

OPINION

To really honor veterans, stop dismantling DEI



US Army (Shutterstock)



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Every Veterans Day, America says “thank you for your service,” patriotic photos fill social media, and flags wave at parades. But as a female combat veteran who served in Iraq as an Army ammunition specialist and now calls New York home, I notice how that gratitude rings hollow while the very programs that make service more equitable and our military more effective are being dismantled.

In January, the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) announced it had ended all diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, stopping millions in spending. The agency also plans to [cut nearly 30,000 employees by the end of 2025](#). These decisions threaten access to care at VA hospitals from the Bronx to Brooklyn. Fewer clinicians and caseworkers mean longer wait times, more backlogs in disability claims, and a reduced ability to address trauma and housing needs. New York’s VA system, which serves more than 600,000 vets, cannot absorb cuts like these.

DEI programs existed because the military and the VA were never designed for the veteran population we have today. [Women were only fully integrated into all combat roles in 2015](#). Black, Latino, Asian-American, Native, and immigrant service members have long described unequal discipline and biased evaluations. LGBTQ service members lived under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” and many still face gaps in care. [Veterans with disabilities often face overlooked injuries and trauma](#).

DEI was not symbolic. It was a structural correction to ensure fairness and effectiveness.

[Women now make up nearly one in five active-duty service members.](#) We serve in every role, from combat engineer to pilot, yet still face higher rates of sexual harassment and assault. About [6.8% experience unwanted sexual contact each year](#) compared with 1.3% of men. A Government Accountability Office review found that [female enlisted personnel were up to 2.5 percentage points less likely to advance than their male counterparts.](#)

Race also shapes military experience and veteran outcomes. A separate GAO review identified major racial disparities in evaluations and advancement. [Black service members are disproportionately subjected to military justice actions](#) and are up to 2.6 times more likely to face courts-martial or non-judicial punishment. Black veterans have also experienced [lower disability claim approval rates and longer appeals timelines.](#) These inequities shape careers, benefits, and lives.

For many women, the challenges intensify after service. [Female veterans are the fastest-growing part of the veteran population and are three to four times more likely than non-veteran women to experience homelessness.](#) Between 2020 and 2023, [homelessness among female veterans rose 24%](#) even as overall veteran homelessness declined.

Military sexual trauma is one of the strongest predictors of PTSD and housing instability. LGBTQ veterans often encounter shelters and services that are unsafe or unwelcoming. These outcomes reflect the inequities that DEI programs addressed.

This is not about political correctness. It is about fairness and national security. Our military is strongest when it reflects the nation it defends and draws on the full range of available talent.

DEI initiatives helped ensure that VA clinicians understood how trauma shows up differently across gender and race, that leadership pipelines included women, and that bias didn't quietly dictate who got promoted or cared for. Ending those programs doesn't make our institutions stronger; it makes them less prepared, less responsive, and less capable of protecting the people they serve.

National defense depends on people. The entire force suffers when service members or veterans are pushed out or overlooked because of their identity. DEI is essential to readiness.

Here in New York, home to one of the largest veteran populations in the country, the loss of DEI capacity is already being felt. Female veterans rely on VA facilities in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Northport for reproductive health care, mental health counseling, and housing programs that are now at risk as budgets shrink. Cutting inclusion efforts weakens the systems that make national defense possible.

Veterans Day should be about more than parades and platitudes. If we truly value the sacrifices of our veterans, we must also value inclusion. A country that only honors some of its veterans honors none of them.

I am proud of my service. But patriotism requires confronting who benefits from our institutions and who is left behind. The fight for diversity, equity, and inclusion is not separate from the fight for democracy. It is the same fight.

So this Veterans Day, when politicians post photos of themselves shaking hands with veterans, ask them what they have done to protect the people who served once the cameras are gone. Gratitude without justice is empty. Inclusion is how we honor service in full.

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