways BVEC will be such a resource is through our housing project. We are developing the most comprehensive and cost-effective model for transforming the lives of veterans most at risk of chronic homelessness through the dynamic combination of transitional and permanent housing with an array of supportive care services that are carefully designed to address each of the identified root causes for homelessness currently confronting our nation's veteran population. This project shall comport with the regulatory framework and guidance established within the HUD-VASH and HCHV Housing Programs. BVEC's success will be objectively measured through a series of success metrics as determined collectively by each of its funding sources, and most importantly, by the homeless veteran population that it serves. The goal is for BVEC to become the premier national model for ending chronic homelessness among our veteran population through rigorous adherence to best practices. Elements of these "best practices" shall include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Identification of and effective outreach to veterans most at risk for chronic homelessness
- Establishment of comprehensive evaluative intake services to assess client needs
- Functional, secure, and comfortable transitional and permanent housing facilities (individuals and families)
- Employment opportunities, vocational training, and job placement services
- Supportive medical, mental health, substance abuse treatment, and counseling services
- Sustainable Veteran Owned Small Business formation, technical assistance, equity investment / financing, and veteran resident contracting preferences
- Social services to refer and facilitate veteran access to public and private grants, education, and other resources
- Financial counseling and services
- Homeownership counseling and financing
- Referral network with other available government service providers and resources

BVEC is appreciative of the work that the House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) has completed thus far during this 118th Congress. We are supportive of H.R. 8371, the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act and appreciate the bipartisan and bicameral nature of that package of legislative items. We also look to continue advocating sensible and sustainable legislative solutions affecting all veterans.

HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS

We cannot disregard the sheer number of veterans who are currently experiencing homelessness - even within the nation's capital. Because of this, BVEC has been actively combatting chronic disparities in benefit utilization, economic opportunity, and agency enforcement. This includes building upon the increasingly broad, bipartisan congressional support to enact meaningful progress on the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) short and long term goals to better serve veterans and military service members, such as increased funding for targeted outreach efforts in various portions of the veteran communities experiencing homelessness, expanding available assistance for at-risk veterans due to economic instability, and expanding community capacity to move veterans into permanent housing. BVEC has created public private partnerships with real estate developers and local organizations in three states (Maryland, Colorado, and Arizona) and Washington, D.C. to provide housing for homeless veterans, and wraparound services (medical assistance, mental health treatment, financial counseling, job training, etc.) so that those veterans can receive the care and stability they need. We aim to provide a model of addressing veteran homelessness that can be replicated across the country.

To fulfill its mission statement of serving minority and other underserved populations, the VA 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. BVEC as a council stands ready with our depth to directly interface with the homeless veteran population, to assist with housing and care solutions from the ground up. Further, 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. Further, 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. We appreciate this legislation was included in the 21st Century Elizabeth Dole Act.

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. Through our coalition of 32+ member organizations, BVEC has direct access to over 300,000 Black veterans nationwide. 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 your subcommittee 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 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.

CONCLUSION

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 Van Orden and Ranking Member Levin, 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. We stand ready to engage on the aforementioned issues as well as are prepared to answer any questions you may have.