



DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS DISTINGUISHED SPEAKER SERIES

Race, the Military, and Veterans

November 16, 2020

Event Transcript

DAN NAGIN: Good day, everyone. On behalf of Harvard Law School, the Veterans Legal Clinic of the WilmerHale Legal Services Center welcomes you to the Disabled American Veterans Distinguished Speaker Series. We have an outstanding group of panelists on Race, the Military, and Veterans. I'm Dan Nagin, faculty director. We are very pleased to have an audience joining us online today from across the country.

I'm eager to turn the proceedings over to our moderator and terrific panelists. But before I do, I would like to share a few introductory words. First, I want to extend our deep gratitude to DAV for its sponsorship of this speaker series and its incredible support of and partnership with the Veterans Legal Clinic. DAV, with its one-million strong membership, is an inspiring example of veteran community building and empowerment. Today's event marks the 7th annual DAV speaker series at Harvard Law School.

The goal is to bring together legal advocates and to create a platform for both conversation and action. The theme of today's discussion and the esteemed panelists who have come together represent another important moment in the series' history.

I also want to acknowledge the Harvard Law School Student Armed Forces Association for its co-sponsorship. We're also pleased that so many from the Armed Forces Association have participated in our legal clinic.

In addition to the Veterans Legal Clinic, the Center is home to five other civil practice clinics addressing consumer law, including litigation to combat predatory for-profit colleges; family law; tax law; housing; and LGBTQ + rights. The center is a major part of the law school's clinical programs and leverages its community-based location in the city of Boston to reach thousands of low-income clients each year and provide community members with essential legal services.

The Veterans Legal Clinic focuses its work on providing services for low-income disabled veterans. And it combines individual client advocacy with initiatives to reform the system that serves the veteran community. The clinic's practices span everything from estate planning and Social Security appeals, to discharge upgrades, and practice before the U.S. court of appeals for veterans' claims, and policy advocacy at the state and federal level.

Among many priority areas, we advocate for veterans who received less than honorable discharges. Trauma can lead to life-altering challenges both during and after discharge. Some cases involve minority veterans who experience discrimination.

We invite you to visit our website, legalservicescenter.org, to learn more.

I'm very honored to introduce today's moderator, Mr. Will Gunn, who we're thrilled to have returned to his alma mater to moderate the panel. He's had an extraordinary career. He previously graduated with military honors from the Air Force Academy. Over a two-decade-plus career in the Air Force, he rose to the rank of colonel. I will note that his service included being named the first ever chief defense council in the Department of Defense Office of Military Commissions in connection with the representation of prisoners held at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. Among many distinguished leadership roles, he served for five years as general counsel for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

For many information about Mr. Gunn's activities, view his full biography on the event page on the Legal Services Center website.

I am very pleased to hand over the proceedings to Mr. Gunn.

12:07:12 WILL GUNN REMARKS

Thanks, Dan. Greetings, everybody. Thanks for joining us. I was eager to accept when Dan invited me to moderate this panel because our topic is at the intersection of some major roads in my life. First, I'm a Black man. I served in the military for 25 years on active duty and four years at the Air Force Academy before that. I've also served in a key role in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Also, Harvard Law School has played a pivotal role in my life. Forty years ago, when I graduated from the Air Force Academy, it was just a year after that that I visited Harvard Square and Harvard's campus for the very first time. Immediately, I knew that's where I wanted to be.

I started law school just a couple of years later. And as a law student, I fulfilled my third-year paper writing requirement under the direction of the late Judge A. Leon Higginbotham and focused on the racial policies in the military. I've been interested in the topic ever since.

Time doesn't permit us to do a deep dive into Black American military history today. But I believe it will be helpful to provide some context. You see, from the time that the first Black people came to Jamestown, Virginia as slaves 401 years ago in 1619, Black people have contributed to the military strength of what is now the United States of America. A unique aspect of that history is that during slavery, Black people served in the U.S. military and in some instances fought against the U.S. military in an attempt to gain their freedom.

Another central theme of this history is that when America was short on manpower, the nation welcomed Blacks into the military. But when the immediate need for military personnel abated, Black people were rejected. You see, Black people weren't segregated in the earliest editions of the nation's military; however segregation became the norm beginning with Black soldiers who served during the Civil War. And segregation prevailed in some part until 1952 when the military deactivated its last Black unit, four years after President Truman signed an executive order.

Black Americans were present among forces in the French and Indian War, and every war since the American Revolution. For example, in 1770, 250 years ago, a Black man named Crispus Attucks was among the first to die in the Boston Massacre. And another Black man is credited with killing a British assault force commander during the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775.

During the Civil Rights Era, the military was described by many people as the most integrated institution in American life, and it has also been described as a microcosm of America, with everything that term entails. Great progress has been made over the last few decades, and some have looked to the military as an exemplar of equality and merit principles. Indeed, in 1989, General Colin Powell became the military's highest ranking officer. In 2014, Admiral Michelle Howard, a 1982 Naval Academy graduate and a Black woman became the Navy's first four-star admiral. And in September of this year, General Charles C.Q. Brown became Air Force Chief of Staff, and in doing so became the first Black Service Chief of any military service.

