HONORING THE FALLEN: HOW CAN WE BETTER SERVE AMERICA'S VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES?

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

SEPTEMBER 24, 2009

Serial No. 111–44

Printed for the use of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE

53–429 WASHINGTON : 2010

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
Internet: bookstore.gpo.gov Phone: toll free (866) 512–1800; DC area (202) 512–1800
Fax: (202) 512–2104 Mail: Stop IDCC, Washington, DC 20402–0001

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HONORING THE FALLEN: HOW CAN WE BETTER SERVE AMERICA'S VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES?

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2009

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:04 a.m., in Room 334, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. John Hall [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Hall, Halvorson, Donnelly, Lamborn, and Miller.

Also Present: Representative Buyer.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN HALL

Mr. HALL. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. The Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee, hearing on Honoring our Fallen Heroes: Are We Meeting the Burial Needs of our Veterans and Their Families, will now come to order.

I ask that you all join me in the Pledge of Allegiance. Flags are at both ends of the room.

[Pledge of Allegiance.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you and thank you for being here today. Thank you to our distinguished witnesses.

From the Revolutionary War to our current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, American servicemembers have given their lives for this country.

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln created a national veterans' cemetery system and dedicated it, "For the soldiers who shall die in the service of the country." President Lincoln's sentiments and our undying gratitude are as palpable today as they were in 1862, evident in our commitment to provide benefits to ensure that our veterans are properly memorialized.

Nevertheless, we may be falling short of our intended goals on some fronts. Although Congress authorized the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide veterans the option to receive burial and plot allowances and reimbursements to certain burial expenses, these benefits were created decades ago and have not kept pace with inflation.

The value of the current $300 burial allowance and $300 plot allowance for qualifying veterans has diminished as funeral and burial costs have increased at a higher rate than the average inflation rate.

I am also concerned about VA's current cemetery policies, which seem to leave a large number of veterans unserved by a burial option.

Under the current standard, new national cemeteries are established in areas where the unserved population is at least 170,000 veterans within a 75-mile radius. That means several areas with large numbers of veterans, such as where the population is more than 110,000, will remain unserved by a VA burial option.

Moreover, VA's current strategic goal of reaching 90 percent served would require an additional 31 cemeteries beyond those already in operation or planned as of 2001.

However, according to a study conducted by ICF International, there are no locations in the U.S. that will meet the current criteria for the establishment of a new national cemetery until 2015. Even at that time, only one community will reach the population threshold of 170,000 veterans. It is evident that changes to the current 75-mile service area standard may be in order.

All these burial benefits concerns negatively impact the survivors left behind. I want to further examine this critical aspect of the issues with the VA as well.

Additionally, the National Shrine mandate holds that, "All national and other veterans' cemeteries under the control of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) shall be considered National Shrines."

Several factors will impact the NCA's ability to meet and maintain the National Shrine mandate, namely the growing number of interments, a large change in burial preferences, population migration, and an aging infrastructure.

I believe that VA should conduct a preemptive review of the NCA's obstacles in meeting a National Shrine mandate in order to try to thwart new issues that may arise and ensure that existing ones do not grow in complexity.

And, lastly, I look forward to hearing from Secretary Cleland of the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), Superintendent Metzler of Arlington National Cemetery, and the rest of our esteemed witnesses.

I believe that we can bring continuous improvements to our system of memorializing our courageous veterans by ensuring that their burial benefits and final resting place reflect the debt of their service.

I would like to acknowledge that we have been joined by the Ranking Member of the full Veterans' Affairs Committee, Congressman Buyer, and ask unanimous consent that he be allowed to participate in today's hearing. I yield now to the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Mr. Lamborn, for his opening statement.

[The prepared statement of Chairman Hall appears on p. 36.]

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. DOUG LAMBORN

Mr. LAMBORN. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing on America's national cemeteries.

I thank our witnesses in advance for their testimony today and for their dedication to serving America's veterans and their families.

Properly honoring a deceased veteran is one of our most solemn and indeed sacred obligations. These patriots have earned honored repose in a National Shrine. They and their families are due the tribute and thanks of a grateful Nation.

As members of the greatest generation pass from our presence, we are seeing increased demand on all of our national cemeteries. VA estimates that interments in national cemeteries will rise from the current level of 2.9 million to 3.4 million by 2014.

Mr. Chairman, it is for that reason that I thank you for helping my efforts to pass H.R. 174, which I introduced with my good friend, Mr. Salazar, earlier this year. H.R. 174 would establish a national cemetery in southern Colorado and greatly benefit those veterans and families in this fast-growing area.

One reason for the continued delay in building the cemetery is that the southern Colorado region does not meet VA's subjective standards for new construction.

I believe that there is a better way to determine need than drawing circles in a 75-mile radius around a national cemetery to determine where the most underserved veterans are.

There are many other factors that need to be taken into account including travel time to and from national cemeteries, access to public transportation in the area, and other factors that are more realistic than a large circle on a map.

However, I know that this problem is not just limited to southern Colorado and that if we polled other Members, we would find these problems and concerns extend to many rural and urban regions like Nebraska, New York City, Los Angeles, Buffalo, New York, and many other areas that are adversely affected by VA's somewhat arbitrary rules.

Passing H.R. 174 would be an important first step in addressing this problem and is identical to H.R. 1660 that passed this Committee and the whole House last Congress.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for your continued support of this bill and I hope that the full Committee will consider it soon.

I want to thank everyone again for being here today and I am looking forward to your testimony.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

[The prepared statement of Congressman Lamborn appears on p. 37.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Lamborn. I also support Mr. Salazar's bill, H.R. 174.

I would like to remind all of our panelists that your complete written statements have been made a part of the hearing record, so please limit your remarks so that we may have sufficient time for follow-up questions once everyone has the opportunity to provide their testimony.

On our first panel is the Honorable——

Mr. LAMBORN. Mr. Chairman, I wonder if it would be possible, with the Chairman's indulgence, to allow the Ranking Member to make an opening statement if he has one.

Mr. HALL. Yes. First I would like to recognize——

Mr. DONNELLY. Mr. Buyer.

Mr. HALL [continuing]. Okay, with Mr. Donnelly's acquiescence Ranking Member of the full Veterans' Affairs Committee, Mr. Buyer.

You are now recognized.

Mr. BUYER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to appear here today, but I will prefer to give a statement after all other Members have given theirs, please. Thank you.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Buyer.

Mr. Donnelly.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOE DONNELLY

Mr. DONNELLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, Mr. Cleland, we are honored by your presence here today and your service to this country.

And, to all the people connected with our national cemeteries, from the people driving around mowing the lawns this morning to the Superintendent of Arlington National Cemetery, we are grateful for your devotion and dedication.

This is a subject of special importance to me. My mom is interred at one of our national cemeteries. And it has always been treated as sacred ground by everybody who works there, everybody connected with it. It is hard to describe the reverence that everybody treats our cemeteries with.

So to all of you for a job well done since they were first started, we are in your debt. I look forward to your testimony.

Again, Mr. Cleland, thank you for all you have done for this country, we are in your debt.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Donnelly.

Mr. Miller.

Mr. MILLER. Mr. Chairman, I have a statement for the record.

Mr. HALL. We will enter it into the record.

[The prepared statement of Congressman Miller appears on p. 37.]

Mr. HALL. Mr. Buyer.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. STEVE BUYER

Mr. BUYER. Thank you very much.

Max, good to see you. Gosh, when I look back over our years together, we have done a lot and we have shared a lot.

And these issues in particular, gosh, I can reflect upon our days when you were on the Senate Armed Services Committee and we worked on some personnel issues when we were doing the drawdown back in the 1990s.

And so many of our forces would rely upon those active duty to provide honors to our comrades. Then as we began to draw down, we learned about catchment areas and that they would not go beyond so many miles of a particular fort because they just did not have the personnel.

If you recall back then, we even, at conference, adopted the protocols and procedures to do military honors and how we would work even more so with the veterans service organizations (VSOs) out there in making sure they had what they needed and all the

way down to how we were going to even create an artificial bugler. I mean, that was even a controversy on how that was even going to be constructed.

And all of our earnest and all of our efforts was to make sure that we set the course and set the proper tone, I guess, that helps define ourselves by that sacrifice.

So I want to thank you and appreciate working with you over the years. And I want to thank you for taking on this new position. The American Battle Monuments Commission, you set the standards and pace for the world. And I think it helps define America as who we are as we cherish our heritage.

And so you have accepted a role of great responsibility, I believe, because you are now the chief steward of so many souls and they lie in grace far away from their homeland.

What is disheartening to me, though, is that we have four standards in America. You set the pace. Coming second is Arlington National Cemetery. Third are the VA national cemeteries. And fourth is the Department of the Interior. We should not have four standards.

I have great pride in what we have been able to do with the National Shrine Program with the VA. And we still have not completed that.

But years ago, when I had visited Andersonville with the Department of the Interior, I was pretty stunned with what I had seen. I did not realize that we were still doing burials, that it was an active cemetery run through the Department of the Interior. I did not know that, Max. I just did not know.

And when I looked off in the distance and saw that they were preparing for a burial on that day, I then began to look around and saw all the markers completely out of line. They were stained with time. The wall was in poor condition that was around the cemetery. Someone had mowed the leaves. Grass was growing all around all the markers. I was stunned with what I had seen.

And the Department of the Interior, I had threatened to take jurisdiction of these active cemeteries away from the Department of the Interior and pull it into the VA.

I have good conversations with the present Secretary Salazar who has said that he will conduct a review. What I am hopeful we can do here is instill a National Shrine Program within the Department of the Interior to raise their standards.

I wish we could all be at your standard, Max, what you sought with the American Battle Monuments Commission. We are not there yet. But let us raise that standard. Let us raise that standard at the Department of the Interior with regard to those 14 cemeteries.

So I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman and the Ranking Member, for bringing the light not only to allow Max Cleland here to talk about the good things that they do at ABMC and the VA, but also a lot of things at the Department of the Interior they do well and they have had their limited budgets.

But let us know what your needs are, and we will work together here not only with the Appropriations Committee but also with Secretary Salazar to make it right.

With that, I yield back, and thank you.

[The prepared statement of Congressman Buyer appears on p. 38.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Buyer.

I would like to remind all panelists that your complete written statements have been made part of the hearing record so please limit your remarks so that we can have time to follow-up with questions with everyone.

Our first panel includes the Honorable Max Cleland who has served this country in many capacities, currently as Secretary of the American Battle Monuments Commission.

Congratulations on your position, sir, but also as Senator and a soldier. All Americans, I think, are grateful for your service.

Also, Mr. John C. Metzler, Superintendent of Arlington National Cemetery; accompanied by Ms. Lynn Heirakuji. Is that how you pronounce your name?

Ms. HEIRAKUJI. Heirakuji.

Mr. HALL. Heirakuji. Thank you. Got it right the second time, I think. Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Personnel Oversight, Department of the Army, U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). And Ms. Katherine Stevenson, Assistant Director, Business Services of the National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Department of the Interior. I forgot to mention, former Secretary of the VA for Mr. Cleland, a long and illustrious resume.

We go by the 5-minute rule as closely as we can, and, Secretary Cleland, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENTS OF HON. MAX CLELAND, SECRETARY, AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION; JOHN C. METZLER, JR., SUPERINTENDENT, ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY; ACCOMPANIED BY LYNN HEIRAKUJI, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE ARMY FOR PERSONNEL OVERSIGHT, DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE; AND KATHERINE STEVENSON, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, BUSINESS SERVICES, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

STATEMENT OF HON. MAX CLELAND

Secretary CLELAND. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I will say that the kind words by Mr. Buyer are welcome. I can take credit for none of that.

The American Battle Monuments Commission has been around since 1923 when General Pershing led the effort after leading the American Expeditionary Forces in World War I. He put it together and was its Chairman for many, many years. I am the Secretary and I am honored to be part of that.

The role of the American Battle Monuments Commission is really truly incredible. Most Americans never see an American cemetery abroad. We invite all of you to come, Members of Congress, members of the public. If you cannot come, access us on the internet, we are there, abmc.gov.

Mr. Donnelly, thank you very much for your comments. My mother is also interred at a national cemetery because my father served at Pearl Harbor after the attack, so we thank you for those words.

Mr. Chairman, I will say that coming to the House is an interesting experience because in the Senate, we are not limited by the 5-minute rule. However, I will try to control myself.

The first time I came to this hearing room, I was up for being head of the VA. I was 34 years of age. That was a time when I encountered all the issues that you are dealing with in terms of the VA cemetery system.

Now I am much older, old enough to think that "Dance With Me" and "You Are Still The One" authored by our Chairman are oldies, but goodies. So it is an honor to be here.

We are the overseas guys. If you want to know what the American Battle Monuments Commission does, it maintains and commemorates Americans who in many ways died in place and are buried pretty much where they fell.

We also administer monuments and memorials. As new generations succeed, the World War I and World War II generations who are buried in our cemeteries, our main mission becomes not only green grass and white headstones, and we do that, as Mr. Buyer pointed out, better than anybody in the world, but our main mission now is to tell the stories of those commemorated at our cemeteries so that succeeding generations will understand why there is an ABMC in Manila, in Hawaii; why there is an American Battle Monuments Commission Memorial to veterans from World War II in the Pacific, in Hawaii, in the Panama Canal, in Mexico City, which honor Americans' service and sacrifices in the Mexican War, Tunisia, North Africa, and throughout western Europe.

America's military, especially through the 20th century, has been all over the world and Americans have lost their lives all over the world. We inter those who primarily lost their lives in World War I and World War II and the families did not want to repatriate their remains to America.

Beginning at the end of World War II, and with the Korean war, technology made it possible for us to fly the remains of our troops home. From the Korean war on, through the Vietnam War, through Iraq, through Afghanistan, we fly the remains home, but in a certain way that makes the loss of that loved one and that serviceman or woman even more anonymous.

So it is appropriate that we gather here today to think about how we can better honor the fallen and how we can better take care of those who gave, as Lincoln said, the last full measure of devotion.

For those who want to read up on the American Battle Monuments Commission, each of you has our annual report and citizens can get it from us if they request it. We are glad to provide it.

This is an age-old problem, Mr. Chairman. I have been looking at some various quotes that I like very much. One dates from about 2,500 years ago when an orator tried to describe his feelings about the loss of people from his community and his Nation.

We remember Pericles' funeral oration, which was recorded by Thucydides, the historian of the Peloponnesian War: "For heroes have the whole earth for their tomb. And in lands far from their own, where the column with its epitaph declares it, there is enshrined in every breast a record unwritten with no tablet to preserve it, except that of the heart."

In so many ways we have the tablets. We have the cemeteries. We have the memorials. But we have our heart as well. And for those who have lost loved ones, their heart will ache until their death. And for the rest of us, too, there is a sense in which we all try to make meaning out of suffering. We try to make meaning out of war.

Archibald MacLeish, the great American poet, lost a brother, a younger brother in World War I, and he is buried in one of our cemeteries at Flanders Field. And MacLeish, in trying to deal with that grief, wrote a poem, and his last lines of his poem are very meaningful to me. He said about the young dead, "They say, we leave you our deaths: give them their meaning."

I think that is what we are all about here, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Secretary Cleland appears on p. 41.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

The next witness is Mr. Metzler.

Once again, sir, your statement is entered in the hearing record, and you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JOHN C. METZLER

Mr. METZLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee today on behalf of the Secretary of the Army in support of our Arlington National Cemetery. It is honor for me to represent Arlington National Cemetery, our Nation's premier military cemetery.

With me today is Ms. Heirakuji, the Deputy Secretary of the Army for Personnel Oversight.

The management of Arlington National Cemetery presents unique challenges among national and military cemeteries. Arlington continues to serve as an active burial place for today's military men and women and serves a very heavily visited National Shrine honoring the past service of men and women in our Armed Forces.

In fiscal year 2008, there were 4,123 interments and 2,781 inurnments in our columbariums. In the current fiscal year, 2009, we estimate there will be more than 7,000 funerals conducted at Arlington National Cemetery.

Ten formal requests for exceptions to the interment policy were received during this current year, seven of which were for extended family members to go into existing graves. They were approved at my level as the Superintendent. Three others were requested and not approved by the Secretary of the Army, which would have required a new grave site at Arlington.

Since the funeral of President Kennedy in 1963, Arlington National Cemetery has become a major tourist attraction. During this past fiscal year, Arlington accommodated over four million visitors, making Arlington one of the most visited historic sites here in our National Capitol region.

Also during this year, there will be conducted almost 3,000 ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery. Thousands of visitors both foreign and American have come to Arlington to participate in various events ranging from a simple wreath ceremony at the Tomb

of the Unknown Soldier to our National Veteran's Day and Memorial Day programs which are attended to by the President.

Over 127 fallen servicemembers serving in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and over 445 fallen servicemembers serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) have been laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery.

Among those buried at Arlington is Specialist Ross A. McGinnis who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic acts in Iraq. Sergeant First Class Paul A. Smith, another Medal of Honor recipient is memorialized in Section D at Arlington Cemetery for his deeds in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

On January 1st, 2009, the Secretary of the Army authorized all servicemembers who are killed in action or died as a result of wounds to receive full military honors at Arlington Cemetery whether they are interred, inurned, or memorialized. This would include an escort platoon, a color team, a band, a caisson, as well as the firing party, casket team, bugler, and chaplain.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my remarks, and I will be pleased to respond to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Metzler appears on p. 43.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, sir.

Ms. Stevenson, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF KATHERINE STEVENSON

Ms. STEVENSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you Members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the national cemeteries that are administered by the National Park Service.

We consider it a great honor to serve our veterans and their families at these national cemeteries and we are committed to ensuring that our cemeteries are maintained at a standard worthy of those who fought for our country.

We are particularly pleased to be able to appear before you to tell you and the Committee, about the progress we have made to improve the condition of the cemeteries we manage since we last testified here in May of 2007.

In 2007, we reported that $1 million in project funds had been spent in the prior 5 years on cemetery repairs. In fiscal years 2008 and 2009, the National Park Service has invested $4.5 million in cemetery repair projects and this is in addition to routine maintenance.

Another $1.9 million in supplemental emergency storm and flood relief funding is being spent on a visitor's center that serves Chalmette Battlefield and National Cemetery.

In addition to this project money, every park with a national cemetery has had an increase in their operating funds in each of the last 2 fiscal years.

Some recent concerns have been raised about the appearance of national cemeteries managed by the Park Service. I wish to assure you that the National Park Service takes these concerns very seriously.

NPS already follows the M40 series of manuals written by the VA's National Cemetery Administration for operations of national cemeteries.

NPS also orders headstones from the same facilities that produce headstones for NCA cemeteries. NPS adheres to standards for placement and alignment of stones and replaces headstones that need second inscriptions for spouses.

As the Nation's lead historic preservation agency, the National Park Service places great value on the historic significance, historic appearance, and historic headstones of the national cemeteries we manage.

Consequently, we clean the headstones as gently as possible. We realign the headstones by hand and we maintain the historic landscape appearance, the contours and the trees to the greatest practical extent.

Our maintenance workers avoid using line trimmers near the headstones as the marble chips and is thus more susceptible to erosion. We also avoid chemicals in order to preserve the monuments and the environment.

Finally, in response to recent inquiries, the National Park Service has just completed an on-site review of four NPS managed cemeteries. That report is in draft, but the study found that the NPS managed cemeteries were in good condition overall.

We look forward to sharing the final report with the Committee in the very near future.

This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Stevenson appears on p. 45.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Ms. Stevenson.

I will now recognize myself for a round of questions starting with Secretary Cleland.

Your written testimony is just as poetic as your oral testimony was and covered a lot of extra ground. But I will just focus on a couple of things.

The Normandy Visitor Center represents the ABMC's efforts to tell a better story of those brave souls who fought in this historic and bloody battle. I know that the ABMC was considering expanding its Interpretive Program to several other sites so that the many visitors to ABMC properties would gain even further insight into our overseas' veterans' sacrifice.

Does the Commission still intend to expand its Interpretive Program to these other sites and could you provide us with a status update on this effort?

Secretary CLELAND. Yes, sir. We do. The wonderful staff that I inherited has worked very hard to get into the third phase of what we do.

First of all, we do white headstones and green grass, but the ultimate story that we tell for succeeding generations is probably what we will be remembered by. We tell that story in various ways, through the internet, through interactive internet access, but we also tell that story through what we call the Interpretive Program.

We stole that idea from the Park Service. They have a whole series of Interpretive Programs throughout the Park Service and they have an Interpretive Promotion System within the Park Service. So we stole that idea in order to tell the stories of those honored at our cemeteries and memorials. Now we have an Interpretive Program.

The first interpretive program for visitors who come to an American Battle Monuments Commission cemetery is at Normandy. Some $30 million was spent on the Normandy Interpretive Program. We thank the House and the Senate for funding that program. Now Normandy has tremendous visitation. Normandy, in fact is our most visited cemetery.

I was there with the President on June 6th, and he looked at me and said "great job." And I said thank you, Mr. President, but I had been Secretary of the American Battle Monuments Commission for just 48 hours.

So the Interpretive Program is underway. We want to have an interpretive center at Cambridge outside of London ready for the 2012 Olympics. There are other interpretive programs we want to put together around the world—in our biggest cemetery in Manila, for example.

So the Interpretive Program is well underway, as are the brochures which we have accelerated in terms of production that will go to these cemeteries in multiple languages. I guess the only language that is not covered is Southern. We have visitors, primarily in our western European operation, who speak two or three languages.

So we will be telling stories of our honored deads' contribution to America's security and safety through the Interpretive Program at our visitors centers and through the brochures that we put together. Both initiatives are well underway, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, sir.

In June 2009, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report on the ABMC identifying 13 deficits in its internal control procedures. Several of them involved its trust funds and banking investments and transactions. GAO then recommended 24 corrective actions.

What is the status of the ABMC's response to this report and what steps have been taken to fix these problems?

Secretary CLELAND. First of all, Mr. Chairman, you are correct and the GAO is correct. We will provide that information for the record.

One of the things that I found when I came to the ABMC was there were a number of GAO recommendations. Some of them have to do with our automatic data processing operation in western Europe. I just determined that the Chief Information Officer for the ABMC should be in western Europe and help us get on top of this.

So we will be glad to provide that information for the record, Mr. Chairman.

[The ABMC subsequently provided the following information:]

Since 1997, GAO has been our auditor. Each year, ABMC has achieved a clean audit where in all material respects it has maintained effective internal control over financial reporting, including safeguarding of assets, and is compliant with laws, regulations, and directives as of the end of each fiscal year. In conjunction with each audit, GAO makes several management recommendations to us each year. Accordingly, ABMC develops a plan of action to resolve these recommendations, and follows up to ensure that recommendations have been implemented.

Over the past 4 years, ABMC has resolved more than 94 percent of these recommendations; many were resolved on the spot when GAO identified the issue. Of those not resolved, ABMC has a plan in place to fix them over time.

In the fiscal year 2008 management report, we had several recommendations relating to managing our trust fund. All of these recommendations have had actions taken to resolve the issues identified by the GAO.

Mr. HALL. Since I only have 45 seconds of my time left——

Secretary CLELAND. All right. Thank you.

Mr. HALL [continuing]. It is not being dissented. But I will just ask you one more question. I have questions for the other witnesses——

Secretary CLELAND. Yes, sir.

Mr. HALL [continuing]. After our other Members have a chance to ask theirs. But, Secretary Cleland, one final thing. Could you explain for us how the current economic climate has impacted the ABMC's foreign currency fluctuation account and has Congress given you enough authority to manage those fluctuations?

Secretary CLELAND. Yes. We do pay Foreign Service Nationals, FSNs as we call them, to help us maintain these cemeteries around the world as monuments, as memorials that are, as was pointed out, the gold standard around the world.

In terms of that, we do have to adjust our currency to theirs, to the host Nation, shall we say, and to the foreign labor force and contractors that we deal with. The Congress has given us sufficient authority to manage the currency fluctuations. We are in good shape in terms of our foreign currency fluctuation account.

Mr. HALL. Thank you so much.

I will now recognize Ranking Member Lamborn for 5 minutes of questions.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am going to give my time to the Ranking Member of the full Committee, Mr. Buyer, in addition to whatever time he might need on his own if that is the case.

Mr. HALL. Mr. Buyer.

Mr. BUYER. Thank you.

[Slide of Normandy]

Mr. BUYER. This is Normandy. And I assume this picture was taken some time back. But what is extraordinary for Americans who have an opportunity to be here on the coastline at Normandy is that it is truly extraordinary. When you step upon the grounds, the grass is as though you are on a—it is like a golf course. It is finely manicured. It is absolutely extraordinary. All the markers in perfect alignment.

It is absolutely an extraordinary place. It is true dedication to the sacrifice that so many of these men not only as they came upon the beaches to make it above this ridge line but those who also then lost their lives in the fight at Normandy.

Then to the rear back here, they also then have a memorial to so many of whom had lost their lives at sea and are unaccounted for. So the American Battle Monuments Commission, you, as I said in the opening statement, you set the pace and you are extraordinary.

[Slide of Arlington]

Mr. BUYER. Next comes Arlington. So many people recognize in America with regard when we think about a national cemetery, we think of Arlington. And there have been so many burials given the fact that we are in a two-front war. With Arlington, there have

been so many visitors. People really feel the pride of a Nation that those of whom have sacrificed in the name of liberty are well taken care of and the families feel pretty good about it. That is the second standard.

[Slide of Fort Rosecrans, San Diego]

Mr. BUYER. The third standard here is our VA National Cemetery. I just chose this one in particular, Fort Rosecrans out in San Diego. And the same type, laser shots with regard to alignment of all the markers and it is beautiful. The National Shrine Program does an excellent job in making sure that we have the one standard and I appreciate that.

[Slide of Andersonville 2004]

Mr. BUYER. Next let me show a national cemetery by the Department of the Interior. Are we getting a sense that there might be a difference? It should not matter that this is the marker of someone that died in the Civil War. It should not matter if it was someone that died in the Revolution or someone who died that is interred in Mexico City, Mr. Cleland, one of your cemeteries in Mexico City, or in the Philippines.

[Slide of Andersonville 2009]

[The slide presentation is attached to Congressman Buyer's prepared statement, which appears on p. 39.]

Now, the day what I describe when you look at—look around the stones. So when you said in your testimony that we gently, finely clean the markers, that is going to take you a lot of time. This is not the standard for which we should have in America.

I think, Mr. Cleland, if you saw that in one of yours, you would just freak out. How is that for an articulation? I would. I did.

Secretary CLELAND. That is Georgia, my home State.

Mr. BUYER. And point out that this was an active cemetery. Now, here is what I love about if you make a lot of noise and you complain about something, you will get a reaction, right? It is physics. It is nature. So I complained about all these weeds and stuff around them also.

Now, you want to see what happens when you complain? I will show you what the response is. We do not have weeds around them anymore because we took a weed whacker to them and we took it to the dirt. Now you do not get any grass.

So I just want to make sure. I mean, look at this. We are doing better, but are we where we need to be? And that is the purpose here of the hearing. It is the purpose of tell us what your needs and requirements are. If you need a Shrine Program to bring us up to the standards, let us know and we will help you do that because we want to make sure that this is not——this is an active cemetery. We want there to be the standard for which these men and women deserve. Okay?

And this is classic that a picture is very powerful. And it is one thing, I could have tried to articulate that, but when you see it, then you can understand why I am so disturbed and so bothered.

So let me ask you, Ms. Stevenson, tell the Committee here what are your needs? What do you believe your needs are to raise the standards within the Department of the Interior?

Ms. STEVENSON. The report that I just mentioned will have some recommendations for funding and it will have recommendations for increased treatment of cleaning and so on.

Mr. BUYER. What are your goals?

Ms. STEVENSON. Our goals are the same as the goals set by the National Cemetery Administration. We have the same three standards, height and alignment, clean stones, and level grave sites, as they do.

Mr. BUYER. How many cemeteries did you go to and review?

Ms. STEVENSON. Four.

Mr. BUYER. How many do you have in your system?

Ms. STEVENSON. Fourteen.

Mr. BUYER. Why would you not go to all 14 cemeteries?

