



Minority Veterans of America

Statement for the Record

for an Oversight Hearing of the

Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs,

Committee on Veterans' Affairs, United States House of Representatives

Wednesday, October 20, 2021

Chairwoman Luria, Ranking Member Nehls, and Members of the Subcommittee,

We collectively serve and represent the minority veteran community—those of color, women, LGBTQ-identifying, and (non)religious minorities—through the Minority Veterans of America (MVA). Our position affords us the privilege and honor of directly serving thousands of U.S. veterans across 49 states, 3 territories, and 3 countries, and representing more than 10.2-million veterans. We work to create belonging and to advance equity and justice for our community, and we have always recognized that intentionally designing equitable policy and infrastructure systems, of which the Bills under consideration today largely address, are central to fulfilling our mission.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (“Department”) recently announced that satisfaction rates, as reported in-house, among veterans that receive services through the Department are at an all-time high.¹ The Veterans of Foreign Wars came to a similar conclusion a year prior in their own annual survey.² This improvement should be celebrated and is a testament to the incredible progress the Department has been able to make in partnership with this Committee. However, the work is not yet over. We must continue to push towards equitable and intentional inclusion of our most underserved communities. Our organization’s own membership has consistently expressed reservations in accessing Departmental services and spaces for fear of their safety or for feeling unwelcome. These veterans are then faced with the reality of accessing spaces that actively harm

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs. (2020). Veteran trust in VA reaches all-time high. Press release. Available at: www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/includes/viewPDF.cfm?id=5464.

² Veterans of Foreign Wars. (2019). Our care 2019: A report evaluating veterans health care. Available at: www.vfworg-cdn.azureedge.net/-/media/VFWSite/Files/Advocacy/VFW-Our-Care-2019.pdf?&la=en&v=1&d=20190927T135726Z.

them as they seek due and necessary support, or to forego those earned benefits and services entirely.

This Committee and the Secretary have both accepted the notion that when we build an equitable system with the most marginalized at the forefront, it will inherently support those with more privilege. Under Secretary McDonough's leadership, the Department has begun to repair the broken trust and confidence in our disenfranchised communities. We are confident those relationships will continue to be repaired in the coming years with the bipartisan support of this Committee. Thank you for allowing us to contribute to the work you are doing to address this crucial issue.

HR 2568: United States Cadet Nurse Corps Service Recognition Act of 2021

We applaud Representative Bustos' Bill to recognize the United States Cadet Nurse Corps substantively through the provision of certain benefits. The Cadet Nurse Corps during World War II was the nation's largest federally funded nursing program, and it was intentionally structured to include racial, ethnic, and religious minority women in its ranks through anti-discrimination measures.³ Given the unique social, political, and economic challenges faced by minority women during this time period, we find it particularly appropriate to recognize and extend benefits to the women—especially the indigenous women and women of color—who attained nursing skills through the Cadet Nurse Corps.

In the spirit of this substantive recognition, the Minority Veterans of America recommends that a provision be added to the Bill which ensures that any commendations or materials produced are fully inclusive of the diversity of the Cadet Nurse Corps.

HR 2724: VA Peer Support Enhancement for MST Survivors Act

We support Representative Delgado's efforts to provide peer support to survivors of military sexual trauma (MST). This Bill both recognizes and provides a path forward through the systematic re-traumatization⁴ of MST survivors seeking relief through the VA claims process. Peer support specialists are uniquely positioned to assist MST survivors given their training as victims' advocates and their relation to the adjudication process.

³ Perry (RN), Paulie M.; Robinson (RN), Thelma M. (2001). *Cadet Nurse Stories, The call for and response of women during World War II*. Indianapolis, IN: Center Nursing Publishing.

⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Accessed on October 16, 2021, from https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf.

To further strengthen this Bill's efforts and provide the best possible support to all MST survivors, we recommend that qualifications for peer support specialists include skills-based cultural competency training around the unique experience of LGBTQ+, racial and ethnic, and religious minorities.

HR 2800: WINGMAN Act

We support Representative Perry's bipartisan Bill to allow certain designated congressional employees to have access to a veteran's records at their request. This Bill bypasses the need for the veteran to use the Department as an intermediary in particular situations, which has historically presented roadblocks and prolonged constituents' access to comprehensive assistance. We have no recommendations at this time.

HR 2827: Captain James C. Edge Gold Star Spouse Equity Act

We support Representative Waltz's expansion of benefits to surviving spouses, including those who have lost those benefits. As the benefit is currently constructed, surviving spouses are forced to choose between receiving their due benefits or moving forward with their lives. Having suffered an immeasurable loss, this current construction of law is incompatible with our nation's duty to supporting military and veteran families. We have no recommendations at this time.