However, those firsts don't tell the whole story. For example, I spent many years of my military career prosecuting and then even more time defending cases. And the data shows gross disparities with respect to race in the military justice system. For example, on average, Black Marines are 32% more likely to be found guilty in a punishment proceeding than white Marines. In the Navy, Black sailors are on average 40% more likely to be found guilty in a court-martial proceeding than white sailors. In the Army, Black soldiers are on average 61% more likely to face a special or general court-martial than are white soldiers. Finally, in the Air Force, where I spent my career, Black Airmen on average, 71% ...71% more likely to face court-martial or non-judicial punishment procedures than are white Airmen.

And it's important to keep in mind, we're not talking about an era in which people can just walk into a recruiter and join the military.

No. They have to face and they have to meet rigorous entry requirements. Similar disparities also exist with respect to officer promotions. As for veterans, the G.I. Bill that was passed at the end of World War II gave veterans education benefits and home loan guarantees that those particularly in the South, but not just in the South, were not able to take advantage of much as whites. Even though the U.S. government was guaranteeing home loans, many Black veterans were unable to use them because banks were unable to give them mortgages. Thus they were denied homeownership, the foundation of generational wealth that millions of their white counterparts received as a result of the G.I. Bill.

Today, data shows that Black veterans suffer from health disparities and are overly represented among the homeless population.

Despite the setbacks and the disparities, there is reason for some optimism. First, many senior military leaders realize that diversity is absolutely essential to military readiness. Also, several African Americans have ascended to the top ranks of both the officer and enlisted ranks of the services. In fact, with the exception of the Marines and the Coast Guard, all have had Black officers achieve the highest possible rank of four-star, full general, or full admiral. Finally, President-elect Biden says he wants to make diversity and inclusion a major feature of his administration.

Our nation is in need of racial healing, and there is much more to the story. In order to help tell that story, I would like to turn to our distinguished panelists. I will introduce them one at a time, and after each introduction, they will each give brief remarks. When the introductions and remarks are all done, we'll follow up with a few questions from me and then you can ask your own questions as time permits.

12:16:40 DELPHINE METCALF-FOSTER REMARKS

WILL GUNN: Our first panelist is Ms. Delphine Metcalf-Foster. Ms. Foster is a disabled Army veteran. In 2017, she was elected National Commander of the Disabled American Veterans, the DAV, one of the nation's largest veterans services organization, with more than 1 million members. She was the first female to hold the position in the DAV's nearly 100-year history. She is a native of Vallejo, California and was injured in January of 1991 while serving in Saudi Arabia in support of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. She was medically evacuated to Germany for care and treatment.

She is a life member of DAV and a former member of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs advisory committee on women veterans. She majored in psychology and liberal studies. She is a retired quality assurance work leader from the Alameda Naval Air Station. She has the rare distinction of being the daughter of a veteran of the Spanish American War. Ms. Foster, the floor is yours for brief remarks.

DELPHINE METCALF-FOSTER: Good morning, everyone. First of all, I would like to tell you about my family in the military. I'm a daughter of the colonel of a U.S. Army Buffalo Soldier who served in the Spanish American War. I am the mother of a U.S. Navy veteran son who is deceased. I'm the grandmother of a U.S. Army Iraq-Afghanistan veteran.

I always thought I was empowered as a woman because of my parents and the strong, steadfast path they made me for after coming from Alabama to California. As you can see in the article, my father sued the state and county of Alejo to let colored troops into the veterans building, which is where I attend my first meeting with the Disabled American Veterans.

We (DAV) continue to work for legislation changes for all concerned. Our folks in Washington are staying on top of the critical issues and ensuring women themselves have a seat at the table. And that was one of the reasons that I went into the military -- plus my family history.

I was working at Levitt Army Medical Center, and a comment was made by a major. I respect her dearly. Her name was Major White and she asked me to go to her office. She had all these pamphlets that said United States Army. She said "Delphine, have you ever thought about going into the military?" I stated, "Yes, I did. When my father was alive." I was five years old when he passed away, but he was so proud of the pictures that he showed me, the black and white pictures on a horse. Since I couldn't ride a horse, I thought that dream went out the window... until I met Major White.

She said she thought I would be a good leader the military. I looked at her. She said: "I know your history. You're married, you have a family. But I notice you in the union meetings. You treat everybody the same. It doesn't matter about rank. You respect rank, but you treat everybody the same. There's a myth about women in the military." And my antennas went up. Here I am, a product of the '60s and '70s.

I said, "Women?"

She said most women have this stereotype. They go in there to find a husband, to find a job, to get away from home.

“But I see you bringing something to them and breaking some of that myth.”

Well, that's all she needed to say. I went home and convinced my husband – who by the way was in the Navy at the time -- that I would like to go in. And the rest is history.