Ms. STEVENSON. We wanted to do it as quickly as we could and get some sense of what was going on and one, for example, that you mentioned, Andersonville was one of them. So we took ones that were fairly close to Andersonville.

Mr. BUYER. What are the four that you went to?

Ms. STEVENSON. Andersonville, Andrew Johnson, Fort Donelson, and Stones River.

Mr. BUYER. Andrew Johnson. That is in Tennessee? That is the one in Tennessee? Have you sent inquiries out to the other ten?

Ms. STEVENSON. No, sir. No more than usual. I mean, we talk to them a fair amount.

Mr. BUYER. All right. You have got 14. There is a disconnect here. I am not in a fight with you. Okay? I want us to raise the standards so when this report comes out, I am going through it.

Ms. STEVENSON. Good.

Mr. BUYER. The light is on you. Okay? So what my immediate sense here is, is when I think the Secretary tells me he is going to do a review that it is going to be of all 14 cemeteries. I do not want something done quick and easy. All right? I want this to be done correctly.

And if your sense is and your counsel to us is that four is going to be sufficient, that is fine. But is what you are asking me is, "Steve, just pause here. When you get the report, you are going to be satisfied?"

Ms. STEVENSON. You know, you can choose a photograph in any of these cemeteries and any, I bet, of the veteran cemeteries that are managed by other people and we will have some scenes that are perfect and some scenes that are not. I know that that is true in the cemeteries that we manage. We are trying to do our very best for the veterans and for their burial places.

Mr. BUYER. All right. Well, your standard at very best does not meet the standards established by others. So we are going to take your standard of very best and we are going to raise it. We are going to raise your very best even higher. Okay?

And I did not go out and selectively choose to find what I think would be the worst photograph. It is easy to go out there and take that photo. And I was extremely upset the day that I saw a veteran being buried in a cemetery like I saw.

It is one thing, you know, we have all been to cemeteries and we have seen the conditions of some of them, but to think that this is

an active cemetery under the stewardship of the Federal Government was extremely disheartening.

I am going to pause here, Mr. Chairman. I will give you back under the time.

I will await your report and I will work with the Chairman and the Ranking Member and Mr. Miller and Mr. Donnelly, others of the Subcommittee. In particular, I am going to work with Mr. Dicks because of the Appropriations Committee. This is not going to be an issue of money. This is going to be an issue of desire and to achieve the highest standard possible.

And with that, I will yield back to Mr. Hall.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Buyer.

Ms. Stevenson, I thank you for coming and testifying before us and note for the record that this Committee does not have jurisdiction over the National Park Service. We appreciate your coming to testify before us. We all share the same goal, I am sure, in terms of the standards and quality of the facilities that you manage for our veterans.

Does the NCA assist with replacing veterans' headstones or markers at Andersonville or Andrew Johnson Cemeteries when they break or deteriorate?

Ms. STEVENSON. I do not believe they do. We order the headstones from the same company, but we do all of that work ourselves.

Mr. HALL. As a participant on the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, do you feel that this is a good vehicle for addressing the NPS's concerns or does the NPS need a more developed partnership with VA regarding cemetery issues?

Ms. STEVENSON. Actually, fairly recently, I think in 2004, an Interagency Committee was established, and we looked very much forward to working with that Interagency Committee, but the head of the Committee became ill and so the Committee was dissolved. We would like to see the Committee reconstituted so that we can discuss some of these concerns.

Mr. HALL. When will the NPS review of its cemeteries be complete and when would you expect you could share those with the NCA?

Ms. STEVENSON. As I mentioned, we did a review of the four cemeteries. That report is completed. It just needs to go through formal review, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Department.

Mr. HALL. Thank you.

Mr. Metzler, based on serious issues that were raised in recent news stories regarding grave marking, et cetera, what has been done to reassure families of those buried at Arlington that their loved ones have been properly interred and that their graves are properly marked? Have you coordinated efforts in this regard with the VA's Office of Survivors Assistance? Are any of your grief counseling or outreach efforts coordinated with the Vet Center counselors who are authorized to see families when there has been an active-duty death?

Mr. METZLER. Sir, we are not coordinating with Veterans Affairs. The Department of the Army does have counselors that the fami-

lies are using, but we are not, to my knowledge, we are not in sync at Arlington Cemetery with Veterans Affairs for that.

Mr. HALL. When problems arise with the VA providing headstones or markers such as with inscription errors, what is your recourse and how are those situations handled?

Mr. METZLER. We go to Veterans Affairs for all our government headstones. When we have made an initial mistake, then we ask for an expedited replacement headstone. Veterans Affairs is very timely and replaces that stone within a month, if not sooner.

Mr. HALL. Mr. Metzler, if there are errors in an inscription, can you make the request for repairs or does the family have to be informed and make those requests?

Mr. METZLER. No. If we are informed about the mistake, we will make an immediate correction on the headstone to the family's satisfaction.

Mr. HALL. Are there instances at Arlington in which a veteran without other eligible dependents has requested that his or her burial benefits be passed to a parent?

Mr. METZLER. We have had those requests over the years, but that is not within our guidance of our regulations. The burial benefit is to the veteran member himself and they cannot pass it on to other family members.

Mr. HALL. Starting with you, Mr. Metzler, if there is something that you would recommend that this Subcommittee or the full Committee do to help you to do your job better and help to memorialize our veterans better and preserve their memory, what would that recommendation be?

Mr. METZLER. It would be the continuation of the National Shrine commitment, sir. That has been a great shot in the arm for us. It has been able to help us get a lot of maintenance done at the cemetery that we have not been able to do in the past. And I would just ask for your continued support in that program.

Mr. HALL. Okay. Just a sentence if you could, Mr. Secretary, same question.

Secretary CLELAND. We are proud of the American Battle Monuments Commission cemeteries. The scope of America's involvement around the world, particularly in the 20th Century, is staggering. When you go to Normandy or any of our cemeteries around the world, you realize just how much America has paid for its service and sacrifice around the world.

We thank the House and the Senate for all the help they have given in the past. And so we are just honored to serve, Mr. Chairman.

I will say that our motto is what General Pershing said at the creation of the American Battle Monuments Commission in 1923, in speaking about the veterans of World War I, that "Time shall not dim the glory of your deeds." And so that is the standard that we try to adhere to.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, sir.

We have a vote that has been called, so I want to quickly ask the same question of Ms. Stevenson and then ask Mr. Miller to ask his questions.

Ms. Stevenson, is there something this Subcommittee, the full Committee, or the VA can do to help you do your job better?

Ms. STEVENSON. We would like to see the interagency working group reestablished.

Mr. HALL. Okay. We will try to make that happen.

Mr. Miller.

Mr. MILLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Two quick questions both to Mr. Metzler, and thanks for your hospitality also. Any time a member of this body has an opportunity to go out there to Arlington, we appreciate what you do. I have two questions.

One deals with the waiver policy. I understand it took almost 10 years to come up with the policy. And could you now unfortunately quickly describe, if you can, why it took so long and what the policy is, how you go through that process?

Mr. METZLER. Well, the waiver policy in the past was an informal process, so it has now been formalized through the Secretary of the Army. There is a group of senior officials within the Army that would receive the request for an exception of policy. After it has come to my office with the recommendation, I will forward it on to the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs.

In turn, they will take that recommendation request from the family and send it out to the senior panel. They will make their recommendations back to the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. All work independently. And then in turn, he will bring it to the Secretary of the Army for a final decision.

That process should take somewhere in the neighborhood of 4 to 5 working days after being reviewed by General Counsel.

Mr. MILLER. Could you elaborate a little bit on the length of time it took to establish the policy?

Mr. METZLER. It did take several years. It was done in conjunction with a rewrite of the Federal Code of Regulations which has currently been completed and is under review right now by the Department of Defense.

Mr. MILLER. Okay. Thank you.

And the other question, and I think all of us are concerned about the lack of land availability around Arlington, are there any other parcels that have been identified that could be available for acquisition?

Mr. METZLER. The two that we currently have that are working is the Millennium site which is a piece of property that we already have under our jurisdiction from Fort Myer and then two come on line is the Naval Annex referred to as Federal Building Number 2. That is scheduled to come on line in the year 2012.

Now, at the same time, Secretary Geren, the outgoing Secretary of the Army, has ordered a new Master Plan to look at these issues and that will start next year in 2010.

Mr. MILLER. If any of us need to help with the new Secretary of the Army, we would be happy to visit with him as well.

Mr. METZLER. Thank you, sir.

Mr. MILLER. Thank you, Mr. Metzler.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Miller.

We have two votes and about 6 minutes remaining. So we will ask our second and third panelists please to be patient. It should be about 20 minutes.

Thank you so much, all of our first panelists, for your work and your service to our veterans and to their memory and to their families.

This hearing will now be in recess until we come back from votes.

[Recess.]

Mr. HALL. That is the first time I have ever hit the gavel three times and boy did it feel good. The Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs will come to order again. Thank you for your patience. Joining us on our second panel today are Mr. John Wilson, Assistant National Legislative Director for the Disabled American Veterans (DAV); Mr. Raymond C. Kelley, National Legislative Director for AMVETS; Ms. Vivianne Cisneros Wersel, Chair of the Government Relations Committee for Gold Star Wives of America (GSW); Ms. Lesley Witter, Director of Political Affairs for the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA); and Mr. John Nicolai, Shop Steward, Local 2241, on behalf of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE). Welcome to you all.

As I said before to our first panel, your statements are already entered into the official record. Feel free please to edit them or change them, or whatever you wish. We will try to keep it to 5 minutes so we will have time for questions. We have votes coming up in about an hour and I would hope to get through both our second and third panels before then, so you do not have to wait again. Mr. Wilson, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENTS OF JOHN L. WILSON, ASSISTANT NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; RAYMOND C. KELLEY, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR, AMERICAN VETERANS (AMVETS); VIVIANNE CISNEROS WERSEL, AU.D., CHAIR, GOVERNMENT RELATIONS COMMITTEE, GOLD STAR WIVES OF AMERICA, INC.; LESLEY WITTER, DIRECTOR OF POLITICAL AFFAIRS, NATIONAL FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION; AND JOHN NICOLAI, CEMETERY REPRESENTATIVE, FT. LOGAN NATIONAL CEMETERY, DENVER, CO, AND SHOP STEWARD, AFGE LOCAL 2241, ON BEHALF OF AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL–CIO

STATEMENT OF JOHN L. WILSON

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am glad to be here this morning on behalf of the DAV to present our views on the current Department of Veterans Affairs Burial Benefits Program, its national cemetery policy, and the way the VA and the American Battle Monuments Commission can better serve veterans and their survivors.

As you know, the VA National Cemetery Administration maintains more than 2.9 million gravesites at 130 national cemeteries and 33 additional installations in 39 States and Puerto Rico. Currently, there are more than 7,000 acres within the established NCA

installations. Just more than half of this land is undeveloped. Including available gravesites and the undeveloped land there is potential to provide more than 4 million resting places.

In addition to the maintenance of these facilities, the NCA administers four programs. The State Cemetery Grants Program, the Headstone or Marker Program, the Presidential Memorial Marker Program, and the Outer Burial Receptacle Reimbursements. NCA must be allocated the resources it needs to meet the increasing demands of interments, graveside maintenance, and related essential elements of cemetery operations.

Some cemeteries, such as the one in Puerto Rico, face the need for immediate expansion through additional land acquisition. We understand that the Puerto Rico National Cemetery, or PRNC, has a project for 2010, which should add burial space through 2017 for first interments. PRNC will remain open, of course, for second interments of spouses and veterans. After completion of the project, PRNC will remain open to first and second cremations until 2030. While cremations are an option for some, veterans and their survivors may hold certain religious beliefs that do not make this a viable alternative. The NCA is actively seeking land of 100 acres or more within a 25-mile radius of Route 22 and Route 1 in Puerto Rico. The rapid acquisition of this land is essential to this veteran population.

Although the 5-year, $250 million National Shrine Initiative was not adopted, the NCA spent $150 million toward that original list of 928 projects, as well as other emerging priorities over the past year. Their ability to do so was in large part due to Congressional action to reverse years of neglect. The Administration requested $181 million for fiscal year 2009. Congress, understanding the sacrifices of the few for the freedom of the many, honored our fallen by granting NCA $280 million. Two-hundred thirty million dollars in original appropriations and an additional $50 million in stimulus funds. The Administration's request for fiscal year 2010 NCA funding is $242 million. Granting that request will sustain the important progress NCA has made and we urge Congress to do so.

The next area to address is burial benefits. The burial benefit in 2008 was only 6 percent of what was provided when the NCA started paying this benefit in 1973. While it was never the intent of Congress to cover the full cost of burial, the benefits now pay only a fraction of what was covered 35 years ago. In 2001, the plot allowance was increased for the first time in more than 28 years to $300 from the original amount of $150. This figure covered approximately 6 percent of funeral costs. The 108th Congress increased that allowance from $500 to $2000 for service-connected deaths. Prior to this adjustment, the allowance had been untouched since 1988.

Clearly, it is time this allowance was raised to make a more meaningful contribution to the cost of burial for our veterans. In accordance with the DAV's Resolution 212, we note that the VA provides a burial allowance for service-connected disabled veterans of $2000, as previously noted. But that has been seriously eroded by inflation because it has not been regularly adjusted for increases in the cost of living. Therefore, the DAV supports legislation to increase the burial allowance payable in the case of death due to

service-connected disabilities, and to provide for automatic annual adjustments indexed to the cost of living.

The concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. It has been a pleasure to appear before this honorable Committee today.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Wilson appears on p. 47.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Wilson. Mr. Kelley, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF RAYMOND C. KELLEY

Mr. KELLEY. Chairman Hall, thank you for inviting AMVETS, and the opportunity to present our views on the Department of Veterans Affairs national cemetery policies. I am going to commit my time to two major points: the veterans population mile radius threshold model, and the burial benefits.

First, NCA is currently providing burial benefit options for 88 percent of all veterans who fall within the 170,000 within the 75-mile radius threshold model. However, under this new model, no new geographical area will become eligible for a national cemetery until 2015. St. Louis will at that time meet the threshold due to the closing of the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in 2017. Analysis shows that the five areas with the largest veteran population will not become eligible for a national cemetery because they will not reach that 170,000 population threshold.

NCA has spent years developing and maintaining a cemetery system based on a growing veteran population. In 2010, our veteran population will begin to decline. Because of this downward trend a new threshold model must be developed to ensure more of our veterans will have reasonable access to their burial benefits. There are two options to modify this threshold. Reduce the diameter of the radius, or reduce the population threshold. AMVETS supports reducing the population threshold.

Lowering the population threshold to 100,000 veterans would immediately make several areas eligible for a national cemetery, regardless of any changes to the mile radius threshold. A new threshold model must be implemented so more of our veterans will have access to this earned benefit.

In 1973, NCA established a burial allowance that provided partial reimbursements for eligible funerals and burial costs. The current payment is $2,000 for burial expense for service-connected deaths, $300 for non-service-connected deaths, and $300 for plot allowance. At the inception the payout covered 72 percent of the funeral costs for a service-connected death, 22 percent for a non-service-connected death, and 54 percent for a burial plot cost. In 2007, these benefits eroded to 23 percent, 4 percent, and 14 percent respectively. It is time to bring these benefits back to their original value.

The national average cost for a funeral and burial in a private cemetery has reached over $8,500, and the cost for a burial plot is $2,100. At the inception of the benefit the average cost was $1,100 and $280, respectively. While the cost of the funeral has increased nearly seven times, the burial benefit has only increased two and a half times. To bring both burial allowance and the plot allowance back to the 1973 value, the service-connected burial benefit pay-

ment will be $6,160, the non-service-connected benefit payment will be $1,918, and the plot allowance will be increased to $1,150.

Based on accessibility and the need to provide quality burial benefits, AMVETS recommends that VA separate burial benefits into two categories: veterans who live inside the VA accessibility threshold model, and those who live outside the threshold. For those veterans who live outside the threshold the service-connected burial benefit should be increased to the $6,160. Non-service-connected veterans' burial benefits should be increased to $1,918. And the plot allowance should increase to $1,150 to match the original value of the benefit.

For veterans who live within reasonable accessibility to a State or national cemetery that is able to accommodate burial needs, but the veteran would rather be buried in a private cemetery, the burial benefit should be adjusted. These veterans' burial benefits should be increased to the average cost for VA to conduct a funeral. The benefit for service-connected burials will be $2,793. The amount provided for a non-service-connected burial will be $854. And the plot allowance will be $1,150. This will provide burial benefits at equal percentages, but based on the average cost for a VA funeral and not a private funeral cost that will be provided for those veterans who do not have access to a State or national cemetery.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. Again, thank you for the privilege to present AMVETS' views and I will be willing to answer any questions you have at this time.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Kelley appears on p. 49.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Kelley. Dr. Wersel, you are now recognized.

STATEMENT OF VIVIANNE CISNEROS WERSEL, AU.D.

Dr. WERSEL. Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, good morning. I am Vivianne Cisneros Wersel, Chairman of the Government Relations Committee for Gold Star Wives. Thank you for the opportunity to present this statement. We are here to provide input on what could be done better to help families of the fallen. Our answer is simply this: help families navigate the benefits process; increase benefits for burial and other associated costs; eliminate the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) and military Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) offset; include the word "survivors" in VA publications, documentation, speeches, and testimony by VA personnel.

I am the surviving spouse of Lieutenant Colonel Rich Wersel, United States Marine Corps, who died suddenly, February 4, 2005, 1 week after he returned from his second tour of duty of Iraq. That day was just like any other day for me. However, it was a day to determine the here, today, tomorrow, the before, the after. All my hopes and dreams had to change and were readjusted. My new life, my old life, and now my new life as a Gold Star Wife.

Gold Star Wives is an all volunteer organization that provides service, support, and friendship. Surviving spouses look to us as their link to benefit information and their voice in Congress. We are the vanguards of survivor benefits, educating the public as well as our elected officials, on issues relating to military survivors.

These efforts, however, cannot be accomplished without you and your support.

Improvements have been made in our benefits process. However, the importance of staying vigilant is vital so no grieving military spouse falls through the cracks. Important decisions are made by each grieving spouse immediately after casualty notification. Many of these decisions are permanent and impact their future as well as their children. These families need accurate information, proper documentation, and expedited benefits. This information should be provided in more than one format and on more than one occasion for full comprehension by the surviving spouse.

Gold Star Wives seeks accurate information, protocol assistance, and increases in allowable costs associated with military funerals and burials. We understand that the VA is in the process of developing a much needed brochure providing more information, explaining the issue of committal shelters. Another issue being addressed by the VA is the possibility of creating new VA cemeteries in areas that normally would not qualify.

Gold Star Wives seeks increases in the VA burial allowance. The number one concern of our families is financial stability. The removal of the Dependent Indemnity Compensation dollar for dollar offset of the Survivor Benefit plan, SBP/DIC offset, would have the greatest and most relevant impact. Additionally, H.R. 2243, the "Surviving Spouses Benefit Improvement Act of 2009," introduced by Representatives Buyer and Walz, would increase the DIC to provide payment at 55 percent of the 100 percent disability compensation, bringing the DIC in line with other Federal survivor programs. DIC has not been increased since the flat rate DIC was established in 1993. This bill will also remove the DIC offset of the Survivor Benefit Plan.

Recently the U.S. Court of Federal Claims' decision with regards to *Sharp* v. *United States* ordered the Department of Defense to refund SBP annuities withheld from three widowed military spouses who were also receiving DIC. The Court found that these remarried widows were entitled to SBP benefits without the dollar per dollar reduction by the DIC. We recognize that jurisdiction resides elsewhere on the SBP/DIC offset. But Gold Star Wives would like each Member of this Subcommittee to be aware of the important decision in this case and work diligently to end the inequity for this small group of military survivors.

Lastly, survivors are not synonymous as dependents, or family members, in many governmental publications, documents, or even speeches. This group is not new and must be recognized, not forgotten. We commend the VA that the new 2009 edition of the Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents and Survivors, which I brought here. It now states, "Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents, and Survivors," on the front cover of the handbook. This is a, for us, a moral victory. Last year is, if you can look at the difference, it just says, "Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents." So we have come a long way and we thank you for this.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify for Gold Star Wives. And I am appreciative of the compassionate work that the Members and the staff of this Subcommittee accomplish on our behalf. We hope that you look to us as the voice of military survivors.

I have 16 seconds. I will say something really quick. Last time I testified I was an audiologist with a masters degree. I am still an audiologist, but now I have my doctorate, I am a doctor of audiology. And I did it through the VA using my Chapter 35 benefits. And I thank you.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Wersel appears on p. 52.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Dr. Wersel. Thank you for you and your organization's work to keep the fabric of the support systems strong for all of our military families. I was at dinner last night with a number of veterans and Gold Star Wives, Gold Star Mothers, and one Gold Star Daughter. I am very grateful for the sacrifices that you and your loved ones have given for our country. Ms. Witter, you are now recognized.

STATEMENT OF LESLEY WITTER

Ms. WITTER. Chairman Hall, Ranking Member Lamborn, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning about how we can better serve America's veterans and their families. I am Lesley Witter, Director of Political Affairs for the National Funeral Directors Association. I am testifying today on behalf of over 19,000 funeral directors and funeral service personnel who are members of NFDA.

Funeral directors help ensure that every deceased veteran receives the care, honor, and dignity they have earned because of their sacrifice in the defense of the freedoms we enjoy today. While the responsibility of providing appropriate funeral and burial benefits and proper military honors falls on the VA and DoD, it is funeral directors who help the family organize a personalized funeral and burial that both celebrates the life of their loved one and honors their service to our country. Funeral directors contact the VA to schedule funeral and burial times, help families file benefit claims, ensure that each veteran receives the appropriate grave markers, and works with the DoD and veterans service organizations to provide appropriate military honors.

In preparation for my testimony today, NFDA completed a nonscientific survey of our membership regarding their opinions on how we can better serve our veterans and their families. I am happy to report that NFDA members provided thoughtful and detailed responses on this important issue. I will now highlight some of the key findings of our survey. I have supplied detailed findings in my written testimony.

Approximately half of the NFDA members surveyed said that they had assisted in planning 21 or more veteran funerals in 2008. Most funeral directors surveyed felt that the DoD and VA were very responsive to funeral directors. Additionally, almost 74 percent felt that the VA and DoD were either very or extremely responsive to veteran families. However, Monica Torres, an NFDA member, a mortuary science student at Mesa Community College, and a military spouse commented that, "gathering information not only from funeral directors but also the veteran's family may be an avenue of interest." If there is no process to collect this important information, NFDA will be happy to assist in developing a questionnaire that funeral directors can give to the families after the funeral and burial are completed.

Regarding funeral and burial benefits, less than one-third of funeral directors responded that they had experienced problems obtaining veteran burial benefits. However, over 66 percent of respondents felt that the current veteran and burial benefits are insufficient. Several NFDA members commented that the funeral benefit has not changed with inflation and that it does not cover the ever increasing cost of a funeral. As a result, almost two-thirds of funeral directors stated that they have absorbed extra costs associated with veteran funerals. The average dollar amount absorbed by funeral directors per veteran funeral was $652.

In addition, NFDA member Mark Jelacic, of Jelacic Funeral Home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, commented that he believes the "VA is disregarding those veterans and their families who have chosen cremation as their final form of disposition by not offering the burial benefit to these veterans." Mr. Jelacic indicated that veteran families do not understand why if they bury their loved one they would get a benefit, but if they choose cremation they may not receive their burial allowance unless the cremated remains are buried.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to take this opportunity to express NFDA's strong support for H.R. 2642, a bill introduced by Mr. Tiberi of Ohio, that directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to assist in the identification of unclaimed and abandoned human remains to determine if any of these remains are eligible for burial in a national cemetery. NFDA members are acutely aware of the sad story of unclaimed remains, many of whom are veterans, throughout this Nation. NFDA members will be happy to work with the VA to identify veterans' remains that have gone unclaimed, and ensure that these heroes receive the funeral and burial honors they deserve.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished Members of the Committee, on behalf of the members of the National Funeral Directors Association, I want to assure you that funeral directors throughout the country remain dedicated to doing their part to honor our Nation's veterans and their families. I want to conclude my testimony today by thanking you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of NFDA. I hope my testimony has been helpful and I am ready to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Witter appears on p. 53.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Ms. Witter. Mr. Nicolai, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JOHN NICOLAI

Mr. NICOLAI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for letting me testify today about the harmful practice of outsourcing cemetery caretaker jobs at the national cemeteries. I am proud to be a Vietnam veteran and served our country in the United States Air Force. Six years ago, after many years in the corporate world, I was hired at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver, Colorado. It is a great honor to work at Fort Logan. It is one of the best kept cemeteries in the national cemetery network in my opinion. That is, at least until recently when some of the caretaker work was contracted out.

I started at Fort Logan as a cemetery caretaker maintaining the cemetery grounds through mowing and trimming, headstone setting, and assisting the interment crew. I currently work as a cemetery representative. The last honor we bestow on our veterans and their families is to give them a decent farewell, which continues with perpetual care of their resting place, an honor that could not be filled with as much dignity and dedication without the cemetery caretakers, almost all of whom are veterans themselves.

Caretakers take a great pride in their job, keeping the cemetery up to National Shrine status. But their jobs are not just about meticulously maintaining the grounds. Oftentimes the cemetery caretaker is the first person the family talks to when they are looking for a loved one's gravesite, or have other questions about the national cemetery. There are family members who visit their loved one's grave almost every day. They are grieving. The caretakers get to know some of them by name and are a source of comfort.

At Fort Logan, almost all the caretakers have been veterans and those who are not veterans are mentored by their veteran coworkers to fulfill their unique roles at national cemeteries. Sadly, NCA contracted out all the caretaker and mowing and trimming work at Fort Logan 2 years ago. That resulted in the loss of three full-time caretaker positions for the next wave of veterans coming home from combat in need of a job. The remaining caretakers often have to redo the contractors' work to make it look good for Memorial Day or for visits by senior management from MISN or Washington.

Next month, another contract will begin at Fort Logan, this time for headstone setting, and our caretakers currently perform that job. That is two more caretaker jobs lost for future veterans. Our caretakers take great pride in their ability to set headstones and they do a magnificent job. It is very personal to them. Most of the time a caretaker setting headstones in a new burial section would be assigned that section until it is completely filled. They consider it a privilege to complete this honorable task. But now this job will be turned over to a subcontractor. It will no longer be caretaking, it will be just a contract laborer with no connection to veterans or their families doing the mowing or headstone setting.

These recent contracts do not seem legal. We never saw a formal solicitation. We never saw any evidence of cost savings. Management never gave us a chance to compete for that work, either in order for us to show that we could it better and cheaper, even though the law gives us that right. NCA has argued that the cemetery caretaker positions are too hard to fill. That in my mind is disingenuous. There is no evidence of that. NCA has not gone out of its way to recruit veterans who are looking for work. There are so many veterans who could fill these positions with honor and dignity that befits them.

Two years ago NCA sent me to West Palm Beach to help open a new national cemetery. The NCA hired a director, office staff, and cemetery representatives, but no caretakers or interment crews. Instead, they gave all this work to contractors. That is a lot of lost job opportunities for today's unemployed veterans.

So I am asking you first to please stop NCA from taking more caretaker jobs away from veterans. And please require NCA to work with VA's own job training programs and veterans groups to

find unemployed veterans to do this honorable work. And finally, NCA should start complying with the OMB guidance that directs agencies to start bringing contractor work back inside the Government. It is the law, it is the fair thing to do for our jobless veterans, and it is the honorable thing for all fallen veterans and their families. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Nicolai appears on p. 56.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Nicolai. I will, with the consent of Mrs. Halvorson and Mr. Lamborn, thank you for your testimony and tell you that we are going to submit questions. We do have questions for you. But if we ask them now, and then you give us the answers, and you multiply it by five, we will not get to our next panel before the next stack of votes is called, and then we are not sure how long that will be. So I hope you do not take it as a sign of our underestimating your importance and the importance of your testimony. But, we will send you questions in writing. Also, some of the questions, frankly, that you have raised, and that we have for you, are questions that we want to ask of the next panel. So, thank you very much for your patience, and thank you for your testimony, your service to our veterans, and to our country. And Mr. Lamborn, would you like to comment?

