

February 8, 2022

**COMMITTEE:** House Government & Operations Committee

**BILL:** HB 279 – Veterans Affairs – Office of Communications and Public Affairs – Veterans Advocacy and Education Act

**POSITION:** Support

As an Owings Mills resident, daughter and granddaughter of veterans who proudly served this country, I **strongly support HB 279.**

I am proud to share that I come from a multi-generational family of veterans and military service members. My father served during Operation Desert Storm with the U.S. Air Force and both of my grandfathers who are now deceased, served in the U.S. Army during WWII. In addition, my sister is one step closer to graduating from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point as she selected her first duty location.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, my mother and I worked tirelessly to navigate Veterans Affairs, venturing to Pontiac, Michigan and completing the necessary forms to acquire the benefits my grandfather, the late Rev. Clinton T. Colbert, so rightfully deserved. My grandfather served in WWII, assigned to gas supply and deployed to Normandy Beach. When he traveled back to his home in Atlanta, Georgia he was welcomed back with a firebomb that damaged his home. My grandfather, like many other African-American soldiers returned from war facing racism and violence. As a result, my grandfather migrated to Detroit as part of the Great Migration to find work in the automotive industry and to escape the blatant and violent racism of the south.

Over the course of his life, he did not take advantage or know the full scope of benefits he could receive as a veteran. After conducting research, we learned that my grandfather qualified for a VA pension and health care services as he was also battling Parkinson's disease later in life. While we were in a different state, we appreciated the level of support provided by someone who walked along side us, answered our questions, identified the forms we needed to complete and even secured my grandfather's medals that were destroyed in the fire along with his uniform in Atlanta.

The specifications outlined in HB 279 will help yield intentional outreach and engagement plans, better tracking and reporting to establish goals, and most importantly be the vehicle that helps veterans and their families secure the benefits they need. My mother and I did a lot of our own legwork and have the boxes of paperwork to show for it, but we appreciated having support from a dedicated Veterans Affairs staff member who went above and beyond to guide us along the way. Because of this experience, I share my story with my colleagues and friends who have parents or relatives who are veterans to encourage them to acquire *all* the benefits they need and deserve.

We must do all we can to serve our veterans and their families after they have so proudly protected and served us. **I strongly urge the House Government & Operations Committee to pass HB 279.**

Thank you for your consideration,

Jennifer White