I started like everyone else, basic training. I went in with my daughter, who was a senior in high school at the time. She lasted two weeks and I lasted 21 years.

And I started going to my Army Reserves. I was in the Army Reserves. I had so many mentors who told me the same thing. And it gave me this feeling of my dad. What would he have thought? What would he have to deal with? How are all my relatives, my relatives that came from Alabama that are still in Alabama. I just started looking at history. Hey, this is a responsibility. So, I went in, I had a great tour. I got called up in 1990 for the Gulf War. I took my company, which was a great registration company, over to Saudi Arabia.

After being injured, coming back to the States for two months, I stayed in a medical hold for a month until my general asked me what do I want to do and stated I could get out of the military on a medical discharge. I said no, I will not be discharged. I want to go back and get my troops. We never leave our troops behind. They are our battle buddies. So, with medication and what have you, I went back to Saudi Arabia, retrieved my troops after three months, and came back to San Francisco.

I stayed on medical hold for a year. After that time, I was discharged and I got involved with a great organization, the Disabled American Veterans. My company and I were greeted by the DAV transitional service officer when we returned to the States. He told us all about our benefits. He told us about what we need to do in order to get education. He gave us the whole gamut. That is why I joined the Disabled American Veterans. I've been a member of the Disabled American Veterans for 31 years. And I cannot find a better organization that is dedicated to a single purpose of empowering its veterans to live a high quality and respectful life with respect and dignity.

I've had issues with mental health, but I started getting involved with our local VA facilities for PTSD. But one thing I was very floored about happened in 2005; I was invited to a veteran center to speak to some veterans and I noticed all the veterans there were Black. Which was fine. I had a great time. But afterwards, I asked the provider. I said “Wow, I've never been to an all-veterans counseling group.” She said they have had to have this because they felt like the mental health service with the VA was not what they needed. It did not listen to their concerns. And I was floored. I said, “What do you mean?” She said no, they do not listen to their concerns. That's why they have to come to the vet center.

So, she passed away about five years later and I never heard about any veterans group again until this year. 2020. I get a flier from my local VA. Please join our Black veterans group. And I'm thinking “Wow. Nothing has changed?”

So, I joined the group myself to see-- because I'm an advocate, I wanted to see for myself -- only to find out that the issues that our Black veterans were having were not addressed at our local VA facilities. Their culture, how they felt about life, and what have you.

And it's just appalling to me that from my dad's beginning in the military to 2020, things still have not been ironed out. That's why I'm so glad, as I stated before, to be a part of this dialogue. Thank you.

12:27:00 PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER SEBASTIAN PARKER REMARKS

WILL GUNN: Thanks very much, Ms. Foster. Greatly appreciate it.

Our next speaker today is Professor Christopher Parker. Professor Parker is a Navy veteran who teaches political science at the University of Washington. He brings survey data to bear on questions of historical importance. His first book, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Post-War South*, was published by Princeton University Press in 2009. It won the American Political Science Association Ralph J. Bunch Award. His second book, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* was published in 2013. And it explores the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of the Tea Party. This book won the American Political Science Association's award for the best book in race, ethnicity, and politics. Professor Parker did his undergrad work at UCLA and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

Professor Parker, your microphone is open for brief remarks.

CHRISTOPHER PARKER: Thank you, Colonel Gunn, and I'm delighted to be part of this august panel. I'm looking at this picture of mine. It's like 20 years old. I should have uploaded a more recent picture. Anyway, I digress.

So, let me just cut right to the matter, cut right to the heart of it. Basically, this country wouldn't be where it is right now as a democracy such as it were. It's kind of funny, and I don't mean funny in a haha way, but I mean it in a peculiar way to discuss American democracy now, because we're teetering on the edge of something else at the moment.

But Black folks have been pulling America's fat out of the fire when it comes to democracy from the very beginning. And with this last presidential election, we did the same. In several states, Black folks, Black turnout made the difference. Amid a coronavirus, nonetheless, where we are three times more likely to contract the virus than white people.

Let me get right to this here. Why do Black folks serve in the military to begin with? This is a question I asked myself when I served in the Navy, as I said in my first book. I was 21 years old, running a combat information center on a warship. I was one of two Black people in the whole department. I was one of the most senior people.

It made me reflect on my grandfather, who was a steward's mate on a Navy ship. If you don't know what they were, to say they were valets to the officers is an overstatement. They would clean an officer's room, they brought them their food, they cooked for them.

Then here I am all these many years later, 45 years later, I'm in this position of leadership, albeit an enlisted rank, but a position of leadership nonetheless. I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation later and wrote this book.

What motivated Black folk to serve, given that we had been treated as second-class citizens?