Mr. LAMBORN. I agree with that, Mr. Chairman. I would like to say to the gentleman from Fort Logan, I have been there. It is just north of the part of Colorado I represent. And it is beautifully kept, and I appreciate your work.

Mr. HALL. Thank you all for your service to our country and to our veterans. We will be writing you, the staff will send you our assorted, assembled questions. In the interest of getting through the agenda before the next votes are called and we disappear for who knows how long, we will thank you and excuse you and wish you a good day. And ask our third panel to join us, consisting of Mr. Steve L. Muro, Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs of the National Cemetery Administration of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; accompanied by Ron Walters, Director of Budget and Planning Services at the National Cemetery Administration for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

As always, your full written statement has been entered into the record. So feel free to expand, or shorten, or edit, or improvise as you see fit. Mr. Muro, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF STEVE L. MURO, ACTING UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; ACCOMPANIED BY RONALD WALTERS, DIRECTOR, BUDGET AND PLANNING SERVICES, NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. MURO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about the initiatives of the National Cemetery Administration to better serve America's veterans and their families. Thank you for accepting my written testimony for the record.

One critical measure of service is VA's ability to provide veterans reasonable access to a burial option. Currently, 87 percent of all veterans in the Nation reside within a 75-mile radius of a national

or State veterans cemetery. Five new national cemeteries opened in 2009, serving the areas of Columbia, South Carolina; Sarasota and Jacksonville, Florida; Birmingham, Alabama; and Bakersfield, California. Washington Crossing National Cemetery, serving the veterans of Philadelphia and Southeastern Pennsylvania, is projected to open in early next year. Seven new State veterans cemeteries established through the State Cemetery Grants Program are also under construction. With the opening of these new cemeteries, NCA projects that 90 percent of veterans will have reasonable access to burial space in a national or State veterans cemetery by fiscal year 2011.

We are responding to the changes in burial preferences of veterans and their families by constructing a great number of columbaria for inurnment of cremated remains. We are also developing a new memorial wall in our cemeteries to honor those veterans whose remains are not available for burial. VA is expanding the Headstone and Marker Program to include a new medallion, an option that will acknowledge the service of veterans buried in private cemeteries around the world. Veterans and their families will be able to choose either the new medallion or the traditional headstone or marker for veterans who died on or after November 1, 1990, and are interred in a privately marked grave in private cemeteries. We anticipate the medallion will be available for veterans and their families early next year.

We are also streamlining the process of burial eligibility determination and interment scheduling to better serve the needs of veterans, their families, and the funeral directors. The centralized national cemetery national scheduling office opened in St. Louis in January of 2007 to handle interment requests for all national cemeteries, except those located in Puerto Rico and Hawaii. As a one-stop scheduling center, it ensures timely, consistent eligibility determinations and is available for families and funeral homes for scheduling of burials 7 days a week. Previously, when these functions were performed by employees at each national cemetery, scheduling was available 5 days a week.

The National Cemetery Administration holds the distinction of earning the highest score ever achieved in the American Customer Service Index Survey for Federal agencies or private corporations. NCA achieved a customer satisfaction rating of 95 out of a possible 100 in 2004 and again in 2007. These results are testament to the dedication and hard work of the national cemetery employees as they serve veterans and their family members during a difficult and emotional time.

Our programs for employee development, which are centered at our National training center in St. Louis, are crucial to maintaining VA as National Shrines and to providing care and compassionate service to veterans and families in their time of need.

We continually assess our burial and memorial programs with the goal to serve veterans even better in the future. We look forward to working with the Members of this Subcommittee as we jointly respond to the changing needs of those who have served. Thank you again for this opportunity and I would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Muro appears on p. 58.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Secretary Muro. Thank you for your testimony and for your work. Congratulations on the high rating you just told us about. That is very impressive. First of all I would like to ask, in your testimony you commented on the four strategic goals outlined by the Advisory Committee in its 2008 report. Along with those goals the Advisory Committee made 16 recommendations, to which the VA responded. Several of these items required additional follow-up. Can you provide us a summary of the follow-up actions VA has taken in response to the recommendations?

Mr. MURO. We do not have a copy of the 16 recommendations those goals here. If you provide me those, I can answer your questions?

Mr. HALL. Sure. We will do that. We will send you the recommendations and then you can provide us with——

Mr. MURO. Thank you.

Mr. HALL [continuing]. Your responses. It has been almost a year since Congress was informed of the activities of the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials. Has that Committee conducted any additional meetings? What other activities or observations have they provided? Is the authority outlined in title 38, section 2401, regarding the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials sufficient to advise the Secretary on such matters or is more authority needed to meet the NCA's strategic goals and mission?

[The VA provided the goals and recommendations in the response to Question 1 of the Post-Hearing Questions and Responses for the Record, which will appear in the Appendix.]

Mr. MURO. Yes, they meet twice a year. They will be meeting again this November. We can provide you notes and recommendations from the last meeting that they held.

[The VA provided the Minutes from the November 2009 meeting of the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, which will be retained in the Committee files.]

Mr. HALL. That would be greatly appreciated, sir. I understand that for safety reasons mourners are not allowed at graveside for funerals. However, this policy contradicts certain religious observances, such as Native American burial rituals, or Jewish gravesite practices. What is VA's policy for graveside burials? The policy for VA-funded State veterans cemeteries, to make accommodations for graveside services in respect to these practices? This is sort of a multipart question. Do State cemeteries have the discretion to restrict or deny graveside requests for safety reasons? If so, would it be possible for VA to offer a more concrete policy to its State veterans cemeteries to accommodate graveside services or religious beliefs?

Mr. MURO. First of all, our policy is to conduct services at committal shelters. On occasion, we do go to the gravesite. Any time the family requests viewing of the lowering after the committal service, we will take them to the site. At some of our national cemeteries, there are viewing areas. At others, depending on the volume, they may go to within 20 feet of the gravesite. They take only the immediate next of kin. We encourage the State cemeteries to follow that policy as well.

Mr. HALL. Thank you. Has the NCA adjusted its planning model to take into account project population growth, variances, and shifts? Specifically what resources and other measures would it entail to reduce the 75-mile radius, or lower the 170,000 threshold as suggested by the Independent Budget and various veterans groups?

Mr. MURO. The study was conducted using the records that we maintain on the 75-mile radius. We are reviewing the population threshold at this time.

Mr. HALL. When do you expect that review to be completed?

Mr. MURO. It will be entered in our budget as we submit our budget through OMB.

Mr. HALL. Thank you. In your testimony you accounted for 2,899 OIF/OEF burials——

Mr. MURO. Correct.

Mr. HALL [continuing]. In which VA provided either burial, or headstones, or markers. Given that the total number of those who have died in these operations is almost double that number, what has happened to the remaining fallen servicemembers? Do you know where they are buried? Where their final resting place is? What contact and interaction did VA have with those veterans' survivors?

Mr. MURO. Between Arlington, State cemeteries, national cemeteries, and the private cemeteries, many of them have chosen private cemeteries near their homes and we have provided headstones and markers for those when requested.

Mr. HALL. I have a few more questions, but I am at this point going to recognize Ranking Member Lamborn for his questions. Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Muro, and you may know this because Representative Salazar and I have met with you on this issue. There is a long history of a need for a cemetery in Southern Colorado. And this is compounded by the fact that Fort Logan, we heard from someone from there earlier, is scheduled to be at capacity in as little as 10 years. And it can take up to 5 years to build and establish and prepare for a new cemetery. Colorado veterans have been organized for years to bring a national veterans cemetery to this region. And since I entered office 3 years ago, I have twice introduced a bill with Mr. Salazar, which would direct the Secretary of the VA to establish a national cemetery in El Paso County for veterans of the Southern Colorado region. And this bill passed the House in the last Congress and we are optimistic about it passing the House this Congress.

Also, last year Chairman Hall and I had a field hearing in Colorado Springs to discuss cemetery issues, including the potential inappropriateness 75-mile rule in a mountain State like Colorado. And Mr. Tuerk, your predecessor, almost could not get there from Denver, from the airport where he flew in, because there was bad weather and the Palmer Divide is 7,000 feet. He almost could not get to the hearing. And that is what separates Colorado Springs from Denver.

Also, he did promise, and this did take place, that someone from the VA would come and inspect sites in El Paso County for a potential national cemetery. That site visit did take place on November 10th, so I am wanting to ask you what the outcome of that visit

was? Was there a report done? And what information did you learn from that site visit?

Mr. MURO. First of all, we learned that we need to go out and look at other sites. We are in the process of putting a team together that does site visits. We will actually be putting a notice in the newspaper in that area for any sites that are 300 acres or larger, for either purchase or donation. We will be sending the team out to conduct visits. We are looking at how and where we going to replace Fort Logan before it closes. It is optimal for us to open the replacement cemetery for Fort Logan. In advance of closure of Fort Logan, because it will help it last a little longer. So we plan to do that, in the next few months and we will be going out there and looking in the area.

Mr. LAMBORN. Well, that is real exciting. Would you be able to, if there is any way our office can help you in that visit we would be very happy to do so.

Mr. MURO. Yes, we will contact you when we get the team ready to go and we will work with you.

Mr. LAMBORN. Okay, well I appreciate that very much. And as a follow-up question, I know that in the last fiscal year for the first time a line item was created and $5 million was given to the VA to buy land in advance of closures. And I know that there are two to four different sites where that is being anticipated, including Fort Logan. Where does that stand in terms of sites you are looking at for that particular line item? And will you be spending the money that you get, I do not think you have spent the $5 million, but you may get up to, if Congress agrees with your request, up to another $25 million on top of that for this upcoming fiscal year. So if you could enlighten me as to where that stands?

Mr. MURO. In reference to the funds, we did get $5 million in 2009 and we are requesting another $25 million to give us a total of $30.5 million. We are currently looking for land. We already sent a team out to Puerto Rico. They looked at about 18 sites. We narrowed it down to possibly three sites. Once we do that, we will go to the Secretary and recommend those three sites and then we will do a study on them. We will make an offer on the one site that the Secretary approves. We will be doing the same thing in Colorado, and for Willamette national cemetery in Portland, Oregon. Willamette national cemetery is anticipated to close in 2019, so we want to purchase replacement land. The nice thing about Willamette national cemetery is that there is some property adjacent to the cemetery that we are currently in the process of negotiating with the owners for at this time. So we may be able to purchase that property. So that is where we will be using those funds in the near future to purchase property.

Mr. LAMBORN. Okay, well thank you for your efforts. And any way that my office can assist you we would love to do so. Thank you.

Mr. MURO. Thank you.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Lamborn. Mrs. Halvorson.

Mrs. HALVORSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Muro, for being here, and all the other panelists before you. Thank you for doing such a good job with regards to a situation that came

up in my district. I am sure you are familiar with the private cemetery Burr Oak in Illinois.

Mr. MURO. Yes, ma'am.

Mrs. HALVORSON. Where several of the veterans, especially their headstones and their entire burial, was desecrated. And Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery, which is in my district, we worked it out where we could offer them free reburial. So that was something that was very, very wonderful that we were able to do for the veterans. We were able to say rest in peace truly means rest in peace.

However, I am really concerned about something that just came up with the fact of this outsourcing of jobs. Can you explain to me what is happening with outsourcing of our jobs? Are they truly being taken away from veterans and going to other companies, and not our veterans?

Mr. MURO. Well, let me explain what we have done. As we open new national cemeteries, we keep certain jobs in-house. We do interments, the cemetery representative work, and we do the setting of headstones; we contract out the mowing. We have increased the full-time equivalent (FTE) in our system. We are up to 1,600. So we are doing some work in-house and work through some contracting. The same goes for our closed cemeteries, where it is more difficult to get staff. The gentleman spoke about south Florida national cemetery. It actually took us 2 years to fully staff that cemetery with veterans from those that were willing to apply. We have had high turnover there because of the cost of living. In many areas, the cost of living has forced us to look at other ways to get the work done. But each year we have increased our FTE. All of our new cemeteries open with approximately 15 FTE to manage and operate the cemetery. We are keeping the interment work in-house. We are keeping the cemetery representative work, and all of the public affairs-type work in-house. The mowing, the trimming, and the setting of headstones and markers we do contract out.

Mrs. HALVORSON. Well, because, we are doing everything in our power to create opportunities for veterans. I do not want to be embarrassed when I hear that veterans cemeteries and groups like yourselves are going outside of our veterans groups. And so——

Mr. MURO. And those that we are contracting with are service-connected disabled veteran-owned businesses.

Mrs. HALVORSON [continuing]. Because——

Mr. MURO. We are giving the work to veterans. We work with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to hire OIF/OEF veterans that are going through different training programs.

Mrs. HALVORSON. Okay.

Mr. MURO. Each network of the five networks throughout the national cemetery system, were required last year and again this year to hire five OIF/OEFs.

Mrs. HALVORSON. Okay.

Mr. MURO. So we are hiring veterans. In fact, 70 percent of our field employees are veterans.

Mrs. HALVORSON. Okay. I just want to make sure that is happening. I mean, we are doing everything——

Mr. MURO. Of course.

Mrs. HALVORSON [continuing]. To make sure of that. Because we are having more and more veterans come back.

Mr. MURO. Yes, certainly.

Mrs. HALVORSON. And that I just want assurances that we are doing everything we can to make sure that we are hiring veterans, we are giving incentives to hiring veterans. I do not want to be talking about that our Veterans Affairs, of all people, are not doing what we talk about all the time, but until we practice what we preach, that is not doing us any good.

Mr. MURO. I understand. And we are.

Mrs. HALVORSON. Okay.

Mr. MURO. We are making every effort to hire veterans.

Mrs. HALVORSON. Great. One last question is, one thing that I know that we are interested in exploring, and something that the Secretary is very interested in is homelessness amongst our veterans. Where you are concerned, can you take us through some of the situations? What happens with burial issues with regards to those who are homeless veterans? And what happens when a veteran does not have any family members? How do you deal with that situation?

Mr. MURO. Our cemetery directors work closely with the different coroners' offices to determine eligibility. We work with VA regional offices to determine eligibility. So that if we do find that they are veterans, those individuals that have been found on the street, who are homeless, we can ensure that they can be buried in a national cemetery.

Mrs. HALVORSON. How do you know if they are a veteran if they do not have, if their——

Mr. MURO. We will use fingerprints to obtain identification so long as they have not been cremated, and there are fingerprints we can work with the FBI with fingerprints to find veteran files. And we have been really successful throughout the country doing that, working with the coroners' offices.

Mrs. HALVORSON. Great. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mrs. Halvorson. I just wanted to ask you Secretary Muro, continuing and following up on a comment that was made by the Ranking Member of the full Committee, Mr. Buyer, when he was here earlier, talking about artificial or digital bugle machines. As the token musician on the panel, I have been a French horn player and a decent, at one time at any rate, a decent trumpeter and bugler. There are many very accomplished high school band bugle players or trumpet players who can play a bugle just as well. Is this in your purview? Is this something that the NCA in the process of working with the families handles? I just came from a 9/11 ceremony, as did many of us, recently, where there were two buglers calling, answering back and forth to each other, playing real bugles. It is a very moving moment with the color guard standing at attention, and the crowd and survivors in one of my 5 counties, 44 families, survivors of 9/11 victims. I can only imagine how much less moving the moment would have been if somebody had pushed a button on a tape, or a CD, or had an artificial reproduction. So, I am just curious, have you contacted,

or do you work with local schools? Or, find people who actually play the instrument?

Mr. MURO. Yes. There are a couple of things that we are doing to try to get real buglers at the cemeteries for not only services, but for ceremonies. We worked closely over the last 3 years with Taps Across American, Bugles Across America, to get more interest in buglers in order to have them come and volunteer. We work with the local school districts, the ROTCs that may have buglers, and we try to get them scheduled for our services so that we can utilize them in support of families. The artificial bugle, it is actually a real bugle with an electronic device in it. Instead of looking like a mute, it sticks in there and they have a——

Mr. HALL. Right. That is not a real bugle, I am sorry.

Mr. MURO. You are right. But it is better than the boom box.

Mr. HALL. Well, it looks better.

Mr. MURO. Right.

Mr. HALL. It is a boom box that is shaped like bugle.

Mr. MURO. Exactly. But we are trying to get volunteers.

Mr. HALL. I understand, sir. I——

Mr. MURO. And there are those buglers that charge the families, unfortunately. You can see this in the paper. People advertise, "I can play a bugle for this amount." We do not encourage it. But we cannot stop the families from hiring them.

Mr. HALL. Right.

Mr. MURO. So we try to work with the VSOs and with the schools——

Mr. HALL. I appreciate that.

Mr. MURO [continuing]. And the organizations.

Mr. HALL. I used to get paid to play organ at Mass——

Mr. MURO. Right.

Mr. HALL [continuing]. When I was a teenager. But it did not mean that maybe I should not have volunteered. But they offered and I, I was mowing lawns and doing other things too. But at any rate, back to normal topics here. Are there entitlement rules for National Guard or Reservists limiting their eligibility for NCA burial benefits? Should those rules be changed to accommodate more Guard and Reservists?

Mr. MURO. As long as they served active duty and they separated under conditions other than dishonorably and served for the time they were called up to active duty, then they actually have the full benefit of burial. If they are called up for 1 day, they are eligible for burial as long as they served that 1 day. If they are called up for 1 year and they serve that year, they are eligible for burial.

Mr. HALL. That is great. If a veteran with no other dependents is buried in a national cemetery and his or her only survivor is a parent, should that parent be eligible, or is that parent eligible, for burial with the veteran?

Mr. MURO. If the parent, either one of the parents, were a veteran, then they would be eligible and it would just be a burial arrangement in a national cemetery.

Mr. HALL. Thank you. Also, in your testimony you mentioned the current budget authority and the stimulus money NCA received this year, along with 928 identified repair projects. If in 2008 NCA completed 304 projects and stimulus money will cover 395, what

are the repair plans for the remaining 339 projects? Does the 2010 budget cover those costs sufficiently?

Mr. MURO. Yes, the FY 2010 budget will let us get more projects completed. We have a goal to try to complete them all within 5 years. That would include raise and realign projects, repair of sunken grave projects, road repair projects, some building repair work, and some of the historic monuments. We just completed a project here in DC at the Congressional Cemetery where we partnered with the National Park Service where we repaired the cenotaphs. Our team has received an award from the District of Columbia under the Historic Preservation for Restoration/Rehabilitation category.

Mr. HALL. What challenges, if any, does the NCA experience when implementing the State Cemetery Grants Program?

Mr. MURO. The challenge is for the States to come up with the necessary funds and the States having the property to develop into veterans cemeteries. That has been our biggest challenge. There are some States, for example, Kentucky, that have moved ahead, and have developed several State cemeteries. Some of the States do not want to operate a State veterans cemetery. For instance New York and Florida have never put in an application. So really our challenge is getting buy-in from the States and them having the funds for initial work so that we can later reimburse them.

Mr. HALL. I would imagine right now with the States in the difficult fiscal straits they are in that it is more challenging than before.

Mr. MURO. It is. But we do have some States that are ready to apply for 2010.

Mr. HALL. Is Colorado one of them?

Mr. MURO. No, Colorado is not one that wants a State veterans cemetery.

Mr. HALL. Okay. I just also wanted to ask quickly, is the NCA paperless processing system and its first notice of death entry into its computer system compatible with the Veterans Benefits Administration IT systems? How is the communication with VBA handled, paper or electronic? How efficient is that process?

Mr. MURO. We took it over in October. Right now we have all of the burial flag applications, First Notice of Death data from all the regional offices and the VA insurance center data sent to us in the NCA First Notice of Death Office in St. Louis. In the next 4 to 6 months this information will be sent to Quantico to be scanned into our system, so it will become completely paperless at that point. We then use the VBA's system, the Share program, and we use that electronic system to log in the First Notice of Death for veterans. We also get data from NCA and from the State veterans cemeteries. When we get that information, we put in First Notice of Death. We are working to make that process a totally electronic so once we order a headstone or marker it will automatically initiate the First Notice of Death electronically to all of VA.

Mr. HALL. We have a vote in progress. So I just have a couple more questions for you, sir, and then we will be done. But I just wanted to first of all ask, given the situation in Illinois, if families request reburial of a veteran whose remains were previously interred at the Burr Oak Cemetery, it is my understanding that prior

receipt of VA burial benefits such as funeral or burial allowances would not affect eligibility for reinterment at a national cemetery, nor the issuance of the new headstone or marker. So the family would not incur any additional costs. Is that correct?

Mr. MURO. That is correct. The only cost——

Mr. HALL. I know it is an unfortunate situation, but is there a standard NCA policy regarding reburial?

Mr. MURO. Yes. That is the standard. If anyone wants to take their loved one from a private cemetery to a national cemetery, the only cost they would incur is the disinterment from the private cemetery. When they bring them to a national cemetery there is no cost for the interment in the national cemetery, for the service, for perpetual care, or for the headstone or marker.

Mr. HALL. Last, just following up on Mrs. Halvorson's question regarding outsourcing to private contractors, it sounded from your response that, I was not sure if you were saying all or most, or that you were making an effort to hire contractors who are using veterans to do the work? Do you know or can you state what——

Mr. MURO. All of our Millennium and maintenance contracts have gone to service-disabled veterans.

Mr. HALL. Are those service-disabled veterans who owned businesses?

Mr. MURO. Right, service-connected disabled veteran-owned businesses, correct.

Mr. HALL. Okay. But are the actual workers doing the work——

Mr. MURO. We encourage them to hire veterans and most of them do. They are after all veteran-owned companies so we encourage that.

Mr. HALL. Okay. Thank you very much, Secretary Muro. I remind all Members they have 5 legislative days to revise or extend their remarks. Thank you, to all of our panelists for all of our panelists for their patients.

Mr. MURO. Thank you.

Mr. HALL. Thank you for the work you do for our country's veterans.

Mr. MURO. Thank you, sir.

Mr. HALL. This hearing stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:23 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

Prepared Statement of John J. Hall, Chairman, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen:

Would you please rise for the Pledge of Allegiance?

From the Revolutionary War to the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, American servicemembers have given their lives for this country.

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln created a national veterans' cemetery system and dedicated it, "... for the soldiers who shall die in the service of the country." President Lincoln's sentiments and our undying gratitude are as palpable today as they were in 1862, evident in our commitment to provide benefits to ensure that our veterans are properly memorialized.

Nevertheless, we may be falling short of our intended goals on some fronts.

Although Congress authorized VA to provide veterans the option to receive burial and plot allowances and reimbursement of certain burial expenses, these benefits were created decades ago and have not kept pace with inflation. The value of the current $300 burial allowance and $300 plot allowance for qualifying veterans has diminished as funeral and burial costs have increased at a higher rate than the average inflation rate.

I am also concerned about VA's current cemetery policies, which seem to leave large numbers of veterans un-served by a burial option. Under the current standard, new national cemeteries are established in areas where the un-served population is at least 170,000 veterans within a 75-mile radius. This means that several areas with large numbers of veterans, such as where the population is more than 110,000 will remain un-served by a VA burial option.

Moreover, VA's current strategic goal of reaching 90 percent served would require an additional 31 cemeteries beyond those already in operation or planned as of 2001. However, according to a study conducted by ICF International, there are no locations in the U.S. that will meet the current criteria for the establishment of a new national cemetery until 2015. Even at that time, only one community will reach the population threshold of 170,000 veterans. It is evident that changes to the current 75-mile service area standard may be in order. All of these burial benefits concerns negatively impact the survivors left behind and I want to further examine this critical aspect of the issues with VA as well.

Additionally, the National Shrine Mandate holds that "all national and other veterans' cemeteries under control of the NCA shall be considered national shrines." Several factors will impact NCA's ability to meet and maintain the National Shrine Mandate, namely: the growing number of interments, a change in burial preferences, population migration, and an aging infrastructure. I believe that VA should conduct a preemptive review of the NCA's obstacles in meeting the National Shrine Mandate in order to try thwart new issues that may arise and ensure that existing ones do not grow in complexity.

Last, I look forward to hearing from Secretary Cleland of the American Battle Monuments Commission, Superintendent Metzler of Arlington National Cemetery and the rest of our esteemed witnesses. I believe that we can bring continuous improvements to our system of memorializing our courageous veterans by ensuring that their burial benefits and final resting places reflect the debt of their service.

Thank you, I now yield to Ranking Member Lamborn for his opening statement.

Prepared Statement of Hon. Doug Lamborn, Ranking Republican Member, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

Thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this hearing on America's national cemeteries.

I thank our witnesses in advance for their testimony today and for their dedication to serving America's veterans and their families.

Properly honoring a deceased veteran is one of our most solemn and indeed sacred obligations.

These patriots have earned honored repose in a national shrine. They and their families are due the tribute and thanks of a grateful Nation.

As members of the Greatest Generation pass from our presence, we are seeing increased demand on all of our national cemeteries. VA estimates that interments in as national cemeteries will rise from the current level of 2.9 million to 3.4 million by 2014.

Mr. Chairman, it is for that reason that I thank you for helping my efforts to pass H.R. 174 which I introduced with my good friend Mr. Salazar earlier this year. H.R. 174 would establish a VA national cemetery in southern Colorado and greatly benefit those veterans and families in this fast-growing area.

One reason for the continued delay in building this cemetery is that the Southern Colorado region does not meet VA's subjective standards for new construction.

I believe that there is a better way to determine need than drawing circles in a 75 mile radius around a national cemetery to determine where the most "underserved" veterans are.

There are many other factors that need to be taken into account including travel time to and from national cemeteries, access to public transportation in the area, and other factors that are more realistic than a large circle on a map.

However, I know that this problem is not just limited to Southern Colorado; and that if we polled other Members we would find these problems and concerns extend to many rural and urban regions like Nebraska, New York City, Los Angeles, Buffalo, NY, and many other areas that are adversely affected by VA's somewhat arbitrary rules.

Passing H.R. 174 would be an important first step in addressing this problem and is identical to H.R. 1660 that passed this Committee and the whole house last congress. Mr. Chairman, I thank you for your continued support of this bill and I hope that the Full Committee will consider this bill soon.

I want to thank everyone once again for being here and I am looking forward to the testimony.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Prepared Statement of Hon. Jeff Miller

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I appreciate your holding this hearing today. We can all agree to the importance of continuing to honor our veterans after they have passed into the next life. Barrancas National Cemetery, in my district in Northwest Florida, is the final home to over 36,000 veterans who fought for this Nation through various conflicts. Every time I step foot on those grounds, I am reminded of their courage, and seeing the honors bestowed upon them during a burial service is truly a moving experience.

The importance of the ceremonies extends to the families of these brave soldiers as well. During the 109th Congress, as Chairman of this Subcommittee, I worked with many other Members to ensure that families of the deceased were given the respect they deserved during burial ceremonies. It is appalling to me people would disrupt these solemn moments, and not let families mourn in peace.

Having also seen Normandy American Cemetery, overseen by the American Battle Monuments Commission, I am further assured that our soldiers buried abroad are also well looked after. The annual D-Day ceremony there is a strong reminder of what this Nation has been through, and I know their sacrifices have made this world a better, safer, and freer place.

I look forward to today's testimony. Much of what is in place at national cemeteries and American Battle Monuments is considered very successful. With your help and input, we can make it even better.

I yield back.

Prepared Statement of Hon. Steve Buyer

Thank you Mr. Chairman and I appreciate your willingness in allowing me to address the Subcommittee on this important issue.

It has been said throughout history that one way to judge and study a society is examine the way in which they honor those that have died in defense of that society.

For the most part, our society continues to honor our Nation's heroes with the respect and dignity that their sacrifices deserve.

However it is becoming increasing clear that we have four standards when we talk about the conditions of our Nation's cemeteries. We have what most would consider the gold standard, which refers to the overseas cemeteries under the jurisdiction of the American Battle Monuments Commission, and sets the bar in beauty and attention to detail.

Not far behind is the standard set by Arlington National Cemetery which is one of our oldest national cemeteries and is truly a national treasure. Third is the standard set by the National Cemetery Administration and its 133 national cemeteries.

