



January 14, 2021

Dear President-Elect Joseph Biden and Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris,

Black veteran representation has never mattered more than in this political moment. As we look to the Biden-Harris administration to “build back better,” we must recognize the outgoing administration has stoked a deep distrust amongst veterans for the Department of Veterans Affairs -- a trust that took decades to foster and whose inroads remain fragile. Appointing diverse veteran leadership is a necessary step toward displaying the incoming administration is diametrically opposed to the previous administration’s toxic culture at the Department of Veterans Affairs. For integrity to be re-established, veterans urgently need VA leadership who do not merely seek to manage crisis or administrative transition, but those whose background is squarely rooted in the experience of veterans of color.

The Black Veterans Empowerment Council (BVEC) is a coalition of national, state and local veteran organizations seeking to shift long-standing racial, economic and social inequalities suffered by Black veterans in the United States. To date, BVEC has partnered with the National Association for Black Veterans, National Association of Black Military Women, Black Veterans Project, Leave No Veteran Behind, Do More Together, Our Legacy Group, VETS Group, The SLD Group and Warrior Summit Coalition, to name a few. We believe that the most pressing problems stem from VA's lack of knowledge and empathy for the vast and nuanced history of Black veterans -- a community long-neglected. We believe it is insufficient to merely inform by counsel, or compel through advocacy, a culture of reckoning and accountability within VA to the issues that concern us, but that our community and its nuanced perspectives must be adequately reflected and competently represented within VA senior leadership.

For more than two centuries, measurable harm has been done toward Black veterans. Deliberate obstruction and inaccessibility of benefits have stripped countless deserving Black families of economic and educational opportunity owed to them for the selfless sacrifice of military service. Some of the most egregious examples are the denial of survivor pension benefits following the Civil War, disproportionate distribution of the G.I. Bill after World War II, and steep inequality across VA disability claim approvals during and after the Vietnam War. Bad paper discharges, predicated on a long-history of racial exclusion and animus within the Armed Forces, have resulted in wide swaths of our community being stripped of the honor, respect and assistance afforded to their compatriots. It is no wonder that Black veterans are consequently twice as likely to live in poverty, represent an overwhelming disproportionality of homeless veterans across our country and suffer higher rates of joblessness, incarceration and associated disparities.

These historical challenges, shaped by entrenched racism and a callous indifference by VA to sufficiently redress these harms have further exacerbated the plight of the Black Veteran community. It is well known that the healthcare, housing, education and employment benefits afforded through VA lay a foundation for economic mobility and establishing generational wealth. Yet, miseducation and predatory exploitation continue to stifle such progress amongst Black veterans. VA leadership has the capacity to shift this reality, if it so chooses.

BVEC urges the Biden-Harris administration to appoint Black veterans to senior roles, particularly the Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Health or Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Benefits, within the Department of Veterans Affairs to forge renewed faith amongst our nation’s Black veterans. BVEC also urges the Biden-Harris Administration to use BVEC as a resource as it tackles the numerous historical inequalities that still exist within the veterans’ community and when shaping and implementing veterans’ policy in the future.

Sincerely,

Victor LaGroom
Director
Black Veterans Empowerment Council