The whole idea behind it really takes root in what's called the citizen-soldier paradigm, which is that anybody who serves in the military, going all the way back to ancient Greece, should have a voice in the council to go to war in the first place. Black people are aware of this. You get people like Frederick Douglass, who on the eve of the Civil War rallied for Black folks to serve in the Civil War, and also W.E.B. Du Bois on the eve of World War I. From the very beginning, one of the reasons we have the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the constitution is because of Black military service during the Civil War. You have the 13th amendment that freed the slaves. You have the 14th amendment which was about due process and granting citizenship to anybody who was born in the United States, birthright citizenship, among other things, and the 15th amendment, which guaranteed the right to vote regardless of servitude. You have these constitutional amendments that passed in the wake of the Civil War that have a lot to do with Black men serving in the military.

They weren't allowed to serve in the Union forces, right? No, no, no, they made up a whole new branch called the United States Colored Troops. So, for all of you who thought what was happening during the Civil War was Black men serving with the Union Army, that is not how that went down. Black folks had to serve in the United States Colored Troops. Let's get that one out of the way.

Nonetheless, what happened, some of the officers, many of whom went on to serve in Congress, witnessed their service during the Civil War and they gave testimony during Reconstruction in order to make way for the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments. So, that was a way in which military service and race and citizenship work from the top down.

Now, during World War I it didn't happen like that. As a matter of fact, half of the Black troop strength was lent to the French command because they weren't deemed as sufficiently competent to serve alongside white troops. Now the Black troops -- many of whom went on to win the third highest French commendation for military valor -- the Black troops, they were basically used for cannon fire and they were blamed for not having enough courage to fight during the First World War. So, not much progress happened during the First World War.

And then along comes World War II. We didn't have top-down change during World War II because there was really nothing that happened beyond, as Colonel Gunn said, you had President Truman pass executive order 9981 that desegregated the armed forces. And it was only during necessity, during the Korean War. It was only during times of war that Black folks were really and truly welcomed. It was only during times of war -- after which our service was rarely acknowledged, if at all.

You had these veterans from World War II and the Korean War who spearheaded the Civil Rights Movement in the South. I argue in my book, which is on the screen right now, that if you didn't have these Black veterans like Moore, and Williams, if you didn't have Black veterans like who led the Civil Rights Movement in the South, then I don't think the Civil Rights Movement would have been the success that it was.

Black veterans are essential to where we are when it comes to American democracy. And the reason why Black men and women later on during World War II served in the armed forces was because it was a way to bring honor and citizenship and more equality to the Black community writ large. And I'll stop there.

12:36:40 BARBARA WARD REMARKS

WILL GUNN: Thanks very much, Professor Parker.

Our next speaker is Miss Barbara Ward. She is a Vietnam-era veteran who served in the Nurse Corp from 1972-1974. Her professional career spans over 40 years working in the healthcare and health insurance industries, as well as in state and in federal government and military.

During the Obama Administration, we served together when she was serving as the director of the Center for Minority Veterans at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. While in that role, she developed successful programs that specifically targeted over 5 million minority veterans nationwide to increase utilization of VA benefits. Before she began serving at VA, Ms. Ward served as a deputy secretary for women and minority veterans for the state of California. She worked with numerous veteran service organizations and stakeholders to service the needs of women veterans.

She is the CEO of Ward and Association, LLC, a consulting group focused on executive leadership and operations. She received her master's degree in public administration health services management from Golden Gate University in San Francisco. Ms. Ward, the floor is yours.

BARBARA WARD: Thank you, Will, for that very warm introduction. It is an indeed an honor and a pleasure to serve on this most distinguished panel today as we share with each of you some knowledge and experience of ours related to race, the military, and veterans in general.

My focus will be on sharing information with you regarding minority veterans. Currently, minority veterans make up approximately 23% of the total veteran population. By 2045, it is anticipated that the number will increase to 36.2%.

Think in terms of making up, being 23% of the total veteran population, but making up 43% of the actual homeless veteran population. That is just one of the major challenges that minority veterans face today. As Will talked about some of the discriminatory practices when we are actually on active duty, I hope that all of you understand that it does not just end when you leave active duty and you become a veteran. Now, all veterans face pretty much the same challenges, whether you're talking about the need for a job when you transition to civilian life, access to quality healthcare, access to your benefits for compensation, and also thinking in terms of certain health conditions.

Most of us are aware that the veterans and the military in general are a microcosm of society in general. I think when you hear and you stay in touch with what's going on with COVID right now, you can really appreciate how that particular virus is impacting minorities in general. So, we see the same thing when it comes down to health equity in the VA healthcare system. Minority veterans oftentimes do not receive the quality of care services that non-minority veterans receive.

Delphine earlier in her brief comments referenced mental health services and some of the challenges that minority veterans face. If you can imagine that you're a military veteran, you have post-traumatic stress disorder because of your service in combat, and then you seek medical attention so you can file a claim for benefits for disability and you are referred to a VA physician. When you encounter that physician, the physician, number one, doesn't look like

you. And you immediately understand that this physician has some biases. And based on the discussion as it goes, you identify the stereotypes that they are relating to you. So, instead of your trying to convey to that particular physician at that time during your visit that you experienced blood, that you lost a buddy on the combat field, that physician says "I'm not really interested in talking to you about that. Let's go back and talk to you about your childhood. Did you experience violence? Did you come from a low-income community? Was there violence in the home? Were you abused in some way?"