To ensure that national cemeteries, under its jurisdiction both new and old, are maintained as national shrines, VA is at work fulfilling its important National Shrine Commitment. That effort, however, is still years from completion.

Disappointing exceptions to these high standards do exist, however.

Several years ago it came to my attention that the condition of the 14 national cemeteries under the jurisdiction of the National Parks Service are not maintained at the same high level as the national cemeteries administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Of these 14 park service cemeteries, only two of them, Andersonville in Georgia and Andrew Johnson in Tennessee, are still open and regularly inter veterans.

When I visited Andersonville in the spring of 2007, I found the conditions of the cemetery to be unacceptable and not to the standard that these heroes have earned.

The grave markers had not been washed in some time and were out of alignment and the grass and shrubbery was not properly cared for and in many cases looked like it had not had attention for several months. It was clear that much improvement was needed to even reach the level of being minimally acceptable.

While I am told that the conditions at Andersonville have improved, I continue to be concerned about what conditions NPS considers acceptable. After a conversation I had with Secretary Salazar earlier this year he committed to conducting a full review of all of the NPS cemeteries.

I believe this review should be an important first step in NPS creating their own national shrine commitment similar to the one in NCA. I am disappointed that despite strong support from Chairman Dicks and Ranking Member Simpson of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Environment the parks service continues to drag its feet on this review. I look forward to hearing more about this issue from our NPS witness today.

The presence of four standards at our national cemeteries is not an acceptable way to honor our veterans. It should not matter if the grave is overseas, at Arlington, or from before the civil war; they all should be maintained to the same high standard that recognized their sacrifice for our freedom.

Mr. Chairman, if it is within the capacity of Congress to help ensure that any national cemetery now deficient rises to the highest standards, we must not delay in that work.

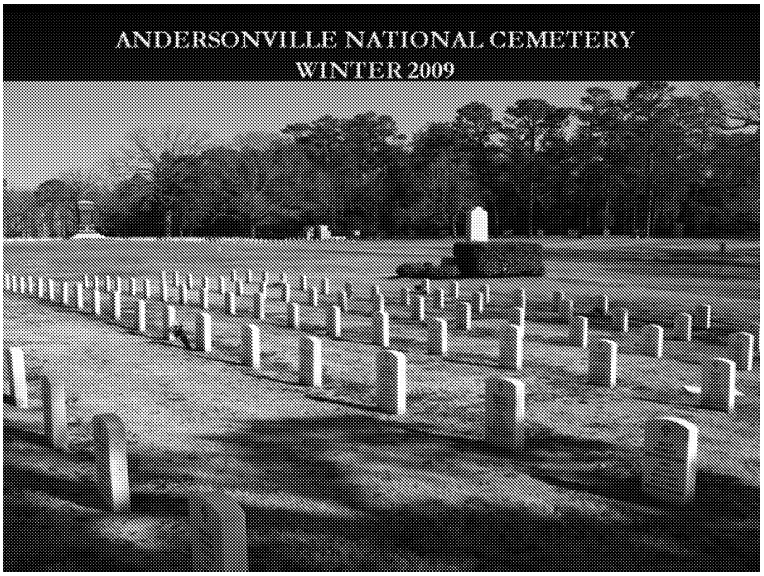
Thank you Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

NORMANDY AMERICAN CEMETERY AND MEMORIAL

ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

FORT ROSECRANS VA NATIONAL CEMETERY
SAN DIEGO CA

ANDERSONVILLE NATIONAL CEMETERY – 2004



Prepared Statement of Hon. Max Cleland, Secretary, American Battle Monuments Commission

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you to share with the Subcommittee the manner in which the American Battle Monuments Commission honors our fallen.

We do not maintain national cemeteries within the United States; we do not provide veterans' benefits or services; nor are we responsible for survivor benefits and programs. Those responsibilities rest with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense. The importance of those services has been recognized since the founding of our Nation. In the words of George Washington, "A Nation that does not care for its soldiers will cease to exist as a Nation."

Honoring our Nation's fallen has been the focus of our Commission since its creation by Congress in 1923. Our purpose was eloquently stated in 1934 by the words of our first Chairman, General of the Armies John J. Pershing, who wrote: "... to relatives of soldier dead, and to every American citizen, I can give assurance that the U.S. Government has kept and will continue to maintain its trust in perpetuating the memory of the bravery and sacrifices of our World War heroes. Time will not dim the glory of their deeds."

The mission of the American Battle Monuments Commission—our purpose—is to honor the fallen by commemorating the service, achievements and sacrifice of America's armed forces: our war dead, missing in action, and those that fought at their side.

This mission is as old as antiquity. In his history of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides quotes the Funeral Oration delivered by Pericles after the first battles of the war:

"For heroes have the whole Earth as their tomb; and in lands far from their own, where the column with its epitaph declares it, there is enshrined in every breast a record unwritten with no tablet to preserve it, except that of the heart."

ABMC is the guardian of 24 permanent military cemeteries and twenty-five memorials, monuments and markers. Three memorials are located in the United States; the remaining memorials and all of the Commission's cemeteries are located in 14 foreign countries, the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and the British dependency of Gibraltar. Nearly 125,000 U.S. war dead are interred in these cemeteries: 31,000 from World War I; 93,000 from World War II; and 750

from the Mexican War. Nearly 6,200 American veterans and others are interred in the Mexico City National Cemetery and Corozal American Cemetery in Panama.

Commemorated individually by name on stone tablets at the World War I and II cemeteries and three memorials on U.S. soil are more than 94,000 U.S. servicemen and women who are missing in action or were lost or buried at sea in their general regions during the World Wars and the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

Our cemeteries are recognized as being among the most beautiful sites of their nature in the world. But our responsibility goes beyond simply maintaining beautiful and inspirational commemorative sites. We have an equally important duty to perpetuate the stories of competence, courage and sacrifice that those we honor can no longer tell for themselves.

It is not enough that future generations honor our war dead by their visits. When the Commission was raising funds to build the World War II Memorial, Tom Hanks offered his time and talent to serve as the campaign's national spokesman. One of the public service ads produced for that campaign depicted a World War II helmet with a bullet hole through its side. The headline read, "Dying for freedom isn't the worst thing that can happen. Being forgotten is."

Future generations must never forget nor fail to understand the significance of what our fellow Americans have done for us and for others around the world. We have a responsibility to tell their stories at each of our overseas cemeteries, and we have committed ourselves to doing just that.

As a war correspondent in England, Walter Cronkite met Captain Donald Stockton, a member of the U.S. Army Air Forces, in February 1943, just after Stockton "had brought an almost tailless Fort back from a raid over France." "Don turned out to be," Cronkite said, "the realest man I ever met."

Three months later, Cronkite returned to Alconbury where Stockton and his crew of the 303rd Bomb Group were based. In one of his most famous stories of World War II, "Nine Crying Boys," Cronkite told of seeing one bomber firing the red distress flares signaling an injured on board. As the bomber pulled up and came to a stop, Cronkite writes of counting the number of men coming off the aircraft. There were only nine out of a crew of 10. "And as the crew came closer he realized that every crew member was shaken, tears pouring down their faces, and that the crew he was watching was that of Don Stockton."

Don Stockton had flown his last mission, his 24th, one short of a complete combat tour at which point he could have gone home. On May 14, 1943, a German fighter attacked Stockton's aircraft. Only one bullet hit the plane. That bullet came through the cockpit window, striking the pilot Stockton. Cronkite wrote that Stockton was "one of those American boy pioneers who in the lean winter days 1942–43 went out daily over Germany in a handful of Fortresses without fighter escort. They were the ones who paved the way for the mighty high-altitude precision attacks of today." Stockton was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, Silver Star and Air Medal.

Years later Walter Cronkite came to Cambridge American Cemetery in England to film a documentary. It was said that the real reason Cronkite was filming at the cemetery was to visit a specific grave. The gravesite was that of Captain Donald Stockton.

Buried at Aisne-Marne American Cemetery in France is Weedon Osborne, the cemetery's one Medal of Honor recipient. Osborne, a Junior Grade Lieutenant in the Navy's Dental Corps, was assigned duty with the 6th Marine Regiment during World War I. During the battle of Belleau Wood, Osborne's unit participated in the advance on Boursches in the Chateau-Thierry region.

Osborne sought to aid the wounded during the battle and was killed while attempting to carry an injured officer to safety on June 6, 1918. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor and the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions on that day. The destroyer *USS Osborne*, which served during the 1920s, was named in his honor. Weedon Osborne was 25 years old at the time of his death.

Weedon Osborne is but one of thousands of Americans who now rest, row on row, beneath white Latin crosses and Stars of David in the hallowed ground of the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery. The unrecovered and unidentified remains of hundreds more lie in the battle-scarred forest and wheat fields of Belleau Wood—young, known but to God, and waiting for us to tell their stories.

Our overseas cemeteries and memorials are tangible representations of American values—of our Nation's willingness in two world wars to come to the defense of our own freedoms and the freedoms of others. These magnificent national treasures instill patriotism, evoke gratitude and teach important lessons of history to all who visit.

Two years ago we opened a new visitor center at Normandy American Cemetery. The Commission recognizes that the war dead at Normandy are not the only American war dead buried overseas who deserve to have their stories told. Accordingly,

we are adapting the interpretive techniques used so effectively at Normandy to our other visitor buildings around the world.

Our interpretive plan does not envision building large new facilities at our twenty-three other cemeteries, as we did at Normandy, which is our most visited cemetery. Instead, we expect to renovate and modernize existing visitor buildings to accommodate the types of exhibits, interactive programs, films and visitor services that have been so well received at Normandy.

We soon will begin facility and exhibit planning at Cambridge, where we will tell stories of the Battle of the Atlantic, the Strategic Air Campaign, and the buildup to D–Day.

We want to complete the renovation there by the spring of 2012—in time to welcome the thousands of athletes and visitors who will converge on London for the 2012 Summer Olympics. The World War II Sicily-Rome American Cemetery in Italy and the World War I Oise-Aisne American Cemetery in France will follow Cambridge as we move forward on this initiative.

We also are well into exhibit design at Pointe du Hoc, to complete the D–Day story begun at Normandy. The emphasis there will be on low-profile panels placed along a self-guided walking tour of the battleground, which appears much as it did when the Rangers captured the Pointe on June 6, 1944.

Concurrently, our project to stabilize the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc is advancing well. Although visitors are free to walk most of the grounds, the Ranger Monument and the German observation bunker it sits on have been off limits for several years because of safety concerns resulting from significant erosion at the base of the cliffs. The French have been very supportive of this initiative, and we are working closely with them in planning the restoration work necessary to preserve this iconic site. If all goes well, we should have the restoration and interpretive work completed by the spring of 2011.

Following both world wars we built magnificent cemeteries and memorials in the lands where our men and women fell—inspirational symbols of American values and permanent reminders to all the world's citizens of the unselfish service and sacrifice of our armed forces. Our cemeteries and memorials are enriched with classical architecture and magnificent works of art. Among those artworks are battle maps created by skilled craftsmen to depict the operational campaigns and troop movements associated with those memorialized at the site.

Beginning with the Korean War it has been U.S. policy to bring our war dead home, and the U.S. Government is committed to obtaining the fullest possible accounting for Americans held captive or otherwise missing from our Nation's ongoing and past conflicts.

We do not envision a change in that philosophy, so building new and permanent memorial cemeteries overseas is unlikely. Nor can we assume that it will be possible or advisable to build permanent memorials commemorating our presence in the lands where we fight today.

Within the U.S., there are processes for establishing national commemorations. The Commemorative Works Act defines those processes for the National Capital Area. As a Nation we have commemorated the eighteenth century founders who led us through the Revolutionary War and the nineteenth century political and military leaders who preserved the Union in the Civil War. We have commemorated the twentieth century's First World War, Second World War, Korean war, and Vietnam War.

When he dedicated the East Coast Memorial on the tip of Manhattan, President Kennedy said, "... every generation of Americans must be expected in their time to do their part to maintain freedom for their country and freedom for those associated with it... there is no final victory, but rather all Americans must be always prepared to play their proper part in a difficult and dangerous world."

We must promise that all our warriors who fall in battle will not do so in anonymity and that regardless of the outcome their country will remember and honor their effort.

The poet Archibald MacLeish challenged us to do no less with these words: "... We leave you our deaths: give them their meaning ..."

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This concludes my prepared statement. I will be pleased to respond to your questions.

Prepared Statement of John C. Metzler, Jr., Superintendent, Arlington National Cemetery

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

INTRODUCTION

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before this Subcommittee, on behalf of the Secretary of the Army, in support of Arlington National Cemetery. Arlington National Cemetery is the Nation's premier military cemetery. Well known edifices and historic sites include the Tomb of the Unknowns, the old and new Memorial Amphitheaters, the Columbarium, the graves of Presidents Kennedy and Taft, and the Visitors Center. It is an honor for me to represent the cemetery. With me today is Ms. Lynn Heirakuji, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Personnel Oversight.

CHALLENGES OF MANAGING ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

Management of Arlington National Cemetery presents challenges unique among the Nation's national and military cemeteries. Not only is Arlington National Cemetery a heavily visited shrine honoring the past service of the men and women of our Armed Forces, it continues to serve as an active burial place for today's military men and women. Since the funeral of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, Arlington National Cemetery has become a major Washington area tourist attraction. During fiscal year 2008, Arlington National Cemetery accommodated approximately 4 million visitors, making Arlington National Cemetery one of the most visited historic sites in the National Capital Region.

In fiscal year 2008, there were 4123 interments and 2781 inurnments. In fiscal year 2009, we estimate there will be 4170 interments and 2800 inurnments, and in fiscal year 2010, we estimate there will be 4170 interments and 2800 inurnments. Ten formal requests for exception to the interment policy were received during this current fiscal year, seven of which were for family members being interred in an existing gravesite approved by the Superintendent, three other requests were not approved by the Secretary of the Army which would have required a new gravesite.

During the same year, about 3,000 ceremonies were conducted at Arlington National Cemetery. Thousands of visitors, both foreign and American, visit Arlington National Cemetery to participate in a variety of events, ranging from a simple wreath laying ceremony to Veterans Day and Memorial Day ceremonies attended by the President of the United States.

To sustain our ability to carry out the cemetery's mission into the future, several broad planning efforts are necessary. This year, it was determined that the Master Plan for the cemetery needs to be reviewed and updated, as appropriate. The Master Plan will be the overall guide as we take steps to address rehabilitation and construction required at the cemetery and its potential impact on the current burial policy.

VETERAN BURIAL BENEFITS

Similar to the National Cemeteries administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs, nearly all honorably discharged veterans have the right to be inurned in Arlington National Cemetery; however, due to the stricter criteria for ground burial, fewer veterans are eligible for ground burial. With many veterans and their spouses dying every day (most from WWII), Arlington National Cemetery conducts an average of 27 funerals daily.

Unless otherwise prohibited and provided that the last period of active duty of the veteran of the United States Armed Forces ended honorably, any person who served at least 1 day of active duty for other than training is eligible for inurnment in the Columbarium. Those eligible for ground burial include servicemembers who die while serving on active duty; retired members of the Armed Forces eligible to receive retired pay who served at least 1 day of active duty for other than training; any former member of the Armed Forces awarded the Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross (Air Force Cross or Navy Cross), Silver Star, Purple Heart, or Prisoner of War Medal; the current and former President of the United States; any person who served on active duty for at least 1 day of active duty for other than training and held an elective office of the U.S. Government (for example, Senator Ted Kennedy, who served on active duty in the United States Army for 2 years) or served in the Office of the Chief Justice or of an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court. The spouse, widow, or widower, minor child, and unmarried adult dependent child of any of the eligible veterans may also be buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Burial benefits available at Arlington National Cemetery include a gravesite, niche, or memorial site; opening and closing of the grave, perpetual care, a Government headstone or niche marker provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and a burial flag at no cost to the family. Cremated remains are buried or inurned in the same manner and with the same honors as casketed remains.

Burial benefits available for spouses and dependents buried in Arlington National Cemetery include burial with the veteran, perpetual care, and the spouse's or dependent's name and dates of birth and death inscribed on the veteran's headstone, at no cost to the family. Eligible spouses and dependents may be buried, even if they predecease the veteran.

OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM AND OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM CASUALTIES

Over 127 fallen servicemembers serving in Operation Enduring Freedom and over 445 fallen servicemembers serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom are laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery. Most of today's war casualties are buried in the renowned area called "Section 60." Among those laid to rest in section 60 is Specialist Ross A. McGinnis, who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions in Iraq. Sergeant First Class Paul R. Smith, another of Army's Medal of Honor recipients from Operation Iraqi Freedom, is memorialized in Memorial Section D.

FUNERAL HONORS

Effective January 1, 2009, the Secretary of the Army authorized all Soldiers who die as the result of wounds received in action and are being interred, inurned, or memorialized at Arlington National Cemetery to receive the following additional elements of military funeral honors: an escort platoon, a colors team, a band, and a caisson section. Following the Army's decision, all other Services adopted policies in line with the Army's change. The Army's caisson section is made available to support additional military funeral honors at ANC for other Services in support of their policies. Arlington National Cemetery and the Military District of Washington are committed to expediting these funerals within 2 weeks of the request and to providing additional elements of military funeral honors to all servicemembers who die as a result of wounds received in action.

COMMEMORATIVE BOOKS FOR FAMILIES OF VALOR

Just over 11 percent of America's casualties from today's conflicts are buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Because so few of these families live in the Washington area, a special beautiful, commemorative gift book, titled, "Where Valor Rests—Arlington National Cemetery" was produced by the Arlington National Cemetery Commemorative Project, Inc., in conjunction with Rich Clarkson and Associates and the National Geographic Society, is presented to the family of each newly interred serviceperson who paid the ultimate sacrifice during our country's current conflicts. The book salutes those of our armed forces who now rest in Arlington National Cemetery and shows the solemn beauty of Arlington, becoming a special keepsake. In addition, each child of a fallen servicemember is presented a book, titled, "For Children of Valor—Arlington National Cemetery." The book is a tool given to assist children affected by loss of a close loved one and helps them to understand and process their grief. The book is also a good resource guide for parents. Dr. Stephen Cozza, psychiatrist and expert in child trauma with the Uniformed Service University of Health Sciences, advised and helped author portions of the book.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my remarks. I will be pleased to respond to questions from the Subcommittee.

Prepared Statement of Katherine Stevenson,
Assistant Director, Business Services,
National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior

Mr. Chairman, we appreciate your invitation to appear at this hearing on honoring fallen veterans to discuss the national cemeteries that are administered by the National Park Service. We consider it a great honor to serve our veterans and their families at these national cemeteries and we are committed to ensuring that our cemeteries are maintained at a standard worthy of those who fought for our country. We are particularly pleased to have the opportunity to inform the Subcommittee about the work we have done to improve the condition of the cemeteries under our stewardship since we last testified before you on this subject on May 8, 2007.

Background on National Park Service Cemeteries

The National Park Service (NPS) administers 14 of our Nation's national cemeteries. With the exception of Andrew Johnson National Cemetery in Tennessee and Custer National Cemetery at Little Bighorn Battlefield in Montana, the cemeteries

that the NPS manages date to the Civil War. Most of these cemeteries are located within park units that tell the story of the Civil War campaign or conflict in which the interred soldiers served. A list of all NPS national cemeteries and the sites with which they are associated is included at the end of this testimony.

Many of the Civil War national cemeteries, established soon after the war ended, were located at or near the battlefield itself. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Civil War veterans and their families began to pay tribute to their fallen comrades by erecting monuments and memorials. Beginning in 1933, jurisdiction over many of these national battlefields, national historic sites, and national military parks, including the monuments, memorials and national cemeteries, was transferred to the NPS. The NPS manages these sites respectfully, interpreting military campaigns, conflicts, and ordeals that the soldiers endured. These sites, including the national cemeteries, are visited by thousands of people each year who learn of the veterans' sacrifices and want to pay their respects to these veterans. Visitors are provided interpretive information about the cemeteries themselves. At Stones River National Cemetery, for example, there is a display about the local African-American community that was formed from the laborers who constructed the cemetery.

Two of the national cemeteries administered by the National Park Service remain open to veterans for burial. They are Andersonville National Cemetery, located in Southwest Georgia, and Andrew Johnson National Cemetery, located in East Tennessee. In 2008, 158 veterans and their dependents were interred at Andersonville and 53 were interred at Andrew Johnson.

Operation of National Cemeteries

The NPS follows the same rules and regulations for burials at its national cemeteries that apply to cemeteries administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The NPS also follows the M40 series of manuals written by VA's National Cemetery Administration (NCA) for operation of national cemeteries. NPS orders headstones from the same facilities that produce headstones for NCA-managed cemeteries, adheres to standards for placement and alignment of stones, and replaces headstones that need second inscriptions for spouses.

Cemetery Care Practices

Recent concerns have been expressed regarding the appearance of the national cemeteries managed by the NPS. The NPS takes pride in serving as a guardian of the Nation's historic treasures, including its national cemeteries. Because these cemeteries are part of the historic fabric of the park units, certain maintenance practices are different from those used by the NCA.

For example, the NPS places a high value on maintaining the historic appearance of the national cemeteries, including retaining as many original headstones as possible, particularly the more historic headstones. Consequently, NPS realigns stones less frequently than NCA, and does it by hand, rather than machine, in order to avoid damaging the stones. NPS also cleans headstones using a pressure washer, rather than bleaching chemicals, in order to better preserve the lettering and the surface of the stone. This may result in headstones that are greyer than headstones maintained by VA but it also results in the long-term preservation of the headstones. In addition, NPS normally replaces dead trees to maintain the historic landscape. Therefore, NPS cemeteries have more tree cover than other national cemeteries. Shade encourages microbial growth on headstones and makes it hard for grass to grow. Tree roots also make it harder to maintain headstone alignment.

Because of our expertise in preservation, others, including federal agencies such as the NCA, have turned to the NPS's National Center for Preservation Technology and Training (NCPTT) for guidance on cemetery care. Presentations given by NCPTT either through in-person workshops or electronic means on the conservation of cemeteries or materials directly applicable to cemeteries had 205 participants in 2007, 239 in 2008, and 146 so far in 2009. NCPTT has been consulted for help with care of monuments at Congressional Cemetery and with the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery. NCPTT was also hired by the NCA to conduct a study on chemical cleaners to find an alternative to its current products for cleaning headstones. We are pleased to serve as such a resource.

Investments in Cemetery Care

The NPS continues to invest in our national cemeteries. Since the NPS testimony 2 years ago, at which time we reported that over $1 million in project funds had been spent in the prior 5 years on cemetery repair projects, project funds for national cemeteries have increased dramatically. In FY 2008 and FY 2009, NPS has invested about $4.5 million in cemetery repair projects in addition to funding for routine maintenance. This figure includes $1.5 million from the American Recovery

and Reinvestment Act. These projects include replacing and aligning historic headstones, storm cleanup, repairing and repainting historic walls that surround our cemeteries, removing hazardous trees, and repairing structures. Another $1.9 million in supplemental emergency storm and flood relief funding is being spent on the visitor center that serves Chalmette National Cemetery and Chalmette Battlefield, in Louisiana, which was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina.

In addition to these projects, each unit of the National Park Service with a national cemetery also has maintenance staff who dedicate at least part of their time to maintaining headstones and grounds. Operating budgets for every one of these parks have increased in each of the last two fiscal years.

As discussed above, NPS also invests in cemetery maintenance by providing training in this area to interested persons and agencies. In addition, some NPS employees have taken courses at the NCA National Training Center in St. Louis, which have been very valuable.

Review of National Park Service Cemeteries

The NPS is in the process of completing a review of the care of its national cemeteries. In July, a team of NPS experts made site visits to the cemeteries at Andersonville, Andrew Johnson, Stones River, and Fort Donelson, as well as a NCA cemetery in Nashville for comparison. The review will provide detail on the differences between the NPS and NCA practices in cemetery care. It may also contain recommendations to the NPS Director to address some of the cemetery appearance issues that Ranking Member Steve Buyer has raised.

The NPS is committed to ensuring that our national cemeteries appropriately honor those who have fought for our country. We will continue to work with the VA on these issues.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions Members of the Committee may have.

National Cemeteries and Associated National Park System Units

Andersonville National Cemetery at Andersonville National Historic Site, Georgia;
Andrew Johnson National Cemetery at Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, Tennessee;
Antietam National Cemetery at Antietam National Battlefield, Maryland;
Battleground National Cemetery at Rock Creek Park, District of Columbia;
Chalmette National Cemetery at Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, Louisiana;
Custer National Cemetery at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, Montana;
Fort Donelson National Cemetery at Fort Donelson National Battlefield, Tennessee;
Fredericksburg National Cemetery at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County Battlefields Memorial National Military Park, Virginia;
Gettysburg National Cemetery at Gettysburg National Military Park, Pennsylvania;
Poplar Grove National Cemetery at Petersburg National Battlefield, Virginia;
Shiloh National Cemetery at Shiloh National Military Park, Tennessee;
Stones River National Cemetery at Stones River National Battlefield, Tennessee;
Vicksburg National Cemetery at Vicksburg National Military Park, Mississippi; and
Yorktown National Battlefield at Colonial National Historical Park, Virginia.

Prepared Statement of John L. Wilson, Assistant National Legislative Director, Disabled American Veterans

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to have this opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) to present our views on the current Department of Veterans Affairs Burial Benefits Program, its national cemetery policy, and the way that VA and the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) can better serve veterans and their survivors. In accordance with our congressional charter, the DAV's mission is to advance the interests, and work for the betterment, of all wounded, injured, and disabled American veterans.

As you know, the VA National Cemetery Administration (NCA) maintains more than 2.9 million gravesites at 130 national cemeteries and 33 additional installations in 39 States and Puerto Rico. Currently, there are more than 7,000 acres within established NCA installations. Just more than half of this land is undeveloped.

Including available gravesites and the undeveloped land, there is the potential to provide more than 4 million resting places. In addition to the maintenance of these facilities, the NCA administers four programs: the State Cemetery Grants Program, the Headstone and Marker Program, the Presidential Memorial Marker Program, and Outer Burial Receptacle reimbursements.

VA estimated in 2008 that approximately 24 million veterans were alive. These veterans served in wars and conflicts ranging from World War I to the global war on terrorism, as well as service in peacetime. The age of our veteran population has peaked and is starting to decline, and as a correlation to this peak, the annual number of veteran deaths is beginning to decline. In 2008, nearly 683,000 veterans were expected to die; this number is expected to slowly decrease over the years. However, with the anticipated opening of new national cemeteries and an increase to the State Cemetery Grants Program, annual interments are projected to increase to more than 105,000 in 2008 with an estimated peak of 115,000 in fiscal year 2009.

The most important obligation of the NCA is to honor the memory of America's brave men and women who served in the armed forces. Therefore, the purpose of these cemeteries as national shrines is one of the NCA's top priorities. Many of the individual cemeteries within the system are steeped in history, and the monuments, markers, grounds, and related memorial tributes represent the very foundation of the United States. With this understanding, the grounds, including monuments and individual sites of interment, represent a national treasure that deserves to be protected and cherished.

DAV thanks the NCA staff for their continued dedication and commitment in providing the highest quality of service to veterans and their families despite funding shortfalls, aging equipment, and the increasing workload of new cemetery activations. We again call on the administration and Congress to provide the resources needed to meet the critical nature of NCA's mission and fulfill the Nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country honorably and faithfully.

NCA must be allocated the resources it needs to meet the increasing demands of interments, gravesite maintenance, and related essential elements of cemetery operations. The NCA is responsible for five primary missions:

1. To inter, upon request, the remains of eligible veterans and family members and to permanently maintain gravesites;
2. To mark graves of eligible persons in national, State, or private cemeteries upon appropriate application;
3. To administer the State grants program in the establishment, expansion, or improvement of State veterans' cemeteries;
4. To award a presidential certificate and furnish a United States flag to deceased veterans; and
5. To maintain national cemeteries as national shrines sacred to the honor and memory of those interred or memorialized.