HR 3402: Caring for Survivors Act of 2021

We support Representative Hayes' Bill to improve and expand the eligibility standards for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC). The shift to proportional compensation and the inclusion of veterans who were rated totally disabled for five or more years demonstrates a dedication to supporting surviving spouses that is in line with the Department's mission and with our collective duty to veterans and their families. We have no further recommendations at this time.

HR 3793: Supporting Families of the Fallen Act

We support Representative Roy's efforts to increase the maximum monetary value of a policy under both Veterans' and Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance. The maximum has remained at \$400,000 for 16 years while nearly every other veteran benefit has increased alongside inflation rates. The unprecedented increase of \$150,000 in 2005 equitably supported the military and veteran

communities, but its stagnation since then has been a disservice. We have no recommendations at this time.

HR 4191, Gold Star Spouses Non-Monetary Benefits Act

We are supportive of Representative Stefanik's Bill and have no further comments or recommendations at this time.

HR 4601, Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act

We appreciate Representative Levin's efforts through this Bill and are proud to support it. As this Committee knows, Veterans' benefits are vastly underutilized by qualifying veterans, with only 15-47% accessing their earned programs.⁵

We would recommend that the required state plans to meet the unique needs of diverse populations be amended to explicitly state members of the LGBTQ community and rural veterans. These veteran communities have been historically overlooked by the Department. Significant efforts have been taken by the Department and this Committee to repair those ensuing community harms over the past several years. By explicitly identifying these sub-populations within the verbiage of the legislation, those efforts will be further emboldened, and the Department and States will receive necessary guidance for comprehensive inclusion.

HR 4633, to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the repayment by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs of benefits misused by a fiduciary

We appreciate Representative Connolly's efforts and are happy to support this piece of legislation. We have no further comments to provide, though would recommend the incorporation of language proposed in Representative Trone's Draft Bill (Restoring Benefits to Defrauded Veterans Act).

HR 4772, Mark O'Brien VA Clothing Allowance Improvement Act

We appreciate Representative Levin's intention in reducing the burden on our nation's disabled veteran community through this piece of legislation. We are proud to support and have no further comments or recommendations at this time.

⁵ The percentage range reflected above is inclusive of major veterans benefits, including education, medical, housing loan, etc. See www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/Quickfacts/Stats_at_a_glance_12_31_20.PDF.

Restoring Benefits to Defrauded Veterans Act (Discussion Draft)

As mentioned above, we are appreciative of Representative Trone's adjustments provided through this Bill. We urge that the language of HR 4633 be amended to include the Representative's considerations. If such an amendment is not made, however, we recommend swift passage of this piece of legislation.

Legislation to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the manner in which Board of Veterans' Appeals conducts hearings regarding claims involving military sexual trauma and to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to improve the language and practices of the Department of Veterans Affairs with respect to such claims (Discussion Draft)

We applaud Representative Mrvan for his tireless dedication to our sexual trauma survivor communities. We urge immediate consideration and swift passage of this discussion draft.

We would also like to highlight the disparate coping mechanisms that may manifest when an individual is managing the impact of military sexual trauma in their life. Historically, aggravating factors like illicit drug and alcohol abuse, failure to report for duty, and other socially abnormal behaviors have been cause for a reduced discharge characterization or have otherwise been identified on a veteran's discharge paperwork through the narrative reasonings for discharge or separation program designator (SPD) codes. The Boards and the Department are presented with an opportunity to rebuild a program framework meant to support our nation's most marginalized and underserved. We would urge for comprehensive considerations to ensure the full advantages of this restructuring are taken.

Justice for ALS Veterans of 2021 Act (Discussion Draft)

We would like to reiterate our support Representative Slotkin's discussion draft and have no further recommendations or comments to provide at this time.

Legislation to improve coordination between the Veterans Health Administration and the Veterans Benefits Administration with respect to claims for compensation arising from military sexual trauma, and for other purposes (Discussion Draft)

We support Chairwoman Luria's discussion draft and have no further comments or recommendations for consideration at this time.

The feedback provided above and further discussed in today's Hearing is meant to help ensure this legislative body continues to live up to the effective advocacy and support standards that they have been charged with in service to our veteran communities. Our feedback echoes the experiences of many minority veterans who have been excluded or underserved from the VA's care and support programs, whether intentionally or negligently. We believe that, as a country, we have made great progress in ensuring all veterans benefit from the work that this Committee is doing on their behalf.

Once again, we thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record. We look forward to continuing to work with you and your offices, and to support your efforts in serving our nation's minority veteran populations. If we can be of further assistance, please feel free to contact our Policy Director, Andy Blevins, directly, at ablevins@minorityvets.org.

Respectfully Submitted,

/s/

Lindsay Church

Executive Director