That's not typically the type of visit that non-minority veteran would experience. So, you can immediately understand why, as a minority veteran, and specifically an African American veteran, you would prefer to seek out treatment from an African American veteran or a minority veteran who understands you and your culture and is not actually going to deny you access to benefits that you've earned simply because of your race.

When we think in terms of health equity, you run into the same thing as far as the services that are provided and the referral of those services. Chronic health conditions are prevalent in minority communities and certainly they impact our minority veterans. So, when you seek healthcare assistance, you want to make sure that you're getting the best quality services possible. Unemployment is another major issue that all of our veterans experience.

But with all of these challenges that I'm sharing with you today, ultimately what's different when you apply those same challenges to minority veterans is the ultimate impact from that standpoint. I've already talked about homelessness and how high the incidence of minority veterans being homeless is. It's pretty much the same thing as unemployment. It's 7.8% for minority veterans, for non-minority veterans, it's 6.1%. And specifically, if you think in terms of the VA system, most federal agencies tend to hire veterans. And there are special points that you receive and considerations for your disability, as well. Recently, the union at the Department of Veterans Affairs conducted a survey of all of their membership and found that there was a very high number of employees that said that they had experienced discrimination in the workplace. And many of those employees are not just regular employees. They are also veterans.

So, then you ask yourself, well, how does that impact our minority veterans? Well it impacts minority veterans from the standpoint that oftentimes you can have all the qualifications that you need to apply for a position and you will never be called for an interview in a federal agency. Or if you are called for an interview, you may make it to the top three candidates and you're just not selected because of unconscious bias. So, these are the same issues that we see that continue that plague our military veterans.

So, those are the things that I wanted to share with you and I want to make sure that we have time for questions. So, Will, I'm going to defer back to you at this time.

12:45:30 QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

WILL GUNN: Thanks very much, Barbara. I greatly, greatly appreciate it. I want to start off with a question for you, Delphine. And I first of all want to thank you and DAV for hosting this event. And I also just want to tell you that I've been able to refer a large number of veterans over the last several years to DAV and to other veteran services organizations. I have been amazed by the fact that so many veterans that I've come in contact with had no idea that they could get free help from organizations such as DAV to file their disability compensation claims. Could

you just take a moment to talk about the type of advocacy that DAV does and the type of help that your organization gives to veterans? All veterans.

DELPHINE METCALF-FOSTER: Sure. All veterans. The DAV provides a lifetime of support for veterans of all generations and families in positive, life-changing ways. They ensure veterans and their families have access to the full range of benefits they deserve. They provide care, employment information, and support during tough times. Just like we had out here in California with all those fires. They supported that as much as any other disaster they have had around the world.

Their advocacy for veterans on Capitol Hill, they connect with meaningful employment and so much more. They're very approachable. Like you say, they are there to support you free of charge. Free of charge.

As I stated before, I am in touch with a lot of my members. The first place I tell them to go to is DAV. They have heard of DAV and the transitional services officer 30 + years ago when they came back. A lot of them forget. A lot of them had been in such dire moments of PTSD and they didn't think of anything else. But 30 years later they come back and say, "Can you refer me to someone?" DAV is on my first list. I have people that I can call to help these people. They don't feel like my time is up or anything. As I said, I selected DAV because not only because I read what they did, but I saw what they did.

WILL GUNN: Thanks very much. Greatly appreciate that. I wanted to turn to you, Professor Parker. The way that you describe the U.S. Colored Troops is a way that I had never heard it before. You essentially were presenting that the U.S. Colored Troops during the Civil War were basically another military service. Would you agree with that characterization?

CHRISTOPHER PARKER: I most certainly would. They were an adjunct to the Union Army.

WILL GUNN: Just looking at your book and your remarks, you talked about Dubois and other Black leaders that were encouraging participation in the military as a way of gaining rights. Do you believe that the military has, and the U.S. government for that matter, has fulfilled that implied promise?

CHRISTOPHER PARKER: Um ...Wow. (Chuckling) Are you talking about to this day? Or specifically to the veterans that I discuss in my book?

WILL GUNN: Even to this day. You can take it as you'd like.

CHRISTOPHER PARKER: I mean, well, no. I think while we have rights, if you will, yeah, we have rights in principle, but are they really rights in practice? No. Right? To the extent that discrimination still takes place on a daily basis. And ever since this, I refuse to call it my president. As soon as 45 has been in office, the level of vitriol and hostility that's been directed at people of color, that affects our integrity and mental health. No. Technically we do have rights on paper. Yes, is it much more difficult for us to practice those rights? Hell, yeah. And discrimination runs rampant. There are all kinds of studies that show that if one has a Black name, quote unquote Black name, it's more difficult for them to get a job. It's easier for a white man with a criminal record to get a job than a Black man with a high school diploma with no felonies, right? And we're talking housing discrimination, discrimination in the financial industry.