Some cemeteries face the need for immediate expansion through the acquisition of additional land. Puerto Rico has such a situation. We understand that the Puerto Rico National Cemetery (PRNC) has a project intended to start in 2010 that gives them burial space until 2017 for first interments. PRNC will remain open, of course, for second interments of spouses and veterans. After completion of the project, PRNC will remain open to first and second cremations until 2030. While cremations are an option for some, veterans and their survivors may hold certain religious beliefs that do not make this a viable alternative. The NCA is actively seeking land of 100 acres or more within a 25-mile radius of Route 22/Route 1. The rapid acquisition of this land is essential to Puerto Rico's veteran population.

The national cemetery system continues to be seriously challenged, though there has been progress made over the years. The NCA is working tirelessly to remove decades of blemishes and scars from military burial grounds across the country. Visitors to many national cemeteries are likely to encounter sunken graves, misaligned and dirty grave markers, deteriorating roads, spotty turf, and other patches of decay that have been accumulating for decades.

If the NCA is to continue its commitment to ensure national cemeteries remain dignified and respectful settings that honor deceased veterans and give evidence of the Nation's gratitude for their military service, there must be a comprehensive effort to greatly improve the condition, functions, and appearance of the national cemeteries.

To address these concerns, the NCA has aggressively moved forward repairing the priorities that were detailed in "An Independent Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries," which was submitted to Congress in 2002. Although the 5-year, $250 million "National Shrine Initiative" was not adopted as we recommended, the NCA has spent $150 million toward that original list of 928 projects as well as other

emerging priorities over this past year. These projects include gravesite renovation, repair, upgrades, and maintenance. Headstones and markers must be cleaned, realigned, and set. Stone surfaces of columbaria require cleaning, caulking, and grouting, and the surrounding walkways must be maintained. Grass, shrubbery, and trees in burial areas and other land must receive regular care.

Additionally, cemetery infrastructure, i.e., buildings, grounds, walks, and drives must be repaired as needed. According to the study, these project recommendations were made on the basis of the existing condition of each cemetery after taking into account the cemetery's age, its burial activity, burial options and maintenance programs.

The NCA has done an outstanding job thus far in improving the appearance of our national cemeteries, but there is a long way to go to get our national cemeteries to where they need to be. By enacting a 5-year program with dedicated funds and an ambitious schedule, the national cemetery system can fully serve all veterans and their families with the utmost dignity, respect, and compassion.

In addition to the management of the national cemeteries, the NCA has responsibility for the Memorial Program Service. The Memorial Program Service provides lasting memorials for the graves of eligible veterans and honors their service through Presidential Memorial Certificates. Public Laws 107–103 and 107–330 allow for a headstone or marker for the graves of veterans buried in private cemeteries who died on or after September 11, 2001. Prior to this change, the NCA could provide this service only to those buried in national or state cemeteries or to unmarked graves in private cemeteries.

The Administration requested $181 million for FY 2009. Congress, understanding the sacrifices of the few for the freedom of the many, honored the fallen by granting NCA $230 million and an additional $50 million in stimulus funds. The NCA is requesting $242 million for FY 2010. Granting that funding request will sustain the important progress NCA has made. We urge Congress to grant the NCA's request.

The next area to address is veterans' burial benefits. The burial benefit in 2008 was only 6 percent of what was provided when the NCA started paying this benefit. This must be increased to a level proportionate to the original benefit.

In 1973, the Federal Government started paying burial benefits to assist in the funeral cost for our veterans. Over the years, the value of these benefits has been greatly reduced due to inflation. It was never the intent of Congress to cover the full cost of burial; however, the benefits now pay only a small fraction of what was covered 35 years ago.

In 2001, the plot allowance was increased for the first time in more than 28 years, to $300 from the original amount of $150. This higher figure covers approximately 6 percent of funeral costs. The 108th Congress increased the allowance for service-connected deaths from $500 to $2,000. Prior to this adjustment, the allowance had been untouched since 1988. Clearly, it is time this allowance is raised to make a more meaningful contribution to the costs of burial for our veterans.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 212, we note that the VA provides a burial allowance for service-connected veterans of $2,000. However, the amount of this burial allowance has been seriously eroded by inflation because it has not been regularly adjusted for increases in the cost of living and is not automatically adjusted for inflation. Therefore, the DAV supports legislation to increase the burial allowance payable in the case of death due to service-connected disability and to provide for automatic annual adjustments indexed to the rise in the cost of living.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I will answer any questions you or the Subcommittee may have.

Prepared Statement of Raymond C. Kelley, National Legislative Director, American Veterans (AMVETS)

Chairman Hall, Ranking Member Lamborn, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for providing AMVETS the opportunity to present our views on the Veterans Affairs National Cemetery policies.

The National Cemetery Administration

The Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration (NCA) currently maintains more than 2.9 million gravesites at 125 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico. Of these cemeteries, 65 will be open to all interments; 20 will accept only cremated remains and family members of those already interred; and 40 will only perform interments of family members in the same gravesite as

a previously deceased family member. NCA also maintains 33 soldiers' lots and monument sites. All told, NCA manages 17,000 acres, half of which are developed.

VA estimates that about 27 million veterans are alive today. They include veterans from World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Global War on Terrorism, as well as peacetime veterans. With the anticipated opening of the new national cemeteries, annual interments are projected to increase from approximately 100,000 in 2007 to 111,000 in 2009. Historically, 12 percent of veterans opt for burial in a state or national cemetery.

The most important obligation of the NCA is to honor the memory of America's brave men and women who served in the armed forces. Therefore, the purpose of these cemeteries as national shrines is one of the NCA's top priorities. Many of the individual cemeteries within the system are steeped in history, and the monuments, markers, grounds, and related memorial tributes represent the very foundation of the United States. With this understanding, the grounds, including monuments and individual sites of interment, represent a national treasure that deserves to be protected and cherished.

AMVETS would like to acknowledge the dedication and commitment of the NCA staff who continue to provide the highest quality of service to veterans and their families. We call on the administration and Congress to provide the resources needed to meet the changing and critical nature of NCA's mission and fulfill the Nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country honorably and faithfully.

In FY 2008, $195 million was appropriated for the operations and maintenance of NCA, $28.2 million over the administration's request, with only $220,000 in carryover. NCA awarded 39 of the 42 minor construction projects that were in the operating plan. The State Cemetery Grants Service awarded $37.3 million of the $39.5 million that was appropriated. This carryover was caused by the cancellation of a contract that NCA had estimated to be $2 million but the contractor's estimation was considerably higher. Additionally, $25 million was invested in the National Shrine Commitment.

NCA has done an exceptional job of providing burial options for 88 percent of all veterans who fall within the 170,000 veterans within a 75 mile radius threshold model. However, under this model, no new geographical area will become eligible for a national cemetery until 2015. St. Louis, Mo. will, at that time, meet the threshold due to the closing of Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in 2017. Analysis shows that the five areas with the highest veteran population will not become eligible for a national cemetery because they will not reach the 170,000 threshold.

NCA has spent years developing and maintaining a cemetery system based on a growing veteran population. In 2010 our veteran population will begin to decline. Because of this downward trend, a new threshold model must be developed to ensure more of our veterans will have reasonable access to their burial benefits. Reducing the mile radius to 65 miles would reduce the veteran population that is served from 90 percent to 82.4 percent, and reducing the radius to 55 miles would reduce the served population to 74.1 percent. Reducing the radius alone to 55 miles would only bring two geographical areas in to 170,000 population threshold in 2010, and only a few areas into this revised model by 2030.

Several geographical areas will remain unserved if the population threshold is not reduced. Lowering the population threshold to 100,000 veterans would immediately make several areas eligible for a national cemetery regardless of any change to the mile radius threshold. A new threshold model must be implemented so more of our veterans will have access to this earned benefit.

National Shrine Initiative

The national cemetery system continues to be seriously challenged. Though there has been progress made over the years, the NCA is still struggling to remove decades of blemishes and scars from military burial grounds across the country. Visitors to many national cemeteries are likely to encounter sunken graves, misaligned and dirty grave markers, deteriorating roads, spotty turf and other patches of decay that have been accumulating for decades. If the NCA is to continue its commitment to ensure national cemeteries remain dignified and respectful settings that honor deceased veterans and give evidence of the Nation's gratitude for their military service, there must be a comprehensive effort to greatly improve the condition, function, and appearance of all our national cemeteries.

Therefore, in accordance with "An Independent Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries," which was submitted to Congress in 2002, AMVETS recommends Congress establish a 5-year, $250 million "National Shrine Initiative" to restore and improve the condition and character of NCA cemeteries. *Volume 2* of the Independent Study provides a systemwide, comprehensive review of the conditions

at 119 national cemeteries. It identifies 928 projects across the country for gravesite renovation, repair, upgrade, and maintenance. These projects include cleaning, realigning, and setting headstones and markers; cleaning, caulking, and grouting the stone surfaces of columbaria; and maintaining the surrounding walkways. Grass, shrubbery, and trees in burial areas and other land must receive regular care as well. Additionally, cemetery infrastructure, i.e. buildings, grounds, walks, and drives must be repaired as needed. According to the Study, these project recommendations were made on the basis of the existing condition of each cemetery after taking into account the cemetery's age, its burial activity, burial options and maintenance programs.

The Memorial Program Service

In addition to the management of national cemeteries, the NCA is responsible for the Memorial Program Service. The Memorial Program Service provides lasting memorials for the graves of eligible veterans and honors their service through Presidential Memorial Certificates. Public Laws 107–103 and 107–330 allow for a headstone or marker for the graves of veterans buried in private cemeteries who died on or after September 11, 2001. Prior to this change, the NCA could provide this service only to those buried in national or State cemeteries or to unmarked graves in private cemeteries. Public Law 110–157 gives VA authority to provide a medallion to be attached to the headstone or marker of veterans who are buried in a private cemetery. This benefit is available to veterans in lieu of a Government furnished headstone or marker.

The State Cemetery Grants Program

The State Cemeteries Grant Program faces the challenge of meeting a growing interest from States to provide burial services in areas that are not currently served. The intent of the SCGP is to develop a true complement to, not a replacement for, our Federal system of national cemeteries. With the enactment of the Veterans Benefits Improvements Act 1998, the NCA has been able to strengthen its partnership with States and increase burial service to veterans, especially those living in less densely populated areas not currently served by a national cemetery. Currently there are 55 State and tribal Government cemetery construction grant pre-applications, 34 of which have the required State matching funds necessary totaling $120.7 million. Funding has been provided that will allow SCGP to establish six new State cemeteries, which will provide burial options for 179,000 veterans who live in a region that currently has no reasonably accessible State or national cemetery.

Burial Benefits

In 1973 NCA established a burial allowance that provided partial reimbursements for eligible funeral and burial costs. The current payment is $2,000 for burial expenses for service-connected (SC) death, $300 for non-service-connected (NSC) deaths, and $300 for plot allowance. At its inception, the payout covered 72 percent of the funeral cost for a service-connected death, 22 percent for a non-service-connected death, and 54 percent of the burial plot cost. In 2007 these benefits eroded to 23 percent, 4 percent, and 14 percent respectively. It is time to bring these benefits back to their original value.

Burial allowance was first introduced in 1917 to prevent veterans from being buried in potters' fields. In 1923 the allowance was modified. The benefit was determined by a means test, and then in 1936 the allowance was changed again, removing the means test. In its early history, the burial allowance was paid to all veterans, regardless of the service-connectivity of their death. In 1973 the allowance was modified to reflect the relationship of their death as service connected or not.

The plot allowance was introduced in 1973 as an attempt to provide a plot benefit for veterans who did not have reasonable access to a national cemetery. Although neither the plot allowance nor the burial allowances were intended to cover the full cost of a civilian burial in a private cemetery, the increase in the benefit's value indicates the intent to provide a meaningful benefit by adjusting for inflation.

The national average cost for a funeral and burial in a private cemetery has reached $8,555, and the cost for a burial plot is $2,133. At the inception of the benefit the average costs were $1,116 and $278 respectively. While the cost of a funeral has increased by nearly seven times the burial benefit has only increased by 2.5 times. To bring both burial allowances and the plot allowance back to its 1973 value, the SC benefit payment will be $6,160, the NSC benefit value payment will be $1,918, and the plot allowance will increase to $1,150. Readjusting the value of these benefits, under the current system, will increase the obligations from $70.1 million to $335.1 million per year.

Based on accessibility and the need to provide quality burial benefits, AMVETS recommends that VA separate burial benefits into two categories: veterans who live

inside the VA accessibility threshold model and those who live outside the threshold. For those veterans who live outside the threshold, the SC burial benefit should be increased to $6,160, NSC veteran's burial benefit should be increased to $1,918, and plot allowance should increase to $1,150 to match the original value of the benefit. For veterans who live within reasonable accessibility to a State or national cemetery that is able to accommodate burial needs, but the veteran would rather be buried in a private cemetery the burial benefit should be adjusted. These veterans' burial benefits will be based on the average cost for VA to conduct a funeral. The benefit for a SC burial will be $2,793, the amount provided for a NSC burial will be $854, and the plot allowance will be $1,150. This will provide a burial benefit at equal percentages, but based on the average cost for a VA funeral and not on the private funeral cost that will be provided for those veterans who do not have access to a State or national cemetery.

The recommendations of past legislation provided an increased benefit for all eligible veterans but it currently fails to reach the intent of the original benefit. The new model will provide a meaningful benefit to those veterans whose access to a State or national cemetery is restricted as well as provides an improved benefit for eligible veterans who opt for private burial. Congress should increase the plot allowance from $300 to $1,150 for all eligible veterans and expand the eligibility for the plot allowance for all veterans who would be eligible for burial in a national cemetery, not just those who served during wartime. Congress should divide the burial benefits into two categories: veterans within the accessibility model and veterans outside the accessibility model. Congress should increase the service-connected burial benefit from $2,000 to $6,160 for veterans outside the radius threshold and $2,793 for veterans inside the radius threshold. Congress should increase the non-service-connected burial benefit from $300 to $1,918 for veterans outside the radius threshold and $854 for veterans inside the radius threshold. Congress should enact legislation to adjust these burial benefits for inflation annually.

The NCA honors veterans with a final resting place that commemorates their service to this Nation. More than 2.8 million servicemembers who died in every war and conflict are honored by burial in a VA national cemetery. Each Memorial Day and Veterans Day we honor the last full measure of devotion they gave for this country. Our national cemeteries are more than the final resting place of honor for our veterans; they are hallowed ground to those who died in our defense, and a memorial to those who survived.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I thank you again for the privilege to present AMVETS views, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

Prepared Statement of Vivianne Cisneros Wersel, Au.D., Chair, Government Relations Committee, Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the Nation's wounds, to care for him who has borne the battle, his widow and his orphan."

. . . President Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, Good Morning. I am Vivianne Wersel, the Chair of the Gold Star Wives' Government Relations Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present this statement on behalf of Gold Star Wives of America. I am the surviving spouse of Lieutenant Colonel Rich Wersel, Jr. USMC who died suddenly on February 4, 2005, 1 week after he returned from his second tour of duty in Iraq. A regular day that began seemingly as routine as any other was a day past which all of my life's goals and dreams had to be adjusted. It's a time reference for me now from which everything now is either before or after, the old life and the new life.

Gold Star Wives of America, Incorporated was founded in 1945 and is a congressionally chartered organization of spouses of servicemembers who died while on active duty or who died as the result of a service connected disability. It is an all volunteer organization. We could begin with no better advocate than Eleanor Roosevelt, newly widowed, who helped make Gold Star Wives a truly national organization. Mrs. Roosevelt was an original signer of our Certificate of Incorporation as a member of the Board of Directors.

The Gold Star Wives is an organization of those who are left behind, families left behind when our Nation's heroes, bearing the burden of freedom for us all, have fall-

en. We are that family minus one—we're wives and children, all having suffered the unbearable loss. We are those whom Abraham Lincoln referred to when he made his Government's commitment "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan."

We begin by thanking this Committee and our Government for providing essential services necessary to help us through our loss, many services being done well, in a caring and helpful way. But I also want to stress the importance of staying vigilant so that no one who is grieving the loss of a loved one will have to endure indignities or lack of benefits because of the lack of knowledge.

Therefore, we need consistent and relevant assistance at the time of the casualty and for some period of time thereafter. We immediately need help dealing with the funeral, the burial, and with our grief. We need to understand the precise nature of the burial benefit as it befits either active duty or retiree status. Then we need a clear understanding, when we can assimilate it, of our benefits as they exist at the time—financial, medical, education, travel, housing allowance, and even such things as how to deal with ID cards, how to file income taxes, etc. And the information may need to come in more than one format and on more than one occasion. In dealing with a loss as great as the death of a loved one, it should not be assumed that we all have the same ability that we do under normal circumstances to hear, learn, understand and act responsibly on multiple decisions in those early days of grief. While there have been huge strides made over the last several years in alleviating problems with benefit and eligibility misinformation coming to those who are grieving, confusion, in the throes of grief, about the complete benefits available will be a normal beginning with the best of information provided. We owe it to these families to help secure their futures with the most accurate information possible at an appropriate time—when it is ready to be received—because the confusing array of decisions that must be made have consequences for the rest of that family's lives.

While there can be incidental occurrences of difficulties with the burial benefit or the national cemetery policy, I am happy to report that we can discern no negative experience trends in these areas from within our organization. We very much appreciate the help we get in those tumultuous early days. We would ask that you be attentive over time, however, to assure that the amount provided for the burial continues to stay abreast of the cost of those services and takes into account varying geographies.

What I can report to you today is that financial stability is the overriding concern of these families. We, in the Gold Star Wives believe the benefit change that will provide the most significant long-term advantage to the family's financial security would be to end the Dependency Indemnity Compensation dollar for dollar offset to the Survivor Benefit Plan. This is not a subject new for us to testify about before Congress. And over the summer, the decision in Sharp, et al v. United States, handed down by the U.S. Court of Federal Claims ordered the Department of Defense to refund the SBP annuities that were withheld from three widowed spouses who also received DIC from the Department of Veterans Affairs. The court found that the DoD's dollar-for-dollar deduction of DIC payments from SBP benefits was based on a faulty interpretation of Federal law. We recognize that jurisdiction resides elsewhere, but we know each Member of this Committee can and should be concerned within the context of your own jurisdiction that this inequity should be fixed, and fixed immediately.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. We appreciate all the compassionate work which Members of this Committee and the staff do on our behalf. We always stand ready to help provide you will all information needed.

Prepared Statement of Lesley Witter, Director of Political Affairs, National Funeral Directors Association

Chairman Hall; Ranking Member Lamborn; Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning about "How We Can Better Serve America's Veterans and their Families." I am Lesley Witter, Director of Political Affairs for the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA).

I am testifying today on behalf of over 19,000 funeral directors and funeral service personnel who are members of the NFDA. Funeral directors help ensure that every deceased veteran receives the care, honor and dignity they've earned because of their sacrifice in defense of the freedoms we enjoy today.

While the responsibility of providing appropriate funeral and burial benefits and proper military honors falls on the VA and DoD, it is funeral directors who help the family organize a personalized funeral and burial that both celebrates the life

of their loved one and honors their service to our country. Funeral directors contact the VA to schedule funeral and burial times, help families file benefit claims, ensure that each veteran receives the appropriate grave markers, and works with the DoD and veteran service organizations to provide appropriate military honors.

In preparation for my testimony today, NFDA completed a non-scientific survey of our membership regarding their opinions on how we can better sever our veterans and their Families. I am happy to report that NFDA members provided thoughtful and detailed responses on this important issue.

I will now highlight some of the key findings in our member survey. Approximately half of the NFDA members surveyed stated they assisted in planning twenty-one (21) or more Veteran funerals in 2008. Less than 3 percent of respondents stated that they had not helped plan any veteran funerals last year.

Overall, funeral directors seem to be happy with the responsiveness of both the VA and the DoD. 57.6 percent of funeral directors surveyed felt the VA and DoD were very responsive to funeral directors. 22 percent funeral directors who responded to the survey felt that the VA and DoD were "extremely responsive" to funeral directors. Only 3.4 percent of respondents answered that the DoD and VA were "not very responsive" to funeral directors.

Additionally, almost 52 percent of respondents felt the VA and DoD were very responsive to veteran families.

However, Monica H. Torres, an NFDA member, a mortuary science student at Mesa Community College and a military spouse, commented that "gathering information not only from funeral directors but also the veterans families may be an avenue of interest." If there is no process to collect this important information, the NFDA will be happy to assist in developing a questionnaire that funeral directors can give to the families after the funeral and burial are completed.

Regarding funeral and burial costs less than one-third (23.3 percent) of funeral directors responded that they had experienced problems obtaining veteran burial benefits. However, some of the negative comments include: "Claims for monetary burial benefits are taking over 7 months to process," "Delay in the processing of paperwork for monuments and benefits," "Lack of communications between various VA offices—memorial marker/insurance/financial benefits."

However, over 66 percent of respondents felt that the current veteran funeral and burial benefits were insufficient. The main reasons cited were that the funeral and burial benefit has not changed with inflation, and that it does not cover the ever increasing cost of a funeral. As a result, almost two-thirds (62.9 percent) of funeral directors stated that they have absorbed extra costs associated with veteran funerals. The average dollar amount absorbed by funeral directors per veteran funeral was $652. However, the range of costs absorbed was between $25 and $3000.

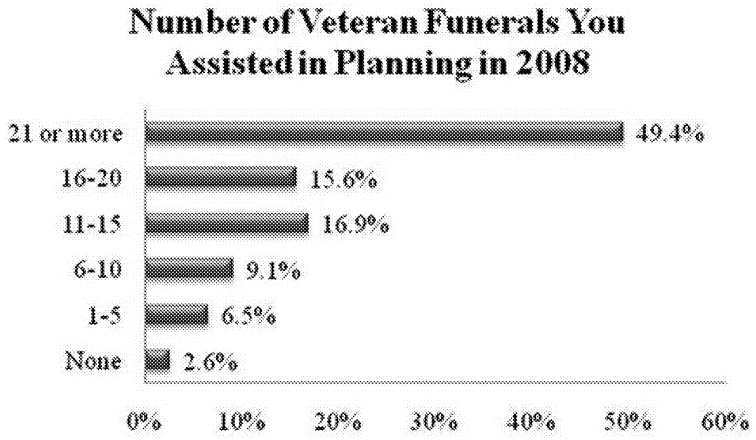
In addition, NFDA member Mark Jelacic, of Jelacic Funeral Home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, commented that he believes the "VA is disregarding those veterans and their families who have chosen cremation as their form of final disposition by not offering their "Burial Benefit" to these veterans or their families." Mr. Jelacic indicated that the cremation rate for veterans in his funeral home has reached 40 percent and that the veteran families do not understand why if they buried their loved one they would get a benefit, but if they chose cremation, they may not receive the burial allowance, unless cremated remains are buried.

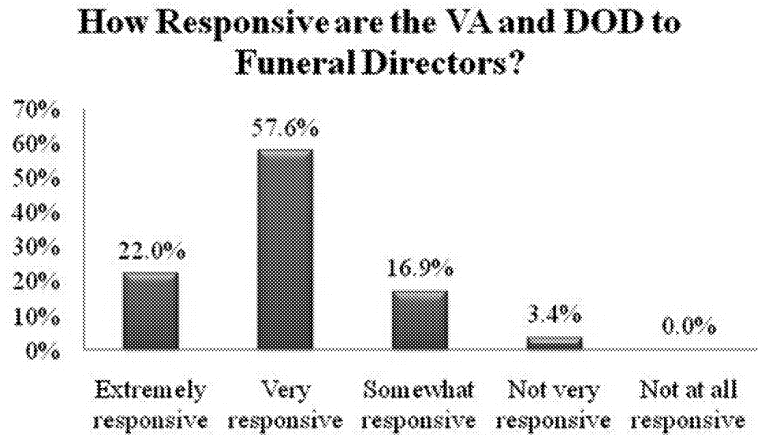
I would like to point out that many funeral directors willingly donate their time and services as a way to honor veterans. For example, one NFDA member stated that "Our time is basically donated, we work with the VA hospice for veterans without families or people to care for them, and their social worker is their next of kin." Another NFDA member stated "I support the veteran's burial detail in our community by giving them an honorarium, a meal and special recognition. I also provide a matted and framed Presidential citation to each family that we serve at a public ceremony two times a year." Another funeral director honors our deceased veterans by donating "funeral coach, family transportation, and clergy transportation as well as the cost of a graveside service."

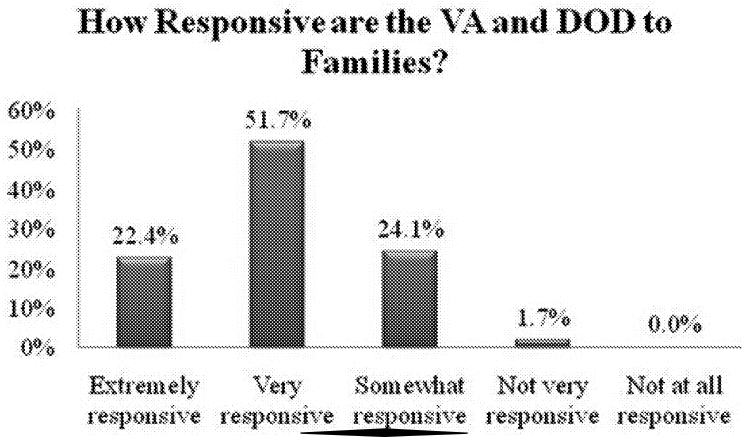
Mr. Chairman, I would like to express NFDA's strong support for H.R. 2642, a bill introduced by Mr. Tiberi of Ohio that directs "the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to assist in the identification of unclaimed and abandoned human remains to determine if any such remains are eligible for burial in a national cemetery." NFDA members are acutely aware of the sad story of unclaimed remains throughout this Nation, many of whom are veterans. NFDA members will be happy to work with the VA to identify veterans' remains that have gone unclaimed, and ensure that these Veterans receive the funeral and burial honors they deserve.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Committee, on behalf of the members of the National Funeral Directors Association, I want to ensure you that funeral directors throughout this country remain dedicated to doing our part in hon-

oring our Nation's veterans and their families. I want to conclude my testimony today by thanking you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the NFDA. I hope my testimony has been helpful and I will be happy to answer any question you may have.







Prepared Statement of John Nicolai, Cemetery Representative, Ft. Logan National Cemetery, Denver, CO, and Shop Steward, AFGE Local 2241, on behalf of American Federation of Government Employees, AFL–CIO

Dear Chairman Hall, Ranking Member Lamborn and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to share my deep concern that the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is eliminating one of the most honored and valuable entry level employment opportunities for veterans through contracting out: the cemetery caretaker function.

My name is John Nicolai. I am a Vietnam veteran and am very proud to have served my country attached to the 6990th USAF Security Squadron. I have worked at Ft Logan National Cemetery in Denver, Colorado, for the past 6 years. I am currently employed as a Cemetery Representative. I started out as a Cemetery Caretaker.

I am also a Shop Steward for Local 2241 of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), which represents nearly 180,000 employees in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and is the exclusive representative of employees of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA).

Historically, NCA Cemetery Caretakers have been responsible for all tasks required to maintain our national cemeteries and bring them up to National Shrine Status. National Shrine Status is a set of standards set by the National Cemetery Administration that maintains these hallowed grounds as a proper final resting place for our national heroes, our veterans.

VA Cemetery Caretakers perform numerous tasks including mowing and trimming, raising sunken graves, setting headstones, raising and realigning headstones, and assisting maintenance workers, gardeners, and interment crews.

The NCA caretaker position has long been a source of valuable and honorable employment for returning servicemembers, including veterans with disabilities in Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Compensated Work Therapy programs (CWT).

The Caretaker position has also been a valuable stepping stone to almost all other jobs in the Cemetery Network. At Ft. Logan National Cemetery, two of the three GS–6 Cemetery Representatives, the entire interment crew started and the WG–7 Maintenance worker also started out as Caretakers. Even some Cemetery Directors started out as VA Cemetery Caretakers. There is no better starting job within the NCA that can give you an overall knowledge of the workings of the cemetery.

In recent years, NCA local directors have replaced more and more veterans in caretaker jobs with outside contractors. As a result, the current generation of veterans, and future generations of veterans, have far fewer job opportunities in NCA.

Outsourcing NCA caretaker work is bad policy and bad for veterans for many reasons. First, in most cases, this outsourcing is carried out illegally because it constitutes a "direct conversion", that is, Federal work is converted to contractor work without conducting the privatization studies required under Federal law and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) A–76 Circular. VA's use of direct conversions has been so egregious that in 2007 Congress passed a law aimed specifically at VA to prohibit this practice. As Senator Brown (D–OH) stated upon introduction of this amendment to the FY 2008 VA appropriations bill:

> "The VA is firing many of its blue collar workers, and replacing them with private contractors without going through the competition process that Congress has called for again and again. It's bad enough that the VA is moving forward without actually figuring out what is in the best interest of the taxpayers. But making matters even worse is that four-fifths of the blue collar jobs targeted for outsourcing to private contractors are held by veterans. These are more than a paycheck. They're a path to independence... The obstacles to employment are steep enough for veterans without throwing unjustifiable outsourcing into the mix."

Second, using contractors instead of veterans is unfair to veterans and their families who were assured by the VA that the workforce that maintains the cemeteries as National Shrines is comprised largely of veterans who bring unique experience and commitment to their jobs. In VA's video, "*Day in the Life: Cemetery Caretaker*", NCA Caretaker John Wells states:

> "We owe a debt of gratitude for those people that went overseas. People that have given everything, and never came back home. That's what we feel like our dedication is ... to provide a service. Not just a service to do the funeral and the headstone, and mowing the grass. But you feel it inside, and you know where they come from. And it's ... an ongoing feeling. ... And those people that

> come here, the family members to ... see their loved one off, is a bond that sticks with you the rest of your life. Because, you've been in their shoes. You've been with the comrade that they are saying goodbye to. ... It means to me that you can still ... do something for the family of those that have lost someone here. ... There's nothing here that I can see that's left undone. If we're mowing or weed eating or anything like that, and we see a stone that's sunk or out of alignment or needs to be tweaked a little bit, we go ahead and take time to do that... Coming to work for the VA means everything to those who work here. Because we like what we do. We don't show up just to do some work and go home. There's a certain amount of camaraderie that we have in common. It's a nice place to work. This is a good place to start a good career. ... We don't take shortcuts. We take pride in what we do."
>
> "*Day in the Life: Cemetery Caretaker*" (http://www.va.gov/JOBS/career__types/wells-video.asp

In addition, cemetery caretaker work is inappropriate for contracting out. The responsibility to maintain these National Shrines is too important to be turned over to fly by night contractors. These contractors typically use poorly paid contingent workers and they maximize their profits by minimizing the amount of effort they put into each of the many contracts they juggle. Most of the employees at Ft. Logan National Cemetery are in agreement with me that the subcontractors are not performing the jobs as well as NCA employees did. In fact, many times our personnel are directed to redo the work not done to standard or left undone by the subcontractors.

NCA outsourcing also undermines the Department's own mission to increase veteran hiring, a mission that is especially important during this period of soaring unemployment among OIF/OEF veterans. The Labor Department recently reported that the number of unemployed Iraq and Afghanistan veterans is nearly as high as the number of OIF/OEF servicemembers currently deployed!

Unfortunately, the problem of illegal caretaker outsourcing is getting worse over time. When I first started working at Ft. Logan 6 years ago, there were *ten* Full Time Employee (FTE) VA Cemetery Caretakers, nine of whom were also veterans. In 2007, the mowing and trimming work was outsourced, leaving only *three* full time VA Cemetery Caretakers, two of whom are veterans.

At the time the work was outsourced, the employees were told not to worry about their jobs, that no one was going to be laid off or fired, that these positions would only be reduced by attrition. But outsourcing by attrition still means fewer job opportunities for the next wave of veterans trying to return to civilian life.

Management tried to argue that outsourcing the mowing and trimming would free up caretakers to perform grave and headstone and marker maintenance to meet NCA Operational Standards and achieve National Shrine status. In spite of this statement, management outsourced the headstone setting in 2009; this will be implemented next month and will result the loss of two more NCA positions.

Every year, in addition to the VA Cemetery Caretakers maintaining the cemetery grounds, seasonal personnel are hired to assist with the various jobs. In the past, as full time VA Cemetery Caretaker positions became available, the seasonal work pool was used to fill some of these positions. In addition, participants in the VHA Compensated Work Therapy Program working at the cemeteries were moved into permanent positions when they became vacant. However, since outsourcing has started, far fewer CWT graduates and seasonal employees with valuable experience are used to fill vacant caretaker positions.

Nearly two dozen AFGE locals in other parts of the country have similar reports: the contracting out of caretaker jobs held largely by veterans and the prolonged use of temporary employees and CWT participants without transition to permanent employment.

AFGE member reports indicate that most, if not all, new national cemeteries have also contracted out caretaker work among other functions. Contract labor is also used in most existing cemeteries that undergo expansion. Congressman Salazar (D–CO) has introduced legislation to add another national cemetery in Colorado (H.R. 174). If it passes, I fear that NCA will continue the trend of hiring only the Director and Cemetery Representatives for new cemeteries, and contract out the Cemetery Caretakers, Interment Crews and other support personnel.

Although Federal outsourcing law may not apply to caretaker work at new and expanded cemeteries, NCA's failure to hire veterans at these sites represents an enormous loss of employment opportunities. Also, as noted below, OMB is now encouraging Federal agencies to give new work to Federal employees, rather than contractors.

Many cemetery directors make the argument that they cannot find suitable applicants to hire to fill caretaker vacancies, but they never seem to look for suitable applicants in VHA or VBA employment programs, or in the local veterans' community. But why is a for profit contractor who is outside the VA better able to find veterans for this honorable work than the VA itself? Cemetery directors also argue that they need the flexibility of contractor labor because the work is seasonal; they have the option to hire caretakers as seasonal employees, a common practice throughout the Federal Government.

In 2007, AFGE met with NCA officials and requested that NCA intervene to stop illegal outsourcing at the local level. At that time, NCA expressed interest in AFGE's offer to link NCA with veterans' groups to identify suitable applicants for caretaker openings in existing and new cemeteries. Shortly thereafter, NCA reported to this Subcommittee that it would provide a report about its review of the competitive sourcing issue. To AFGE's knowledge, this report was never completed.

Therefore, AFGE urges this Subcommittee to take action on both fronts: stop illegal outsourcing of caretaker work at existing cemeteries and link unemployed veterans with new caretaker job opportunities. More specifically, the first step is to impose a statutory moratorium on the outsourcing of the NCA caretaker function and require NCA to conduct an inventory of the current caretaker workforce and caretaker contracts. Congress has already taken similar action on a Government wide basis. The 2009 Consolidated Appropriations Act placed a permanent prohibition on "direct conversions" that applies to the VA and other Federal agencies (except DoD which is covered by a different bill) and imposed a moratorium on new privatization studies during FY 2009. Pending legislation would extend that moratorium and require agencies to establish inventories of contracted services that should be "insourced", i.e. brought back into the Government.

Inventories and insourcing are also key components of OMB's new guidance. All agencies, including the VA, are supposed to develop a workforce inventory with the goal of bringing inherently governmental work back into the Government, and increasing the use of Federal employees for new, expanded and outsourced work.

We encourage this Subcommittee to play a leading role in the development of a permanent program linking NCA job opportunities with potential applicants identified by VA's job training programs and veterans' organizations. This program would further the admirable goals of the VA's Veterans Employment Coordination Service "to advance efforts to attract, recruit and hire veterans into the VA, particularly severely injured veterans returning from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom." (VA Web site: VECS Homepage). Bringing cemetery caretaker work back into the VA honors this commitment while honoring veterans and their families.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Prepared Statement of Steve L. Muro, Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, National Cemetery Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on how the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) honors Veterans through lasting tributes to their service and sacrifice.

NCA is one of three Administrations within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). NCA and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), which is responsible for burial flags and monetary burial benefits, jointly administer VA's burial and funeral benefits for Veterans, family members and survivors. We in NCA have four statutory missions:

- To provide burial for Veterans, their eligible family members and survivors, and to maintain those places of burial as national shrines;
- To provide Government-furnished headstones and markers for the graves of eligible Veterans worldwide;
- To administer the State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP), under which NCA provides grants up to 100 percent of the development cost for establishing, expanding and improving Veterans cemeteries owned and operated by the States and Tribal governments; and
- To administer the Presidential Memorial Certificate (PMC) program, under which NCA provides to the families and loved ones of honorably discharged, deceased Veterans, certificates bearing the signature of the President to commemorate the Veteran's service.

This is a very important period in NCA history as Secretary Shinseki leads the Department in fundamental and comprehensive change emphasizing innovation and performance. These initiatives are consistent with the theme of today's hearing on how we can better serve America's Veterans and their families. I thank you for providing me an opportunity to share with the Committee, the Veterans at this hearing, and all those we serve, the tangible benefits the employees of NCA provide through their daily commitment and dedication to our Fallen Heroes.

NCA maintains more than 2.9 million gravesites at 130 national cemeteries in 39 States and Puerto Rico, as well as 33 soldiers' lots and monument sites. Since 1973 when Congress created a National Cemetery System under the jurisdiction of VA, annual interments in VA national cemeteries have almost tripled, from 36,400, to more than 103,000 in fiscal year (FY) 2008. We expect to perform over 107,000 interments in 2009, a 3.8-percent increase over the number performed in 2008. Of the 130 national cemeteries operated by NCA, 70 cemeteries have gravesites available for the first interment or inurnment of casketed and cremated remains; 20 cemeteries can only accommodate the first inurnment of cremated remains (along with the cremated and casketed remains of subsequent family members); and the remaining 40 cemeteries can only accommodate an interment if there is room in the grave of a previously interred family member. Seventy-four State Veterans cemeteries funded under the State Cemetery Grant Program are operated in 36 States, Guam and Saipan.

In FY 2008, NCA processed more than 360,000 applications for Government-furnished headstones and markers for the graves of Veterans and their eligible family members, and issued over 500,000 Presidential Memorial Certificates to the families of eligible Veterans.

We are working diligently to fulfill the commitment our Nation has made to Veterans who served during previous periods of conflict, and we make special arrangements to accommodate the needs of family members who have lost a loved one serving overseas in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF). As of September 9, 2009, 1,063 OEF/OIF service men and women who died as a result of combat-related injuries have been interred in either a VA or a State Veterans cemetery. In addition, NCA has provided another 1,836 headstones or markers for fallen OEF/OIF servicemembers who are buried in private cemeteries. To honor these brave men and women, we do everything possible to expedite the placement of headstones or markers at the gravesite on the day of interment. We also try to accommodate burial requests in closed national cemeteries near a Veteran's family if a gravesite can be made available due to the reclamation of a previously obstructed or reserved gravesite.

Our ability to provide reasonable access to a burial option is a critical measure of the effectiveness of our service delivery to Veterans and their families and survivors. Currently, over 87 percent of all Veterans in the Nation reside within a 75-mile radius of a national or State Veterans cemetery. VA established the 75-mile service area standard because NCA data showed that more than 80 percent of persons interred in national cemeteries reside within 75 miles of the cemetery at the time of death. NCA plans to increase the percentage of Veterans served to 90 percent by FY 2011. Strategic initiatives are in place to meet this goal. They are:

- Establish additional national cemeteries in un-served areas;
- Expand existing national cemeteries to provide continued service; and
- Establish or expand State and Tribal Government Veterans cemeteries through the SCGP.

The *Future Burial Needs* report, required by Public Law (PL) 106–117, assisted NCA in developing its long-range plans. The report, completed in 2002, assessed the number of additional cemeteries needed to ensure that 90 percent of Veterans live within 75 miles of a national or State Veterans cemetery, and identified 31 locations with the greatest concentration of unmet need for burial access. Revised population estimates that VA provided to Congress in June 2003 assisted in the identification of 12 locations with the greatest number of Veterans who were unserved by burial access to a national or State Veterans cemetery; all 12 locations met VA's Veteran population threshold of 170,000 for planning new national cemeteries. This policy has enabled VA to focus resources on serving areas where high concentrations of Veterans do not have access to a burial option. PL 106–117 directed the Secretary to build six new national cemeteries; six additional locations were identified in PL 108–109, the National Cemetery Expansion Act of 2003. Together, these statutes laid the foundation for VA initiatives to provide Veterans improved access to burial options.

Establishing New National Cemeteries

VA has established 11 of these 12 new national cemeteries. New national cemeteries mandated by PL 106–117 and located in the six geographic areas of identified need in Atlanta, Georgia; Detroit, Michigan; Ft. Sill, Oklahoma; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Sacramento, California; and South Florida now provide service to two million Veterans who had resided in areas not previously served by a national or State Veterans cemetery.

PL 108–109 directed VA to establish six additional national cemeteries near Bakersfield, California; Birmingham, Alabama; Columbia/Greenville, South Carolina; Jacksonville, Florida; Southeastern Pennsylvania; and Sarasota County, Florida. Five of these six new national cemeteries are now operational. With the future opening of Washington Crossing National Cemetery near Philadelphia, this phase of national cemetery expansion will be complete. Funding of $41 million was appropriated in FY 2006 for land acquisition costs, $12 million was appropriated in FY 2007 for preliminary design work, and $137 million was appropriated in NCA's FY 2008 major construction account for these six new cemeteries. We are proud of VA's progress in accomplishing this significant expansion of national cemeteries.

Annual Veteran deaths reached a peak at 665,000 in FY 2006 and have begun a gradual decline. However, with the opening of these new national cemeteries, annual NCA interments are projected to increase from over 100,000 in FY 2008 to nearly 114,000 in FY 2011, an increase of 10.6 percent due entirely to increased access.

Providing Grants for State and Tribal Government Veterans Cemeteries

The SCGP is vital to achieving NCA's performance goal for burial access, and in permitting NCA to meet the needs of Veterans, family members, and survivors residing in less populated areas that do not meet VA's criteria for the establishment of a national cemetery. Since 2001, 29 new State Veterans cemeteries have opened in 17 States and Saipan. With the opening of the Idaho Veterans Cemetery in 2004, there is now a national or State Veterans cemetery in every State in the Union. To date, VA has funded 275 grants, totaling more than $389 million to establish, expand or improve 74 Veterans cemeteries in 36 States, Guam and Saipan.

Cemeteries established under the grant program must conform to VA-prescribed standards and guidelines for site selection, planning, construction, appearance and operations. State cemeteries must be operated solely for the interment of Veterans, their spouses, surviving spouses, and eligible children. Seven new State cemeteries are now under construction in Springvale, Maine; Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri; Alliance, Nebraska; Dublin, Virginia; Newton, Mississippi; Greenup, Kentucky; and Spokane, Washington. Sixteen States have multiple State Veterans cemeteries and some States, such as Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin, have been pro-active and planned new State cemeteries to coincide with the anticipated closure of nearby VA national cemeteries. In FY 2008, State Veterans cemeteries provided for 24,826 burials, and in FY 2009 burials are projected to increase to over 27,000. This increase has been possible because of expanded access offered by five State cemeteries opened in 2008 and 2009 in Adel, Iowa; Williamstown, Kentucky; Missoula, Montana; Fort Riley, Kansas; and Abilene, Texas. State cemeteries provide 20 percent of non-private burials for Veterans and their families.

Expanding and Improving Current National Cemeteries

The next planning challenge for NCA will be to continue expansions and improvements to existing national cemeteries by acquiring land where necessary and completing development projects for additional gravesites or columbaria. We currently have major and minor construction projects underway to expand the life of several national cemeteries so that they can continue to meet the burial needs of Veterans, their family members and survivors in their geographic regions. Included in the President's FY 2010 budget request are major expansion projects at Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery in Illinois for $38.3 million, and Houston National Cemetery in Texas for $35 million. Also included is $50.7 million for the minor construction program, which will focus primarily on smaller gravesite expansion projects.

In the area of facilities, we have begun several initiatives at our cemeteries in order to serve Veterans more efficiently. We have begun using graveliners that are pre-placed in the ground prior to the time of need. Pre-placed graveliners allow for a greater number of gravesites in a section because their installation precludes the need for buffer space between individual burial sites, which in turn reduces turf and irrigation needs. An acre with traditional gravesites will accommodate 871 burials; an acre with pre-placed graveliners can accommodate 1,815 burials or double the number of traditional gravesites.

We are also responding to changes in burial preferences by Veterans and their families by constructing a greater number of columbaria for the inurnment of cremated remains. As the choice of cremation over full-casket burial continues to increase, columbaria allow us to accommodate more burials at a given site, while being responsive to Veterans' preferences. We are also developing new memorial walls in our cemeteries to honor those whose remains are not available for burial. These memorial walls require less space than the traditional placement of memorial markers on land which is now available to be used for interments. This is one more strategy we employ to ensure national cemeteries can provide burial options well into the future.

Strategic Goals

As we approach meeting our performance goal of providing burial access for 90 percent of Veterans, we are also thinking strategically about how we will meet the needs of Veterans in the future. As a first step, VA commissioned an independent burial program evaluation that addressed multiple issues, including:

- Assessment of VA's current 75-mile service area standard;
- Adequacy of the 170,000 Veteran population threshold for planning new national cemeteries;
- Role of State cemetery grants in meeting Veterans' burial needs; and
- Potential use of cremation-only burial sites or mausoleums in meeting Veterans' burial needs and preferences.

We provided this report to Congress on November 5, 2008. Any changes to current policy will be considered during formulation of future budget requests.

Performance Standards

NCA continues to make the most effective use of available resources to ensure that national cemeteries are maintained and operated in a manner befitting their status as national shrines. In recognition of our stewardship and dedicated service to Veterans, NCA's national cemeteries achieved a customer satisfaction rating of 95 out of a possible 100 points by the 2007 American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) survey undertaken by the University of Michigan. This is the second time that NCA received the highest score by a Federal agency or private organization participating in the ACSI. The ACSI study polled next-of-kin or individuals who had arranged for the interment of a loved one in a VA national cemetery within 12 months of the survey. The outstanding results achieved by NCA are a testament to the dedication and hard work of NCA's employees as they serve Veterans and their families during difficult and emotional times.

National cemeteries carry expectations of appearance that set them apart from their civilian counterparts. To meet these standards, the 2002 *National Shrine Commitment* report provided the first independent, comprehensive assessment of VA assets at 119 national cemeteries; 928 projects were identified to repair, alter or improve existing cemetery elements at a then-estimated cost of $280 million. (Through 2008, NCA had completed work on 304 of the identified projects with an estimated cost of $99.5 million.) In 2003, we established operational standards to provide guidance and quantifiable goals for maintaining national cemeteries as national shrines at both open and closed national cemeteries. These standards are reviewed and updated continuously based on input from NCA cemetery staff, 70 percent of whom are Veterans themselves.

To complement the operational standards we also established a comprehensive program by which the performance of national cemeteries is assessed, monitored and reported to the Under Secretary. The Organizational Assessment and Improvement (OAI) Program combines the traditional elements of an inspection program with the proven concepts of organizational excellence. This internal audit-based program is a combination of regular self-assessment, and periodic site visits by teams of NCA employees, to validate business and service delivery results and to measure the progress of the national cemetery in meeting national shrine standards of appearance. OAI allows us to objectively identify projects and allocate valuable resources. The program is in its fifth year and has become a valuable tool in assessing performance measures at all VA national cemeteries.

NCA received $50 million in stimulus funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 to assist in fulfillment of our commitment to the national shrine standards. These funds are being used for 395 cemetery projects in 39 States and Puerto Rico. Projects include raising, realigning and cleaning headstones and markers, and repairing sunken graves. We are also funding projects that conserve energy and water through the use of wind turbines, solar power and other measures. We are repairing historic monuments and memorials at national shrines; repairing roads, buildings, and other cemetery infrastructure; and purchasing new

equipment for cemetery operations. These stimulus funds will be obligated by September 2010, and we have established procedures to ensure rigorous oversight of and accountability for the use of these funds.

In addition to being good stewards of our national cemeteries, we listen to our Veterans and their families regarding benefit inequities and work with Congress and this Committee in particular to expand benefits to respond to the needs and changing expectations of those we serve and to properly honor our servicemen and women. The headstone and marker program is an area where this partnership has been especially fruitful. Initially the Government furnished a headstone for a servicemember who died on the battlefield to ensure the remains were marked. Then the purpose of this provision evolved to ensure that the remains of a Veteran in a national, post or private cemetery would not lie in an unmarked grave. With the passage of PL 107–103, The Veterans Education and Benefits Expansion Act of 2001, the benefit of a Government-furnished headstone expanded to honor all Veterans who died after the date of passage, regardless of whether the grave was previously marked with a private headstone. The Government-furnished headstone or marker then became a symbol of a Veteran's service to the Nation and recognition of its gratitude. At the conclusion of this 5-year pilot study, VA submitted a report on the positive reception of the Veteran community to this expanded burial benefit. We were pleased to see it become permanent and apply to those Veterans who died since November 1, 1990. (Prior to that date, a monetary allowance had been available when survivors purchased private headstones and markers.)

In response to concerns voiced by Veterans and their family members, we worked with Congress and, again, with this Committee, to expand the memorial marker benefit to include all individuals eligible for burial in a national cemetery but whose remains are unavailable.

Another area where we are meeting the changing needs of Veterans is by expanding the headstone and marker program to include a new medallion option that will acknowledge service to the Nation for Veterans buried in private cemeteries around the world. I am pleased to report on our progress in making this new benefit available in the near future.

With the passage of PL 110–157 in December 2007, the Secretary now has the authority to furnish a medallion or other device that can be affixed to a privately-purchased headstone, marker or niche cover to signify the grave as that of a Veteran. Veterans and their family members will be able to choose either this new medallion, or the traditional Government headstone or marker, for Veterans who died on or after November 1, 1990, and are interred in privately-marked graves in private cemeteries. We believe that many Veterans and their families will request this medallion for placement at those private cemeteries where a traditional Government-furnished headstone or marker is not permitted, or where families preferred to privately mark a grave but still seek recognition of a Veteran's service to the Nation.

VA has worked with the Department of the Army's Institute of Heraldry in developing designs for the new medallion. Designs and prototypes have been presented to the Commission of Fine Arts, the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, and multiple Veterans' focus groups. Based on input from these varied groups, the Institute has refined the design, and prototypes for a medallion are being fabricated for final approval by the VA Secretary. We anticipate that we will enter into manufacturing contracts at the end of this calendar year and the medallion will be available to Veterans and their families in early 2010. This will expand further the recognition we provide Veterans for their service to our Nation.

Additional NCA Achievements and Initiatives

As challenged by the Secretary, we are looking at our internal processes to ensure that we are maximizing resources and continually serving Veterans with ever-improving services. I would like to share some of these innovations with you.

NCA National Scheduling Office. We are restructuring and streamlining the processing of burial eligibility determinations and interment scheduling to better serve the needs of Veterans, their families and funeral directors. Located in St. Louis, Missouri, the centralized NCA National Scheduling Office opened in January 2007 to handle interment requests for all national cemeteries except those located in Puerto Rico and Hawaii. As a one-stop call center, it ensures fast and consistent eligibility determinations, and is available to families and funeral homes for scheduling of burials 7 days a week. Previously, scheduling occurred Monday through Friday during national cemetery office hours.

NCA has also initiated a paperless document processing system. Veteran, spouse and dependent information may be submitted by fax and all documents received are automatically entered into an electronic database. When documentation is unavail-

able, scheduling office staff attempt to obtain necessary information from various available sources. From receipt of supporting documentation to final determination and scheduling, the processing is now paperless.

In FY 2008, the first full year of operation, the Scheduling Office handled 72,249 calls, averaging less than 10 minutes from start to finish. More than half of the calls resulted in the scheduling of a burial while the caller was on the phone.

Timeliness of Marking Graves in National Cemeteries. We are proud that innovations by our dedicated workforce have dramatically reduced the amount of time it takes to mark the grave with a Government-furnished headstone or marker after a burial is complete. This is important to Veterans and their family members and survivors and therefore, it is important to us. The headstone or marker is a lasting memorial that serves as a focal point not only for present-day survivors but also for future generations. Our staff knows that following the death of a loved one, seeing the tangible grave marker often brings a sense of closure to the family. We make every effort to have the grave marked on the day of the interment for OEF/OIF servicemembers who die from combat-related injuries.

Of the 113,000 headstones or markers ordered for VA national cemeteries, 95 percent were placed within 60 days of interment, a significant improvement over the performance level of 49 percent in 2002. NCA is now focused on reducing the time required to mark the graves of Veterans interred in private cemeteries. In FY 2008, 215,000 headstones and markers were ordered for private cemeteries. Of these, 95 percent were ordered within 20 days from receipt of the application. This is a dramatic improvement over the FY 2007 performance of 38 percent, and also exceeds our strategic target of 90 percent.

NCA National Training Center. In order to ensure a high-performing, well-trained workforce and to meet succession planning goals, the NCA National Training Center in St. Louis was established in 2004. The Training Center emphasizes technical, supervisory and leadership training so that high quality service is provided to our Veterans and their families. The Training Center has continued to expand to train supervisors, equipment operators, grounds keepers, cemetery representatives, and other NCA staff. Additionally, we offer training to State Veteran cemetery employees to assist them to meet national shrine standards. As new national cemeteries become operational, the Training Center offers consistency in operations throughout the national cemetery system, and ensures that a high-performing workforce and a well-trained staff is prepared to fill key positions.

We are especially proud of the establishment of the Cemetery Director Intern Program, an intensive year-long program designed to develop key technical, administrative, leadership and supervisory skills and competencies. In addition to classroom training, intern candidates rotate through a series of hands-on assignments that expose them to all NCA business and operational processes. After successful completion of their internship, these individuals are prepared to assume the role of Director or Assistant Director at one of our national cemeteries. The fifth class of cemetery director intern candidates will graduate in April 2010.

Reproduction of Gettysburg Address Tablets. To commemorate the bicentennial of President Abraham Lincoln's birth, NCA has reproduced 62 historic cast-iron plaques containing the Gettysburg Address. The original Gettysburg Address tablets in national cemeteries were erected around 1909, and a second set of tablets was erected in the 1930s in national cemeteries developed between the two World Wars. These tablets will now be located at all national cemeteries to honor President Lincoln, who established the first 14 national cemeteries in 1862. Like the originals, these tablets were manufactured at Rock Island Arsenal, Illinois.

Memorial Programs Service Initiatives. Another area where NCA staff seeks to respond to those we serve is the Applicant Assistance Call Center located in Washington, D.C. The Call Center responds to approximately 1,500 calls weekly, and provides information on headstone and marker delivery status, as well as general information about Memorial Programs Service benefits. In 2002, to improve customer service and the efficiency of our headstone and marker program for Veterans buried in private cemeteries, NCA customized a paperless processing system using a toll-free fax line that allows us to receive applications electronically into our automated application processing system. In FY 2008, we received 45 percent of our applications—about 95,000 per year—in this manner, and anticipate the rate to increase. For those requesting a headstone or marker, we recently initiated a postcard notification to provide confirmation of receipt of the application and status regarding delivery date. We are also initiating a customer satisfaction survey to determine how well we are meeting our clients' needs.

First Notice of Death (FNOD). NCA has assumed responsibility from the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) for entering approximately 1,800 First Notices

of Death each day into VA information systems, which in turn update VA electronic files to terminate compensation benefits to deceased Veterans. The transfer of this Department function assists VA clients by freeing up VBA resources to focus on adjudicating and paying Veterans claims and better aligns business processes with core administration missions. An important additional benefit is a reduction in overpayments and the timely notification to next-of-kin of potential survivor benefits.

Nationwide Gravesite Locator. In 2004, NCA launched a Web-based Nationwide Gravesite Locator (NGL) system to search for the gravesite locations of deceased family members and friends, and to conduct genealogical research.

The NGL is accessed approximately 1.5 million times annually and currently contains more than 6.7 million records and is growing. It provides information on Veterans and family members buried in VA's 130 national cemeteries since the Civil War, with more recent records (1999 to the present) for burials in State Veterans cemeteries and Arlington national cemetery. To further assist Veterans and their families, we recently added information on Government-furnished headstones and markers placed in private cemeteries. Additionally, to reach more users, VA has optimized the NGL for viewing and browsing on "smart" handheld devices in response to changing needs.