All this stuff continues to happen. Residential segregation and the impact that it has on our ability to build wealth, this stuff remains in effect.

WILL GUNN: Thanks, I appreciate it, Professor. Ms. Ward, the Department of Veterans Affairs, you touched on this, that the VA will be investigated for widespread racism and discriminatory allegations made by employees. Do you feel that such allegations have impacted the hiring and career advancement of minority vets?

BARBARA WARD: Well, that's an excellent question. Based on the six years that I worked at the Department of Veterans Affairs, I served on the diversity and inclusion committee where we monitored very closely the hiring practices, recruitment, and actually retention rates. And frequently, we would talk about the number of minority veterans that had applied for jobs, but we didn't see them getting hired, especially in your higher senior level ranks at the Department of Veterans Affairs. So, we would ask the question: is the issue that there are no qualified applicants being considered? And the answer always was no, definitely there were qualified applicants, but the hiring authority, who typically is not a person of color due to unconscious bias, selected someone that they were more comfortable with. Someone who looked like them. So, it had nothing to do with qualifications, so definitely.

The other thing that we followed very closely was the retention rates for the veterans who were actually hired and how many of those were terminated during their probation period. And one of the things that we found that was a consistent pattern was the highest number of veterans who were actually terminated in their probation period -- the first three months of having worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs -- were African American male veterans.

Definitely discrimination does impact that.

WILL GUNN: Can you repeat that last statistic again about the probationary period?

BARBARA WARD: Well, during the probationary period, as most of us are aware, you have to pass your probationary period. But it's an opportunity for the hiring authority to determine whether or not you can do the job. And what we found when we looked at retention rates, especially for minority veterans, the group that had the retention rate during their probationary period was African American male veterans.

WILL GUNN: I have a question from the audience. And here is one basically paraphrasing. Extreme racism is not recognized by VA as trauma for a PTSD claim on the disability service-connected compensation. Do the panelists think stress or trauma caused by racial discrimination can or should be treated similarly to combat or military sexual trauma to support a PTSD disability claim? I present that to any of you who would like to expound.

BARBARA WARD: Okay. I will start the answer on this particular question. I know that it's not well recognized that discrimination that you experience on active duty can actually be used for you to file for benefits for post-traumatic stress disorders, but I actually know that there are veterans that have received claims for benefits just for that purpose. I have a very close friend who was a retired colonel from southern California. She was a Vietnam veteran, as well. And she actually ended up getting her claim approved. As Delphine talked about, if you go to a reputable veterans service organization, oftentimes they can help you, based upon all the information that you give them, to put your claim together in such a way that you can actually be successful in having your claim accepted. But I certainly do believe, based on many of the

stories that I have heard specifically from minority veterans and a lot of minority women veterans specifically that yes, that discrimination experience on active duty I feel should be allowed if you have justification and necessary documentation to support your allegations.

WILL GUNN: Thank you, Barbara. Delphine or Chris?

DELPINE METCALF-FOSTER: Yeah, I think it should be allowed also. Case in point, something that happened to me while I was allowed that and other PTSD rating. One of my providers mentioned to me about my duty in the military when I went overseas. When I mentioned to him that I was in graves registration, he said, "What did you do? Did you do something wrong? What are you talking about?" He said graves registration is a company -- you go back into World War I or World War II -- that they put people in if they want to get rid of them or they don't fit their mold or something. I said "Excuse me?" And I did my own research. Oh, no. Anyone your company. But you especially being in charge of something like that. And right there it told me there was a difference. I did some research. I saw some minorities that were in charge of that company back in the day. I said wow. So, I agree.

WILL GUNN: Thank you. Chris, any thoughts on that?

CHRISTOPHER PARKER: Yeah, I definitely agree with my fellow panelists. For one, you're all supposed to be there in the military pulling toward the same collective goal. And the fact that one is subject to discrimination based on their race, and you're willing to put your life on the line just like anybody else, that's just a whole other level of B.S. that we shouldn't have to deal with. And we have to deal with it. We've all dealt with it, I think, in the military. And it always kind of struck me as odd as I'm thinking we're all supposed to be completing the same mission, but you're treating me like this based strictly and solely on the color of my skin. That's a whole other layer of stress with which we should not have to deal.

WILL GUNN: Thank you. Another question from the audience. What needs to be done to disrupt the trends you all have identified? How do we make significant progress and institutionalize fairness and equal treatment?

DELPINE METCALF-FOSTER: Well you know what I do? I get involved in my community and the VA on advisory boards. I get involved with my Congressman. I'm on his military advisory committee and have my voice heard. Okay? I don't say well, it's the VA's fault. I know there's some issues there. But myself, I put myself out there to get involved in other things so I can have documentation to bring forth and to share. That's what I do.

WILL GUNN: Thank you.

DELPINE METCALF-FOSTER: I get involved, especially in my advocacy with women's veterans and our DAV mission. In order to have change, we have to also be part of that change and I think by joining certain committees, certain organizations, we can bring them forth and we can make change. We can make change. That's my feeling.