Outreach Activities. Public outreach activities continue to increase with NCA participation in over 30 national conferences last year, including the National Funeral Directors Association Conference and the National Congress of American Indians 66th Annual Convention. In addition to our national outreach efforts, we participate in thousands of local events, including Town Hall meetings, community fairs, celebrations, and other civic events. We are targeting specific organizations that have day-to-day contact with homeless, indigent and women Veterans. I was pleased to represent VA at the Cremation Association of North America conference last month in Denver. Additionally, my senior staff and I conduct bi-annual meetings with Veterans Service Organization representatives to exchange information and to ensure they are informed of current NCA program initiatives.

Innovation. Consistent with our commitment to exchange ideas and best practices with State and other Federal cemeteries, we partnered with the National Park Service to test biological cleaning products on marble headstones to find products that effectively clean headstones, are user-friendly, environmentally safe, and cost-effective. Through innovations by our cemetery staff, we have received a patent on a pivotal casket carrier, developed at Rock Island National Cemetery, that allows cemetery staff to maneuver caskets easily between headstones. We are also working with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office to obtain a patent on a Mower/Trimmer device that was developed at Calverton National Cemetery. We are partnering with the private sector to identify possible commercial applications for these innovations.

Closing

Thank you again for the opportunity to come before you today. I hope my testimony answers the important question you have posed—"Honoring the Fallen: How Can We Better Serve America's Veterans and Their Families?" It is a question foremost in the minds of our dedicated workforce who on a daily basis are honored to provide memorial benefits to Veterans, their family members and survivors. I look forward to working with the Members of this Subcommittee as we jointly respond to the changing needs of those we are honored to serve.

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Washington, DC.
October 14, 2009

John C. Metzler
Superintendent
Arlington National Cemetery
Arlington, VA 22211

Dear Mr. Metzler:

Thank you for testifying at the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs oversight hearing on Honoring The Fallen: How Can We Better Serve Americas Veterans and Their Families?, held on September 24, 2009. I would greatly appreciate if you would provide answers to the enclosed followup hearing questions by Monday, November 15, 2009.

In an effort to reduce printing costs, the Committee on Veterans Affairs, in cooperation with the Joint Committee on Printing, is implementing some formatting changes for material for all Full Committee and Subcommittee hearings. Therefore, it would be appreciated if you could provide your answers consecutively on letter size paper, single-spaced. In addition, please restate the question in its entirety before the answer.

Due to the delay in receiving mail, please provide your responses to Ms. Megan Williams by fax at (202) 225–2034. If you have any questions, please call (202) 225–3608.

Sincerely,

John J. Hall
Chairman

Questions from the House Committee on Veteran's Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Oversight Hearing Honoring the Fallen: How Can We Better Serve Americas Veterans and Their Families? September 24, 2009

Question: How has Arlington National Cemetery handled instances in which a veteran's survivor(s) have requested that the burial benefit include a parent who is not otherwise eligible to be buried in ANC or a national cemetery?

a. Can such requests by the veteran be considered prior to the death of the veteran?
b. Since 2001, how often are these requests made annually?
c. In 2008 and 2009, how many have been honored? How many have been denied?

Answer: When Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) receives a request for the burial of a family member of a servicemember in the same gravesite who is already interred in ANC and the requestor does not meet current eligibility standards, we will consider an exception to the interment policy provided the family member does not occupy space set aside for the spouse, minor or unmarried adult dependent child of the servicemember, and there is space in the gravesite for the additional burial. Further the requestor is not married nor has any dependents; these types of requests have been approved.

a. Arlington National Cemetery only considers these special exceptions to the interment policy at the time of need.
b. Since 2001, the following requests were received and approved:

2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
11	9	13	11	11	4	6	6	4

2001—7 daughters and 4 sons
2002—2 mothers, 5 daughters and 2 sons
2003—1 mother, 10 daughters and 2 sons
2004—6 daughters and 5 sons
2005—7 daughters, 3 sons and 1 brother
2006—4 daughters
2007—3 daughters and 3 sons
2008—1 mother, 4 daughters and 1 son
2009—2 daughters and 2 sons

c. 10 requests were honored in 2008/2009: 6 in 2008 and 4 in 2009, no requests have been disapproved.

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Washington, DC.
October 14, 2009

Katherine Stevenson
Assistant Director, Business Services
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Ms. Stevenson:

Thank you for testifying at the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs oversight hearing on Honoring The Fallen: How Can We Better Serve Americas Veterans and Their Families?, held on September 24, 2009. I would greatly appreciate if you would provide answers to the enclosed followup hearing questions by Monday, November 15, 2009.

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Due to the delay in receiving mail, please provide your responses to Ms. Megan Williams by fax at (202) 225–2034. If you have any questions, please call (202) 225–3608.

Sincerely,

John J. Hall
Chairman

U.S. Department of the Interior
Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC.
November 13, 2009

Hon. John J. Hall
Chairman
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Enclosed is the response to a followup question for the record from the oversight hearing of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs held on September 24, 2009.

This response has been prepared by the National Park Service. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to respond to you on these matters.

Sincerely,

Christopher P. Salotti
Legislative Counsel
Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs

Enclosure

cc: Hon. Doug Lamborn, Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

Questions from the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Oversight Hearing Honoring the Fallen: How Can We Better Serve Americas Veterans and their Families? September 24, 2009

Question 1: At the hearing, the NCA reported that the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials is scheduled to meet for its biannual session in November. Has the NPS been invited to participate in this meeting?

Response: Yes, the National Park Service has been invited to attend the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials meeting in Washington, DC on November 17–18, 2009. Brad Bennett, Superintendent of Andersonville National Historic Site, will attend. Mr. Bennett has been selected to replace Fred Boyles, the previous Andersonville superintendent, on the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials.

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Washington, DC.
October 14, 2009

John Wilson
Assistant National Legislative Director
Disabled American Veterans
807 Maine Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Mr. Wilson:

Thank you for testifying at the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs oversight hearing on Honoring The Fallen: How Can We Better Serve Americas Veterans and Their Families?, held on September 24, 2009. I would greatly appreciate if you would provide answers to the enclosed followup hearing questions by Monday, November 15, 2009.

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Sincerely,

John J. Hall
Chairman

POST-HEARING QUESTIONS FOR JOHN L. WILSON, ASSISTANT NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR OF THE DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS FROM THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES SEPTEMBER 24, 2009

Oversight Hearing Honoring the Fallen: How Can We Better Serve America's Veterans and Their Families

Question 1: The Independent Budget makes clear recommendations for the NCA to include the State Grant Program funding allocation. In the IB Report for 2010, it outlined two new threshold model scenarios—one for a 65 mile radius and another for a 55 mile radius. How would reducing this standard affect the NCA budget, and has the IB forecasted the funding requirements for those options?

Response: The NCA has done an exceptional job of providing burial options for 88 percent of the 170,000 veterans who fall within a 75-mile radius-threshold model. However, under this model, no new geographical area will become eligible for a national cemetery until 2015. St. Louis, Missouri, will, at that time, meet the threshold due to the closing of Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in 2017. Analysis shows that the five areas with the highest veteran population will not become eligible for a national cemetery because they will not reach the 170,000 threshold.

The NCA has spent years developing and maintaining a cemetery system based on a growing veteran population. In 2010 our veteran population will begin to decline. Because of this downward trend, a new threshold model must be developed to ensure more of our veterans will have reasonable access to their burial benefits. Reducing the mile radius to 65 miles would reduce the veteran population that is served from 90 percent to 82.4 percent, and reducing the radius to 55 miles would reduce the served population to 74.1 percent. Reducing the radius alone to 55 miles would bring only two geographical areas into the 170,000 population threshold in 2010, and only a few areas into this revised model by 2030.

Several geographical areas will remain unserved if the population threshold is not reduced. Lowering the population threshold to 100,000 veterans would immediately make several areas eligible for a national cemetery regardless of any change to the mile radius threshold. A new threshold model must be implemented so more of our veterans will have access to this earned benefit.

Question 2: In 2002, VA reported to Congress on the independent study on Improvements to veterans cemeteries. At the time, DAV made a recommendation to fund the National Shrine Initiative. Since then, the NCA has made several repairs and undergone renovations and expansions. What has the DAV observed regarding these efforts, and what additional activities do you still see needed for 2010? 2015?

Response: The fact that $25 million was set aside for the National Shrine Commitment for fiscal year (FY) 2007 and FY 2008 is encouraging. The NCA has done an outstanding job thus far in improving the appearance of our national cemeteries, but we have a long way to go to get where we need to be. By enacting a 5-year program with dedicated funds and an ambitious schedule, the national cemetery system can fully serve all veterans and their families with the utmost dignity, respect, and compassion.

The DAV calls on the administration and Congress to provide the resources required to meet the critical nature of the NCA mission and fulfill the Nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country so honorably and faithfully. We believe Congress should provide NCA with $241.5 million for FY 2010 to offset the costs related to increased workload, additional staff needs, general inflation, and wage increases; and include as part of the NCA appropriation $50 million for the first stage of a $250 million 5-year program to restore and improve the condition and character of existing NCA cemeteries.

Question 3: Does the DAV provide transportation to national cemeteries for veterans survivors in the same way that they transport patients to VA Medical Centers?

Response: The DAV does not provide transportation to national cemeteries in the same manner as is done for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Centers. The program referred to is the Transportation Network Program. Because so many sick and disabled veterans lack transportation to and from VA health care facilities for needed treatment, DAV operates a nationwide Transportation Network. This program continues to show tremendous growth as an indispensable resource for veterans. Across the Nation, DAV Hospital Service Coordinators operate 190 active programs. They've recruited 8,532 volunteer drivers, who logged 28,136,963 miles

last year, providing 809,656 rides for veterans to and from VA health care facilities. Many of these veterans rode in vans DAV purchased and donated to VA health care facilities for use in the Transportation Network. DAV Departments and Chapters, together with the National Organization, have now donated 2,260 vans to VA health care centers nationwide at a cost of $46,610,654.

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Washington, DC.
October 14, 2009

Raymond Kelley
National Legislative Director
AMVETS
4647 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, MD 20706

Dear Mr. Kelley:

Thank you for testifying at the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs oversight hearing on Honoring The Fallen: How Can We Better Serve Americas Veterans and Their Families?, held on September 24, 2009. I would greatly appreciate if you would provide answers to the enclosed followup hearing questions by Monday, November 15, 2009.

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Sincerely,

John J. Hall
Chairman

Questions from the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Oversight Hearing Honoring the Fallen: How Can We Better Serve Americas Veterans and their Families? September 24, 2009

Question 1: The IB recommended that the NCA create two accessibility threshold models for the burial benefits: one for veterans who reside inside the threshold and another for those who live beyond it. Does the model take into account very rural and remote areas and conversely does it consider the traffic challenges in more urban congested areas?

Response: The two-model system proposal is based on the VA threshold policy of veteran population within a certain mile radius. AMVETS believes there should be a policy provision regarding the threshold model that will allow for national cemeteries to be built in areas that do not fall within the threshold model, if a natural or man-made obstacle denies veterans reasonable access to a national cemetery. For example, urban areas that may have a national cemetery within 75 miles, but the length of time that it takes to get to the cemetery from the decedents home is greater than 2 hours, or two populated areas that are within a 75 mile radius and meet the population threshold, but are separated by a land feature that causes the actual drive time to be more than 2 hours for a portion of that threshold population. Conversely, this provision should be afforded to veterans who do not have reasonable access, to include rural and remote, to a State or national cemetery regardless of any threshold models.

Question 2: Given the success of the State Cemetery Grants Program, would it be better to expand that program rather than reduce the service area standard to less than a 75 mile radius or reduce the population threshold to a point below 170,000 veterans? Or both?

Response: The mission of NCA is to provide a final resting place for our veterans. Without reducing the threshold radius model regulation, NCA will no longer be developing new cemeteries. The 2010 Priority List of Pending State and Tribal Government Cemeteries has 60 construction grant pre-applications, 36 of which already have State matching funds. VA currently has enough personnel resources to establish just a few of these State or tribal cemeteries per year. In 2009 six cemeteries were developed and in 2010 there are 13 planned. A large majority of these cemeteries will accommodate less than 25,000 veterans and many will serve just a few thousand per cemetery. Also, States like California will not provide State matching funds so relying heavily on the States Grants Program would cause certain areas to be under served. AMVETS believes it would be counter productive to rely on just one of these burial options in the future, and we would suggest that the State Grants Program be funded at the level requested by the Independent Budget and that VA reduce the population threshold to 100,000 to accommodate more densely populated areas.

Question 3: In your testimony you claimed that visitors to national cemeteries are likely to see sunken graves, deteriorating markers, and poor roads and turf that have decayed over the years. Conversely, VA reports that on the Customer Satisfaction Index, it scores amongst the highest even among private industry entities. How do you reconcile your information from that reported by VA? How often does AMVETS conduct site visits to national cemeteries?

Response: AMVETS has made countless visits to national and State cemeteries providing funeral honors; however, our testimony is not based on our evaluation of cemeteries it is based on NCAs own evaluation. In their most recent evaluation, NCA found that the percentage of properly aligned headstones and markers had fallen to 65 percent in 2008, down from 69 percent just 1 year earlier. NCA also identified 153 monuments and memorials that need repair or restoration; they currently have the financial means to correct 49 of these monuments and memorials.

To sustain the high Customer Satisfaction Index, VA must be provided the resources to continue to have our cemeteries held in the highest regard.

Question 4: If a deceased veteran has no other eligible beneficiaries at the time of his/her death, should a parent be remitted to be buried with the veteran without the need of a waiver?

Response: Historically, veterans benefits are provided to veterans and their dependents, allowing benefits to move to descendants. Allowing parents to receive veteran earned benefits would change the logical direction of transferability to ancestry. Setting a precedent of this type would open the door of ancestry transfer of benefits. AMVETS believes this would be a bad precedent to set and there are burial options that will provide military honor and accommodate the surviving parents wishes as well.

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Washington, DC.
October 14, 2009

Vivanne Cisneros Wersel
Chair, Government Relations Committee
Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.
200 N. Glebe Road, Room 425
Arlington, VA 22203

Dear Ms. Wersel:

Thank you for testifying at the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs oversight hearing on Honoring The Fallen: How Can We Better Serve Americas Veterans and Their Families?, held on September 24, 2009. I would greatly appreciate if you would provide answers to the enclosed followup hearing questions by Monday, November 15, 2009.

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size paper, single-spaced. In addition, please restate the question in its entirety before the answer.

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Sincerely,

John J. Hall
Chairman

Follow-up Questions to the September 24 hearing, Honoring the Fallen: How Can We Better Serve Americas Veterans and their Families?

Question 1: What are the most prevalent issues survivors have when they are first planning a funeral and how does VA meet those needs?

Response: Almost invariably there are questions/misunderstandings involving costs and the staging of the ceremony. It would be well for the briefers to understand this is not a time that lends itself to a great ability to focus for the widows/widowers. GSW recommends that there should be a determined extra effort to assure that the recipient understands the information received and will be able to retain it. We understand the Department of Veterans Affairs is in the process of putting together a brochure that will present this vital information, and we applaud that effort. It is important that both the costs and the ceremony protocol be written down, clearly, concisely and in print easily readable.

There are also great variances on understanding what can be put on the headstone. The one concern we heard continually was that simply listing the military facts of the life of the lost loved one on the headstone was usually not adequate emotionally for the family. The ability to put something more personal on the headstone while maintaining the look and integrity of the cemetery is important to the family, whether spouse or children or parents. Also, many widows seem to have the question of headstone markings asked right at the funeral and with the request to sign off on it at that time. This is simply not acceptable nor an appropriate time for the widow to understand the choices she may have in the decision she is making. We strongly encourage for this process to be reviewed and adjusted.

Question 2: In your testimony you noted there are geographic variances in the cost of covering a funeral. Does GSW have another proposed alternative method for providing these benefits? Please elaborate.

Response: GSW would recommend a local adjustment to the flat rate for the cost of funerals in various parts of the country. Clearly a funeral in rural mid-America is different from one in an urban setting, and one in a VA cemetery different from a privately run resting place.

We are also encouraged that the VA is studying the possibility of creating new VA cemeteries in areas that do not currently qualify under the criteria established for approval of new sites, either because none exists in the geographic are or because the current cemetery is full. This is important in assisting survivors with a burial location convenient to home.

Question 3: When survivors visit national cemeteries, are you aware of any situation where they encounter any problems with the condition of the facilities or the helpfulness of the staff?

Response: Our membership does not identify any issues of this nature.

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Washington, DC.
October 14, 2009

Lesley Witter
Director of Political Affairs
National Funeral Directors Association
400 C Street, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002

Dear Ms. Witter:

Thank you for testifying at the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs oversight hearing on Honoring The Fallen: How Can We Better Serve Americas Veterans and Their Families?, held on September 24, 2009. I would greatly appreciate if you would provide answers to the enclosed followup hearing questions by Monday, November 15, 2009.

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Sincerely,

John J. Hall
Chairman

National Funeral Directors Association
Washington, DC.
November 13, 2009

Representative John Hall
Chairman, Subcommittee on Disability and Memorial Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Hall

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs on September 24, 2009. Below you will find answers to your questions about NFDAs testimony at the oversight hearing on Honoring the Fallen: How Can We Better Serve Americas Veterans and Their Families?

1. I understand that a 2008 study found that there is a lack of knowledge about the VA burial benefits. How do you think that VA could better provide outreach targeted to funeral home directors and to families?

While it is possible that there is a general lack of knowledge about veterans benefits, NFDA is confident that funeral directors are very knowledgeable about veterans funeral and burial benefits. NFDA works diligently to keep our members informed and educated about issues relating to veterans funeral and burial benefits, and they in turn serve as a conduit of benefit information for Veterans families. Some possible avenues of targeted outreach for the VA may be with groups that provide services and educational programs to veterans and their families prior to their death.

2. In the study the NFDA conducted in preparation for this hearing, did you survey all 19,000 of your members? How many responded? What is the total number of funeral home directors in America?

Our research indicates that there are approximately 105,668 people working in the funeral service industry. 70,669 are non-licensed funeral service personnel and 35,000 are licensed personnel, such as funeral directors and embalmers.

NFDA completed a non-scientific survey of our membership regarding their personal experiences and opinions on how we can better serve our veterans and their families. The purpose of our study was to survey our members regarding their viewpoint on funeral benefits offered to Veteran families, and to get personal anecdotes and experiences about working with the Veteran Affairs and the Department of Defense. This was done via a Web-based study which was sent to approximately 7,700 NFDA members. A survey invitation containing a link to the online survey was posted in NFDAs electronic newsletter, *The Bulletin*. A reminder was also posted in *The Bulletin* 1 week after the initial invitation was sent.

This effort yielded a total of 60 completed interviews with a margin of error of ±12.6 percent. NFDA believes that despite the low response rate, the responses provided are similar to the experiences of our membership as a whole and is therefore a representative sample. Given this margin of error, the results provided by our survey were provided in testimony for directional purposes only and are only an indication of respondents opinions.

a. According to your informal survey, VA overall was responsive to funeral home directors. How did you define responsive? Has there been a difference regarding VAs communication with funeral home directors since the institution of its electronic records system and new call center?

As you know, our survey indicated that the majority of funeral directors are satisfied with the responsiveness of the VA. Most funeral directors felt the VA and DoD were either extremely responsive (22.0 percent) or very responsive (57.6 percent) to funeral directors. As this was not a scientific survey, we did not define satisfied. Instead, respondents were asked to rate how responsive the VA and DoD were to funeral directors by using response categories of extremely responsive, very responsive, somewhat responsive, not very responsive, and not at all responsive.

3. About one-third of your members were experiencing difficulties with VA burial benefits and 66 percent said that benefit was insufficient. How would you recommend that VA improve its current burial benefit?

The majority of funeral directors surveyed indicated that the current funeral and burial benefit is insufficient because of how it impacts the families of veterans. In an effort to relieve the financial strain on veteran families, NFDA respectfully suggests that Congress enact legislation to adjust these burial benefits for inflation annually.

At its inception, the funeral and burial benefits covered approximately 72 percent of the funeral costs for a service-connected death and 22 percent for a non-service-connected death. However, NFDA estimates that the current national average cost for a funeral and burial in a private cemetery has reached $7,323, and the cost for a burial plot is $2,133. The current VA payment is either $2,000 for service-connected deaths on or after September 11, 2001, or $1,500 for burial expenses for service-connected deaths prior to September 10, 2001. For nonservice-connected deaths the VA will pay up to $300 toward burial and funeral expenses and a $300 plot-interment allowance for deaths on or after December 1, 2001. The plot-interment allowance is $150 for deaths prior to December 1, 2001.

As you can see from these figures, the current VA benefits do not come close to covering the current cost of a funeral or burial. This means that veteran families are forced to make up the difference, or funeral directors must donate their time and services to a veteran family who cannot afford the difference between actual cost and VA benefit amount.

In addition to concerns about how the amount of the current funeral/burial benefit affect veteran families, several NFDA members expressed concern about the complexity of benefits offered. As one NFDA member put it there are too many variables, such as plot allowance, transportation, stone engraving, etc. If a veteran dies, there should simply be a lump sum payment made to the family to reimburse a portion of their funeral expenses without categorizing it. And simplifying the application would help as well. Additionally, other survey respondents indicated that the 48 hour time requirement for family members to locate discharge papers and the long delays in processing paperwork can be problematic for both funeral directors and families.

a. At the hearing, Gold Star Wives alluded to the geographic variances in funeral and burial expenses. Do you think VA should provide a locality adjustment based on the rural or urban nature of the community or whether the veteran

had resided outside of the NCA service area standard? If so, how should that adjustment be determined?

Like any other good or service, funeral and burial costs are affected by the standard of living in a particular area. There is no doubt the funeral and burial costs in certain metropolitan areas are significantly higher than those same services in more rural areas. There are a variety of reasons for the discrepancy in costs, but in order to ensure equity among veterans, NFDA supports the notion that the VA should provide a locality adjustment based on the rural or urban nature of the community or whether the veteran had resided outside of the NCA service area standard.

b. Do funeral homes not accept VAs allowance when it is insufficient for covering the cost of the veteran's funeral? What do veteran's families do when they cannot afford a funeral service or burial?

Families have the option of burying their loved one in a veterans cemetery for no cost; however, families often chose to bury their loved one in a private cemetery because of logistical issues like traveling to visit the gravesite. If a family chooses a funeral and burial in a private cemetery, the cost is obviously higher. In this case the family can elect a funeral package that costs the exact amount of the VA benefit. Alternatively, the family can elect to pay any charges over the amount of the VA benefit, or chose a cheaper funeral and burial plan. In many instances, the funeral director will offer additional goods and services to the family at no cost as a way to honor the veteran's service. The average dollar amount absorbed by funeral directors per veteran funeral was $652. However, the range of costs absorbed was between $25 and $3,000. Some of the costs absorbed by funeral directors include service fees, casket and vault costs, transfer costs of remains to funeral home, embalming and other preparation of the body, fees for the use of the hearse, and charges associated with buglers and flag cases etc.

4. In your support of H.R. 2642, you noted that funeral home directors are aware of circumstances in which a veteran's remains would be unclaimed or abandoned. Is there a process for referring these situations to VA and are there situations in which VA has not responded to such a request?

The average number of unclaimed cremated remains at respondents' funeral homes was 6.21. These remains are often those of someone who dies without assets and without family or friends to pay for their funeral. There is a risk that veterans whose remains are unclaimed, may be buried in indigent graves instead of receiving the funeral they earned because of their service to our country.

Unfortunately, there is not a standard process for referring these situations to the VA, so it is up to funeral directors or some other entity to contact the VA to see if the unclaimed remains are those of veterans. When a VA representative is contacted and is not able to verify veteran status from computer records, a process is activated to investigate further, which includes gaining assistance from the VA Records Management Center or the National Personnel Records Center where veterans' military records are stored. Generally, the VA will pay an allowance to the person or entity who paid for the veteran's funeral or benefit, if he or she has not been reimbursed by another Government agency, or some other source, such as the veteran's employer. There is no time limit for claiming reimbursement for a service connected death, but non-service connected reimbursement claims must be filed within 2 years of the veteran's burial.

NFDA supports Mr. Tiberi's bill, H.R. 2642, because it directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to work with veterans service groups and other organizations to provide assistance in determining if unidentified or abandoned remains are those of a veteran eligible for burial at a national cemetery. In addition, the bill requires the Secretary to establish a searchable public database of the veterans identified in this project. If remains are found to be those of an eligible veteran, the VA will provide the burial.

Sincerely,

Lesley Witter
Director of Political Affairs

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Washington, DC.
October 14, 2009

Marilyn Park
Legislative Representative
American Federation of Government Employees
80 F Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Ms. Park:

Thank you for testifying at the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs oversight hearing on Honoring The Fallen: How Can We Better Serve America's Veterans and Their Families?, held on September 24, 2009. I would greatly appreciate if you would provide answers to the enclosed followup hearing questions by Monday, November 15, 2009.

In an effort to reduce printing costs, the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, in cooperation with the Joint Committee on Printing, is implementing some formatting changes for material for all Full Committee and Subcommittee hearings. Therefore, it would be appreciated if you could provide your answers consecutively on letter-size paper, single-spaced. In addition, please restate the question in its entirety before the answer.

Due to the delay in receiving mail, please provide your responses to Ms. Megan Williams by fax at (202) 225–2034. If you have any questions, please call (202) 225–3608.

Sincerely,

John J. Hall
Chairman

Responses by John Nicolai
Ft. Logan National Cemetery on Behalf of AFGE
To Questions from the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Oversight Hearing Honoring the Fallen: How Can We Better
Serve America's Veterans and Their Families?
September 24, 2009

Question 1: The jobs performed at the NCA are varied, but all contribute to the cemeteries' abilities to meet the National Shrine Mandate and produce high satisfaction scores. What has the NCA done to train staff and improve performance?

Response: I am not aware of any formal training exists for interment drivers and caretakers–two positions regularly lost to contracting out. Most of the training done at Fort Logan National Cemetery has been on the job training as far as I know. There is a cursory record kept of experiential training done for the grounds crews. I do not know how often it is updated or whose responsibility it is, the workers or Management, to keep track of the time spent in OJT.

In contrast, the Interment Operators are usually sent to a training facility in Illinois. Of the four Cemetery Representatives, two have been sent to the training facility in St. Louis.

Question 2: Are there different performance standards for NCA employees as opposed to services performed by contractors?

Response: To the best of my knowledge, yes, NCA employees are held to different, and higher performance standards than contractors. As an observer it is quite clear that the contractors are only there to do a job and do not share the behavioral concerns of the permanent employees. Examples follow:

Because there is no permanent structure for the employees of the subcontractors, the cemetery grounds is the only place to take a break or eat their lunch. They gather around the shade of a tree and take their breaks. Because they have no vehicles to go elsewhere there is no choice offered to them to do anything different. *But it is certainly unsightly and a concern when a committal service procession drives by on their way to a committal service for our fallen veterans to see contract workers having lunch on the cemetery grounds, especially when there a rule against pic-*

nicking for our visitors. I believe this only happens because contract workers do not have the same connection to and sense of honor about the cemetery grounds as NCA employees, most of whom are veterans.

The subcontractor employees usually come to work on foot or bike. When they need to use a restroom they either walk or ride their bikes to and from the location they are working. At times they do not observe that there is a procession coming up behind them and we have to stop the procession in order to avoid running into them.

There have been issues with inappropriate dress. A subcontract worker was working without a shirt. Another was seen wearing a t-shirt with that said Get Naked, clearly a phrase that was not appropriate for work attire in this environment.

The mowing and trimming done on the cemetery by the subcontractors is substandard. Having been responsible for doing these tasks, as a cemetery caretaker, it is clear the subcontractors are not held to the same standards. Quite often there are windrows of cut grass in the cemetery burial sections and the headstones, even though they were trimmed, are not well trimmed.

Many times the contract administrator has had to be called and asked to have the mowers move to another section or turn their machines off during committal services because of the noise. *The FTE employees were always keenly aware of the need for peace and quiet when in the proximity of a committal service.*

Often times, when mowing is done in the vicinity of the committal shelters the cut grass is left on the sidewalks and not cleaned up. We then have to have our own employees clean the sidewalks.