WILL GUNN: Thank you. Barbara or Chris? Any thoughts?

BARBARA WARD: Well, I actually agree with Delphine's comments. And I think what I would say to everyone is how you bring about change is you have to be a part of the change process that you want to see. And I think we need to be more vocal as veterans and we need to make

sure that we have a seat at the table. We now have a new administration coming on board. This is certainly the time for us to voice what our concerns are, just as we recently discovered that they already identified members of the transition team for the Department of Veterans affairs. That would be a great opportunity to network and find those individuals so you can say these are the things that are problematic. These are the things that need to change. And say these are the things that we need recommendations.

I agree with Delphine from the standpoint of serving on veterans affairs advisory committees. I served on the women's advisory committee. And currently I serve on the advisory committee for Gulf War illnesses. And you have to know who your congressional representatives are to call out the deficiencies that you see that are impacting veterans in general.

WILL GUNN: Thank you. Chris, any thoughts?

CHRISTOPHER PARKER: I'll just simply say me three. (Chuckling) I mean my co-panelists are on fire. I have to agree with everything they said. I have nothing important to add.

WILL GUNN: Great. Appreciate you. Barbara, I believe if I heard you correctly, you said that about 23% of veterans are minorities.

BARBARA WARD: Yes.

WILL GUNN: But that 43% of all homeless veterans are minorities. Is that right?

BARBARA WARD: Yes. Mm-hmm.

WILL GUNN: What do you think accounts for that disparity?

BARBARA WARD: Well, I think you have to go back to the Vietnam War because many of the veterans like in Los Angeles, Los Angeles has one of the highest homeless veteran rates there is in any state or city in the country. And part of that is due to the Vietnam veterans. If you remember when the war was fought and we came back home, there were no welcoming committees for us. There was no one standing up for any of us. So, you had a large percentage of minority veterans that had Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders that never received appropriate treatment. They have become chronically homeless veterans.

I also think discrimination plays a role in this from the standpoint that oftentimes when you have veterans that did not make a lot of money when they were on active duty and many of those are minority active-duty members. When they transition to civilian life, if you're being discriminated against and you cannot get gainful employment, then you're going to end up homeless.

I also think that once you are referred to let's say HUD and you get a voucher, frequently you are dealing with landlords that don't really see a Black veteran, they just see a Black person. And they can choose to either rent to you and accept your voucher or not -- and many times they choose not to just on the mere fact that you are a minority.

So, I think also oftentimes minority veterans are not aware of all of the services that the VA offers as far as having a homeless veteran coordinator at every VA medical center that is there to help you facilitate and find housing. I think it's a combination of all of those things.

WILL GUNN: Thank you. Chris or Delphine, do either of you have anything to add on that point?

DELPHINE METCALF-FOSTER: No. I definitely agree with what Barbara said. I want to also interject something about information and history about our military and minority veterans. I didn't get my degree until I was 59 years old. And Sonoma State University, where I went, they found out I was a veteran and what have you. The first thing my counselor asked me, she looked at the combat vet, the whole bit, going on chapter 31 of the VA. She said "Can I put you in contact with my history department? I said "History department? Sure."

To make a long story short, two professors at that university had asked me to talk to their class about women in the military. I was just really floored. I said women in the military. They said we don't have that in the history books. I said wow. And they said ma'am, would you mind coming to our class? So, I made a point of doing that while I was at that university each year. And I thought it was just awesome. You would think living in this time that women veterans would be brought up in the history books. Minority members would be brought up in the history books, but they're not. They're not.

I think it starts at another level also. And that's when they are growing up, young people, to make them aware of just what we have done as a race and also as a veteran.

WILL GUNN: Let me ask this. What specific advice would you all offer to a veteran today on how to handle discrimination when seeking or getting services?

BARBARA WARD: Well, the advice that I would offer is to first off utilize the veterans service organizations if you're actually trying to file a claim for benefits. But if you're talking about specifically for discrimination, I think seek out the Center for Minority Veterans, to see what they can give you. And to utilize whatever resources are available within let's say the VA system, and don't just accept that you're being discriminated against and get frustrated and not pursue the benefits that you've actually earned.

Because that's one of the big differences that I find with minority veterans. They might go to a county vet service officer and if they feel that this person is biased against them, then they will just become frustrated and sit home and complain about it, but they don't do anything to be proactive. Where with non-minority veterans, I found that if they feel that if someone is not treating them fairly, they will go to ten different people, if it takes ten people for them, they keep knocking on doors and phone calls and voicing their concerns until someone hears them.

I think you just have to make sure that you know what resources are available, how to utilize them, and see the process through to the end. Those would be my thoughts.

WILL GUNN: Thank you. Let me ask this. Considering the discussion that we've had here today with the racial disparity that continues in the military for service members and veterans, what would you say to say someone 18-22 who is looking at the military as an option. Is it a good option? What do you think? Delphine?

DELPHINE METCALF-FOSTER: (Chuckling) Yes, I would. And I'm going to mention something else about the Veterans Military Academy Committee I was on. I encourage young people also to check those academies out and also remember there is a prep school. You know, I've heard so many people talk about the academies and a lot of young people are not

ready in a lot of ways. And I would start with that. Have them start checking out if they want to go into the military academy and there's other ways to get in. But make sure you know the history of what you're doing. You know? Because being on that academy, I saw so many young people come up with good grades and excellent grades. And never did anything else but the grades, but did not know how to function when it came to the committee, didn't know how to speak with them and what have you. And it was just kind of sad. I would advise some young people to do some research. Mm-hmm.

WILL GUNN: Great. Thank you. Professor, what do you think about that? Is the military a good option? What would you say to a young person who is considering?

BARBARA WARD: Well, I think I saw a message from him saying that he had to leave. So, I will answer. I would say based on my experience, I would tell young people, I think the military offers vast opportunities in spite of discrimination or other things that we hear about all the time. I would suggest that they find someone who has been in the military who has experienced that lifestyle and to try to connect with them to have them as a mentor possibly to offer them guidance.

Using myself as an example, I actually had finished nursing school when I decided to go into the Air Force. And at that time, I only had to make a two-year commitment to active duty. And I determined at that time, this is just not for me. So, I need to go ahead and get my honorable discharge. But in exchange for just two years of service, my nursing experience taught me impeccable organizational skills that have followed me throughout my 47-year career. I was able to buy my first home when I got a divorce using my VA loan and when I went through my first layoff, I was able to use my GI Bill to get my master's degree, which has helped me throughout my career, as well.

I think anything that you venture to do in life, there's always pros and cons, but I think that the military offers so many benefits and opportunities for our young people and that they probably wouldn't have those opportunities if they did not go in the military. So, I would definitely encourage them to do that. But to find someone who can mentor them and guide them in that process.

WILL GUNN: I think we have time for at least one more question. How can we best talk to our white fellow veterans and help them understand what Black veterans experienced in the military? Are there ways that you can recommend that white veterans can be better allies to Black veterans?

DELPHINE METCALF-FOSTER: Better dialogue.

WILL GUNN: Does the DAV offer such a forum for such a dialogue?

DELPHINE METCALF-FOSTER: They don't offer a forum that I know of, although we do have committees that do get together and talk as a group. But on a one-to-one, I think you should have more dialogue with our minority veterans. Inviting them in on committees, inviting them in on certain programs and seeing their opinion about things. I think a dialogue is really needed.

WILL GUNN: Barbara, do you have any thoughts on that?

BARBARA WARD: Well, I think communication definitely is key. And I hate to present a negative perspective, but I'm just going to be honest. I spent six years working as the director for the Center for Minority Veterans at the VA, and I was just amazed that whenever we would follow through on complaints how fellow white veterans just didn't get it and no matter how you tried to explain it to them, it's like you could talk and talk about the reason why you need data so that you can either dispel allegations that are being lodged or disprove them.

And, you know, from their perspective, well there really are no issues within the VA. There is no discrimination. You know, you tell them something happened at a VA facility, and then the response will be, well that's just anecdotal because there is no data to substantiate that. But if it was one non-minority veteran who had that same problem, it's amazing how many people would get involved and do everything that they can.

So, I think just as in society, we definitely have to keep the communications going. But I really think the big issue with the Department of Veterans Affairs is there need to be substantial policy changes implemented.

WILL GUNN: Thank you. Thank you very much. There's been a question about whether or not this will be posted. And my understanding from talking to Dan is that it will be. I have just one thought to share since we're approaching the last minute of our conversation here today.

And that is in looking at the disparities, I think a lot of it, a significant amount comes from lack of knowledge or lack of perspective. Here's what I mean. During my military career, almost two decades ago, I got a chance to travel with the judge advocate general. And we'd go to different installations and we'd receive briefings, where data, such as the data that I showed earlier, showing how Black Air Force members were being punished through non-judicial punishment at much higher rates than others, and my boss, the Judge Advocate General would ask about that.

And the typical response was, sir, we pulled each one of those cases, and we can assure you that evidence supports each and every one of those charges. And my boss, who was Caucasian, his typical response was along these lines, "I'm glad to hear that. And I'm not surprised at all to hear that."

But the reality is the thing that data doesn't tell us is who got a break, who wasn't punished, who perhaps received a stern talking to as opposed to being written up or having the matter referred to non-judicial punishment or ultimately to a court martial and to discharge. We have issues with respect to unconscious bias and as I heard President Obama talk about just last night, we're in the midst of a journey, and that journey is to make America a more perfect union. And that includes the military. Thanks everyone for joining us today for this important discussion. Thank you, Delphine. Thank you, Barbara. And I'll pass along my thanks as well to Professor Parker. Dan?

DAN NAGIN: Thank you, everyone. Take care. And thank you to our incredible moderator and panel. Be well, everyone.

DELPHINE METCALF-FOSTER: Thank you, you also.

END.