The headstone setting contract has just been implemented. There is not enough data to discuss what might possibly be considered a different standard. *It appears the deadline for a few headstones to be set has already been missed.*

Question 3: How has the use of contractors changed? Has this negatively impacted the NCA services? Please elaborate.

Response: Contracting previously was used for specific specialty situations which could not be adequately done by the Full Time (FTE) VA employees. Within the last few years this has changed to contracting to do the work previously done by FTE. Mowing and Trimming, Sod Laying, and Headstone setting are all being subcontracted out a Ft. Logan National Cemetery. *Using contractors instead of veterans working for NCA and other dedicated NCA employees on a regular basis for daily tasks has seriously weakened morale, and is altering and diluting the sacred atmosphere of Ft. Logan in ways already discussed, for example, mowing too close to a service or taking their lunch break on the cemetery grounds.*

These subcontracts were let to supposedly allow the Full Time Cemetery Caretakers to concentrate on other things to help bring the Cemeteries up to National Shrine Status, but I am not aware of any study or analysis to justify this alleged reallocation of work. In reality, the subcontracting made it unnecessary for the VA to backfill positions that were vacated due to retirement, promotion or simply an employee quitting or having been relieved of duty. In other words subcontracting out work previously done by FTE Cemetery Caretakers has been done through attrition.

Question 4: Is feedback and suggestions for improvements from employees solicited in a consistent and cohesive manner across all facilities?

Response: Management does not regularly or consistently solicit feedback or suggestions from employees. When I made a comment regarding the recently installed call center and a suggestion, I was told, via email, that I have no idea how busy they were suggesting I should probably not say or complain about anything.

Question 5: What business practices do you see at the NCA that contribute to the overall effectiveness of the program?

Response: This is a perception question. I would assume the management of NCA would answer: the consolidation of scheduling, having instituted the St. Louis Call Center. I am sure this has been a benefit to management in regards to getting a better handle on the numbers game for strategic planning.

The call center may be an improvement for some of the cemeteries but the empirical evidence at Ft. Logan has demonstrated a *considerable downside in terms of customer satisfaction*. The use of the call center creates an additional layer that leads to more errors and delays. In addition, to serve veterans and their families properly, the cemetery staff should, but is not always treated as a customer of the call center.

For example, the information that is passed from the call center to the cemetery representatives is cursory. Because of the nature of a call center, their apparent goal is to get the info in and info out, as fast as they can. Because of the volume there is no time for detail. Prior to the call center being established Ft. Logan did its own scheduling and detail was considered important for many reasons. Most im-

portant is the veteran and their families we are serving. Providing the family with correct information at the time of the service is of utmost importance. We strove for perfection. This moment is one of the most difficult times in ones life. To provide the family a depiction of what will be on their loved ones headstone and have it be wrong adds to their grief.

Since the call center has taken over scheduling and data input there have been more errors on the paperwork than is acceptable. In the past the information was faxed to Ft. Logan on a form that was all inclusive. As soon as the form was faxed to Ft. Logan, a cemetery representative would call the funeral director, who was nine times out of ten, sitting with the family awaiting our call. Every body was on the same page and we could get most all of the questions we had answered in order to provide a complete package at the time of the service.

Because the information was in writing we had a document to refer back to if there was a mistake made. The funeral home and family could then schedule a church service to accommodate the schedule at Ft. Logan. It was a cooperative effort including all parties.

The way things are handled now are different. The calls are made to the call center by the funeral home. I have been told there are many times the caller is on hold for long periods (keep in mind the grieving family is also being held up) or the phone is busy. I am not saying this is always the case but it happens more often than it should.

When the call is made the information is taken verbally and input into the BOSS system. If there is a mistake, there is nothing to reference that made the mistake (call center vs. funeral home). Once the case has been scheduled it is passed on to a quality control person (another delay) and eventually transferred to the cemetery in charge of the case as well as emailed to the funeral home representing the deceased. The information on the deceased that is entered into the BOSS system by the call center is most often incomplete. Religious emblems, social security numbers, ranks of veterans, and a host of other pertinent information needed to provide a correct monument for the deceased may be missing. The cemetery representative then will call the funeral home to verify receipt of the scheduled burial.

By the time we have received notification of the scheduled burial the family has left the funeral home, the funeral director who is handling the case is not available and all we can do is leave a message that we need the information. Because we are also in and out of the office coordinating services at committal shelters, the game of phone tag proceeds. Sometimes we never get the answer and have to deal with the family at the time of the service, one of the worst days of some peoples lives.

Other problems that are associated with the call center include:

- Confusion regarding caskets vs. cremains: Several times we have been informed we have a casket coming to the cemetery and when the procession arrives it has been a cremation. The reverse is also true. Our form of the past was specific in its request.
- Double booking of services: Two services have been scheduled for the same time at the same shelter.
- Wrong phone numbers: There are times when a family will pick up their loved ones cremains from the funeral home and make arrangements themselves in order to save money. If the incorrect phone number is given or there is a typo there is no way to get in touch with the next of kin in order to prepare them for arriving at the correct location or time at the cemetery. When this has occurred in the past I called the call center and was told there was nothing they could do but wait for the next of kin to arrive.
- Military Honors: At Ft. Logan we usually made sure military honors had been ordered either by the funeral home or by the family. It is no longer a sure thing this has taken place because we have lost control of being able to be the first contact with the funeral home or the next of kin.
- Loss of rapport: Because we had control of the scheduling the funeral home directors awaited our calls. We usually called them back within 5 minutes of their faxing the application. Now it is, in their minds, unnecessary to have any contact with us until the service of which they may or may not attend. In most cases this is not a problem because we have had relationships with the funeral directors for years and there is considerable mutual respect amongst the employees of Ft. Logan and the directors. It does have an impact with new directors and is beginning to present problems at the time of a veterans committal service. Additionally, because of the increase in cremations Ft. Logan is experiencing more and more services without the presence of a funeral director. The more information we can get about the family of the deceased the better to insure their loved ones service is done as expected. "As expected" is whatever the funeral director tells them. The employees at the call center having to handle

several different cemeteries can hardly understand the nuances of each cemetery. The cemetery representatives of each National Cemetery have an intimate understanding of their respective locations.

- Subsequent burials: There have been a few times when we get an application for burial and have completed the task only to find out the deceased had another family member already buried in our cemetery. Once again because of lack of experience, therefore not asking the right questions and having to deal with so many different cemeteries, a particularly egregious error was made. The only way we found the error was when a family member called to ask why the two family members were not buried in the same grave. This resulted in a disinterment and re-interment in the correct burial plot.
- When the call center took over the FTE Cemetery Representatives responsibilities (a change of work condition which is a violation of the union contract) of establishing burial eligibility, establishing cases, and scheduling burials we were given a feedback form to assist the call center in error abatement. Because the errors continued and were so consistent we determined it was better for us to just correct them and stop wasting our time trying to remedy the situation. The individuals who man the positions in the call center are interns and are replaced by new interns at certain intervals. The learning curve starts over, of course, with each new class of interns.
- There is a possibility the work being done is redundant in that it now takes four individuals to do the task formerly done by two individuals: (1) the representative at the call center, (2) the quality control senior representative, who checks their work (3) the cemetery representative at the National Cemetery and (4) the senior representative, who checks their work. This is done with less accuracy and takes more time than initially done by the representatives at the local cemeteries.

Question 6: What additional steps can be taken to improve employee retention and make the NCA an employer of choice?

Response: The first step, to improve employee retention, is to stop the threat and practice of outsourcing their jobs. A one time fully staffed cemetery caretaker crew has been reduced from ten Full Time Employee positions to three Full Time Employees. The drop in employee morale, caused by this reduction, is obvious. It is not just affecting the cemetery caretakers. It is affecting all employees. It is obvious the intent of the NCA senior management is to replace these blue collar jobs. The interment crew thinks it is just a matter of time for their positions to be outsourced in spite of the assurance by management it won't happen.

Acting Assistant Secretary Muro testified at the hearing that, at new national cemeteries, all caretaker and interment work is done by contractors, instead of veterans employed by NCA. These are very honorable jobs that should be included in every National Cemetery and offered as a place for a veteran to make a living serving those who served. I started working at Ft. Logan National Cemetery at the age of fifty three as a Cemetery Caretaker. I did this after working most of my life in a white collar job in corporate America. Any new bill passed to establish a new National Cemetery should include a clause stating the first choice of jobs to be filled in a new cemetery should be offered to our veterans. ***I cannot describe the immense pride I take in having done that job.***

Another step in making NCA an employer of choice is to initiate management training that includes a motivation class of some sort. There are times in my past experience working at FLNC I have witnessed workers treated as if they are some sort of second class citizen. It appears there needs to be some classes taught to management regarding mutual respect and how to motivate people.

Finally, for every job opening in an existing cemetery, and every new position made available through the opening of a new cemetery, NCA should be required to conduct outreach to veterans through the veterans community and through VHA and VBA support programs. Advertising these jobs should go beyond the Government Web site to alert the availability of work at these hallowed grounds.

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Washington, DC.
October 14, 2009

Steve L. Muro
Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
National Cemetery Administration
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Mr. Muro:

Thank you for testifying at the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs oversight hearing on Honoring The Fallen: How Can We Better Serve Americas Veterans and Their Families?, held on September 24, 2009. I would greatly appreciate if you would provide answers to the enclosed followup hearing questions by Monday, November 15, 2009.

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Due to the delay in receiving mail, please provide your responses to Ms. Megan Williams by fax at (202) 225–2034. If you have any questions, please call (202) 225–3608.

Sincerely,

John J. Hall
Chairman

Questions for the Record
The Honorable John Hall, Chairman
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Honoring the Fallen: How Can We Better Serve
Americas Veterans and Their Families?
September 24, 2009

Questions 1: At the hearing, there was some discussion on the NCAs four Strategic Plan Goals that are reported in the VA Performance and Accountability Report. These were reviewed by the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials in its 2008 report. The Advisory Committee made 16 recommendations to which VA responded. Several of these items required additional followup. Can you provide a summary of the followup actions VA has taken in response to those recommendations?

Response: Please see the attached table of Advisory Committee recommendations, which were previously submitted to the House Committee on Veterans Affairs. The table also provides the status of followup action, where applicable.

Question 2: In the VA Performance and Accountability Report, NCA did not meet its 80 percent target of funeral home directors confirming that it scheduled committal services within 2 hours. The NCA response rate was indicated at 72 percent. What is the plan to improve performance and what steps are being taken to ensure better accountability?

Response: NCA measures the efficiency of scheduling committal services at national cemeteries through its annual Survey of Satisfaction. Funeral director respondents are asked, How long does it typically take to confirm the scheduling of an interment at the national cemetery? NCAs strategic target is to have 93 percent of funeral directors respond that services are scheduled within 2 hours of the request. Since 2004, performance on this measure has remained relatively steady, ranging from 72 percent to 74 percent. In FY 2009, the average was 77 percent when the Memorial Service Network that has not fully transitioned to the National Scheduling Office, was taken out of the calculation. This demonstrates that perform-

ance is higher for those areas of the country currently served by the Scheduling Office. Once all cemeteries are under the Scheduling Office, and we have moved beyond the learning curve for funeral directors, we anticipate NCA performance will steadily improve and that we will ultimately reach our goal of 93 percent.

NCA is working to improve performance in this area. In January 2007, NCA established a National Scheduling Office in St. Louis, Missouri. This centralized office provides a one-stop call center and a streamlined, standardized process of determining burial eligibility and interment scheduling to better serve the needs of Veterans, their families and funeral directors. In addition, the National Scheduling Office has staff available to confirm eligibility and schedule services 7 days a week. In FY 2008, the Scheduling Office handled 72,249 requests for burial. The average time to confirm eligibility and schedule the service was less than 10 minutes. When burial requests from Riverside N/C NCAs busiest cemetery— are processed by the Scheduling Office, beginning on January 18, 2010, all interment scheduling for VA national cemeteries in the continental United States will be completed by the experts at the Scheduling Office in St. Louis, and NCA anticipates improved performance.

Implementation of centralized scheduling was a significant change in business practice for NCA. Letters explaining the new process were sent to all funeral homes who partner with NCA to serve Veterans and their families, and implementation has proceeded in a phased approach across the NCA system. NCA anticipates that as the National Scheduling Office becomes fully operational and other scheduling enhancements, such as requests for services through the Internet, are developed, more funeral directors will respond that scheduling meets our 2-hour target.

Question 3: Please explain why the NCA replaces damaged headstones or markers at Arlington National Cemetery, but not for eligible veterans' graves at the National Park Service sites.

Response: NCA provides original and replacement headstones and markers for all Federally-administered cemeteries, which includes all VA national cemeteries, all Department of Defense national cemeteries (Arlington and the Soldier and Airmens Home, military post or base cemeteries of the Armed Forces, and service department academy cemeteries), and all Department of Interior National Park Service (NPS) Cemeteries. NCA also provides headstones and markers for State Veterans cemeteries and for all eligible Veterans buried in private cemeteries. We will contact management at the NPS to ensure it is aware of the process through which NCA supports the ordering of new or replacement headstones or markers for NPS cemeteries.

Question 4: Does the NCA have specific guidance it provides to the State cemeteries on accommodating particular religious or cultural burial practices, such as for graveside services? Please explain those policies and how they are communicated to the States and enforced? Is there more that needs to be done to make sure that these accommodations are honored?

Response: NCA encourages the provision of similar levels of service at national and State Veterans cemeteries by offering the States training opportunities at the NCA St. Louis Training Center and invitations to participate at NCA National and Memorial Service Network (MSN) Conferences. However, under VA regulations, the States may have differing facilities, such as chapels; may restrict eligibility to residents of the State; and may undertake differing operating procedures, such as graveside services, which are rarely performed at national cemeteries.

Due to concerns for the safety of cemetery workers and the public in active interment areas, NCA provides covered committal shelters for conducting final committal services. However, exceptions are made to accommodate religious practices and ceremonies, and States are encouraged to accommodate family member requests based on cultural and religious beliefs whenever possible.

Question 5: If a veteran with no other eligible dependents is buried in a national cemetery and his/her only survivor is a parent(s), who is not a veteran or otherwise entitled to burial in a national cemetery, should that parent be made eligible for burial with the veteran?

Response: If a parent is not a Veteran, section 2402(6) of title 38, United States Code, permits the Secretary to designate other persons or classes of persons as eligible for burial. Requests for burial of a non-Veteran parent are reviewed on a case-by-case basis. In 2007 and 2008, the Secretary approved two separate requests for the burial of a deceased parent in the same grave as an unmarried, childless servicemember who died as a result of wounds incurred in combat. Neither deceased servicemember had a surviving spouse or dependent children who, if deceased, were eligible for burial in a national cemetery, or who were already interred in the gravesite.

VA supports expanding eligibility to parents of certain servicemembers as indicated in VAs Hearing Statement at the October 8, 2009, House Committee on Veterans Affairs, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Legislative Hearing. We note that, on October 21, 2009, the Subcommittee amended the text of H.R. 761 to reflect VA concerns, and voted to approve the revised legislation, which has subsequently been incorporated as section 303 of H.R. 3949, the Veterans' Small Business Assistance and Servicemembers Protection Act of 2009.

Question 6: How has the NCA handled instances in which a veterans survivor(s) have requested that the burial benefit include a parent who is not otherwise eligible to be buried in a national cemetery?

Response: Section 2402(6) of title 38, United States Code, permits the Secretary to designate other persons or classes of persons as eligible for burial. For all such requests, VA determines if granting the request would result in reduced national cemetery burial space for other eligible Veterans. Such requests have only been approved if the Veteran did not have a surviving spouse or a dependent child who, if deceased, would be eligible for burial in a national cemetery, or who was already interred in the gravesite.

Question 6(a): Can such requests by veterans be considered prior to the death of the veteran?

Response: NCA policy is to permit the burial of an otherwise ineligible parent only if the burial would not reduce the number of national cemetery gravesites available for other eligible Veterans. This requires that a parent be buried in the same gravesite as the Veteran. However, a Veterans eligibility for national cemetery burial cannot be determined until the Veteran has died. Therefore, no request by a Veteran can be considered before the Veterans death. As VA testified at the October 8, 2009, legislative hearing before the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, VA could support the extension of burial eligibility to the parents of unmarried and childless Veterans who die due to combat- or training-related injuries. These limitations would help ensure that the burial of an eligible Veteran's otherwise ineligible parent does not reduce the number of gravesites available for other eligible Veterans. However, even in those circumstances, VA cannot consider a parent's eligibility until VA determines that the Veteran is eligible, and VA cannot determine the Veterans eligibility until the Veteran dies.

Question 6(b): Since 2001, how often are these requests made annually since 2001?

Response: Since 2001, there have been 16 requests for burial of otherwise ineligible parents in national cemetery gravesites. Many of these requests were for the burial of dependent parents of Veterans who died from non-combat-related injuries. In all cases, NCA considered whether granting the request would reduce the number of national cemetery burial sites available for other eligible Veterans.

Question 6(c): In 2008 and 2009, how many have been honored? How many have been denied?

Response: During 2008–2009, NCA approved two requests for the burial of deceased parent(s) with Veterans who died from combat-related injuries who had no eligible spouse or dependent children. One combat-related waiver request was denied because the deceased Veteran had a living spouse and children eligible for burial. Therefore, granting the request for parent burial would have diminished burial capacity for other eligible family members and Veterans.

Question 7: In your testimony you described several impressive innovations undertaken by NCA employees. Does VA Research and Development funding assist NCA in these types of projects? And, if so, how many? If not, why not?

Response: NCA does not receive assistance from VA Research and Development (R&D) funding. NCA supports innovations through funding provided by its Operations and Maintenance account.

Question 8: According to the Missing in America Project, there are potentially thousands of unclaimed veterans cremated remains being stored in urns at mortuaries, coroners offices, and hospitals across the country. Besides the VA Web site, what outreach has it conducted to these entities in order to identify abandoned veterans?

Response: VA has worked with and continues to assist the Missing in America Project (MIAP), as well as coroners offices, and conducts outreach to funeral industry professionals on the national and local level, to ensure VA memorial benefits are provided to unclaimed Veterans identified through MIAP efforts. Since January 2007 we have processed over 500 MIAP requests to establish burial eligibility. Nationally, NCA attended the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association conference (Detroit, Michigan), the International Cemetery Cremation and Funeral Association conference (Las Vegas, Nevada), the 127th Annual Funeral Directors

Association of Kentucky State Convention (Louisville, Kentucky), and the National Funeral Directors Association convention (Boston, Massachusetts). Nationwide, VA cemetery directors and Memorial Service Network staff conduct outreach to local funeral homes and other industry professionals on a daily basis.

Question 8(a): Since these are primarily cremated remains and the FBI cannot match fingerprints, what does VA do to ensure that the unclaimed remains of veterans do not remain unclaimed?

Response: NCA requires a minimal amount of information regarding the identity of the deceased to initiate an eligibility determination. Where the remains are identified but unclaimed, NCA will work with coroners offices and will search sources including VAs regional benefits offices, hospitals, and medical facilities, to locate any records that could assist with establishing Veteran status. If unsuccessful, NCA will then contact Federal, State and local Government agencies to obtain military service information. NCA will always reopen a case if new evidence supporting Veteran status is uncovered at a future date because its goal is to ensure that those Veterans who are entitled to burial in a national cemetery are honored with a final resting place in a national shrine.

Strategic Goal	FY 2007-2008 Advisory Committee Recommendations	VA Response Previously Provided to House Veterans' Affairs Committee	Status of Actionable Recommendations
Goal 1: Ensure that the burial needs of veterans and eligible family members are met.	***Recommendation 1.1:*** The Committee asks that VA contact the Federal Aviation Administration on behalf of VA, the National Park Service and State veterans cemeteries to develop policies to reduce increasing noise levels at veterans cemeteries due to the low flying aircraft.	***Non-Actionable:*** VA believes that noise from low flying aircraft near national cemeteries is a minor problem associated with specific aircraft in isolated events and is not, on the whole, a major inconvenience for visitors or staff. In locations where noise levels are excessive and persistent, NCA will work with the appropriate authorities, to include the Federal Aviation Administration, to reduce noise levels.	*N/A*
	Recommendation 1.2: The Committee recommends that NCA determine the feasibility to produce 10" x 4" x 42" shields and raised letter headstone to replace Civil War era headstones.	***Actionable:*** VA supports this initiative and NCAs Memorial Programs Service is developing new specifications to be available for FY 2008. There are two sizes of marble headstones with raised lettering in a recessed shield; 12" x 42" x 3" and 13" x 42" x 3". NCA has begun introducing a third size for this type of historical headstone, which will be 10" x 42" x 3". This new headstone will be available for use beginning on October 1, 2007.	*These headstones are now available through NCAs Memorial Programs Service. NCA has provided over 500 of these headstones to the National Park Services Andersonville National Cemetery.*

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Goal 1 cont'd: Ensure that the burial needs of veterans and eligible family members are met.	***Recommendation 1.3:*** The Committee recommends that the burial allowance be increased to further offset the cost of veteran's burial in State veteran's cemeteries under the provisions of the State Cemetery Grants Program.	***Actionable:*** VA has contracted a private consulting firm to undertake a program evaluation of all memorial benefits, including the burial and plot allowances. When available, the study will be provided to the Advisory Committee.	*The "Evaluation of the VA Burial Benefits Program" was delivered to VA by the contractor in August 2008. VA has reviewed the study's recommendations. If any changes to current burial policies are proposed, they would be included in a future budget request.*
	Recommendation 1.4: The Committee recommends that the State Cemetery Grants Program funding be increased from $32 million to $50 million, beginning in FY 2009.	***Actionable:*** VA recognizes the contributions of State veteran's cemeteries in helping to meet the need for memorial benefits in areas not served by an open VA national cemetery. The President's FY 2009 budget will be submitted to Congress in February 2008. VA carefully analyzes its budget request to ensure its adequacy to meet the benefits needs for all VA programs. We believe the final budget request for the State Cemetery Grants Program will be sufficient to meet future demands.	*In FY 2009, NCA's State Cemetery Grants Program budget was $42 million. In FY2010, $46 million was appropriated for the Grants Program.*
	Recommendation 1.5: The Advisory Committee urges NCA to contact the "Trust for Public Lands" to study strategic opportunities to purchase land for future national cemeteries.	***Actionable:*** NCA recognizes the importance of developing a proactive strategy to purchase land for future national cemeteries and to ensure the continuation of national cemeteries currently in service. Any entity that can assist NCA in purchasing available property for future national cemeteries is welcomed. NCA is developing a list of site needs to determine which cemeteries have immediate, short-term and long-term acquisition needs. After NCA has developed the list, it would be appropriate to contact the Trust for Public Lands for any assistance that it can provide and to see if any public land is available to meet NCA's goal.	*NCA's Cemetery Development Coordinator has established contacts and a working relationship with the Trust for Public Lands and is actively seeking its assistance to identify possible land for new national cemeteries or expansion of current national cemeteries.*

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Goal 2: Provide veterans and their families with symbolic expressions of remembrance.	***Recommendation 2.1:*** Acknowledge the Committee's support of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) "Veterans Pride Initiative," in which veterans are encouraged to wear their military medals on Veterans Day, Memorial Day, and other national holidays.	***Non-Actionable:*** The Department appreciates the Committee's support. Endorsement by Committee members and other influential citizens will be needed to help build recognition, support, and participation in this initiative.	*N/A*
	Recommendation 2.2: The Committee suggests that the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) advise Congress to review the proposed use of a "V" device attached to private markers of veterans interred in private cemeteries as described in H.R. 797 Bronze "V" Marker Option. The Committee feels that the public will be confused by the "V" or not understand what it represents and suggests that instead of a "V" that the word "Veteran" be considered. The military uses a similar "V"-device with military medals to denote valor.	***Actionable:*** The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has notified the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs of concerns related to the design of an appropriate device and is prepared to offer technical assistance if the Committee requests it.	*The Committee's recommendation resulted in a revision to the proposed legislation. The final legislation, Public Law 110–157, did not contain the bronze "V" language but instead gave VA authority to provide a medallion or other device to signify the deceased's status as a veteran to be affixed to privately purchased headstones and markers in private cemeteries. The medallion design is being finalized and product availability is anticipated in 2010.*

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Goal 3: Ensure that national cemeteries are maintained as national shrines, dedicated to preserving our Nation's history, nurturing patriotism, and honoring the service and sacrifice veterans have made.	***Recommendation 3.1:*** The Committee commends NCA and the National Park Service for their joint Global Positioning System mapping of Alexandria, Virginia, National Cemetery and recommends that this be considered for future use by NCA.	***Actionable:*** VA recognizes the benefits of Global Positioning System (GPS) integration within its national cemeteries to help manage, preserve and document the historic landscapes and buildings maintained by NCA, as well as to locate underground utilities, emergency shutoff, and irrigation systems, to name a few, and plans to expand its use. VA believes that combined with new-construction applications, this technology is an outstanding tool for tracking the evolution of burials, VA capital assets and historic features. In order to begin GPS integration at the cemeteries, NCA introduced "GPS Integration" as a funding line item for all new cemetery construction for fiscal year 2008 Major category construction projects and expanded to all cemeteries with the fiscal year 2009 Major construction plan (except Puerto Rico National Cemetery, which is projected to close by 2019). As funding permits, NCA intends to apply GPS integration at the initial cemeteries.	*NCA's intent is to place into service a complete GPS system that is capable of precisely locating (in three-dimensional space) monuments, benchmarks, section markers, individual grave sites, control components of underground utility systems, underground utility lines, roadways, and numerous other site features.*
	Recommendation 3.2: That NCA investigate the possibility of developing cooperating associations to allow for retail sales of theme related products to further the support by the public for national cemeteries.	***Non-Actionable:*** Although VA is not interested at this time in pursuing retail sales at VA national cemeteries, we will look into possible products appropriate for sale at our facilities. However, legislation would be required to provide authority for NCA to sponsor or endorse sale of retail items.	*N/A*

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Goal 3 cont'd: Ensure that national cemeteries are maintained as national shrines, dedicated to preserving our Nation's history, nurturing patriotism, and honoring the service and sacrifice veterans have made.	***Recommendation 3.3:*** That NCA cooperate with individuals or organizations that may want to publish positive, favorable or informative books about NCA.	***Actionable:*** NCA is happy to assist individuals or organizations who want to publish positive books, magazine articles and film products about NCA burial and memorial benefits and facilities.	*NCA provided guidance to Mr. Tom Ruck in publishing his book "Sacred Ground: A Tribute to Americas Veterans." NCA provides access, as appropriate, to its facilities and information for legitimate and positive projects. However, NCA cannot conduct research for those wishing to publish materials about NCA. Individual authors are responsible for developing content and verifying accuracy.* *NCA's Communications Management Service has not received any additional formal requests to approve or provide information for books about NCA.*
Goal 4: Provide One VA world-class service to veterans and their families through the effective management of people, technology, processes and financial resources.	***Recommendation 4.1:*** Explore the possibilities of providing the Intranet BIRLS/BDN Access (BBA) system to the Department of the Interior, National Park Service national cemeteries, Anderson National Historic Site, and Andrew Johnson National Historic Site to enhance burial eligibility verification.	***Non-Actionable:*** The matter was researched and the initiative declined. Governance for access to BIRLS is covered in 38 CFR 14.640–14.643, the Freedom of Information Act and Privacy Act. In 1998, the issue was raised, researched, and declined with respect to access by State veterans cemeteries. After consultation, the restrictions that prohibit granting access to NPS entities continue to apply. The Department recommends that NPS cemeteries establish relationships with their nearest VA national cemetery for assistance with eligibility determinations.	*NOTE: NCA has offered the National Park Service (NPS) its Operational Standards and Measures along with any support, recommendations or advice NPS may need in implementing them or in support of its organizational goals. NCA values NPS participation on its Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials and would be pleased to participate in an interagency Committee to help NPS and NCA achieve their shared goals.*

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Goal 4 cont'd: Provide One VA world-class service to veterans and their families through the effective management of people, technology, processes and financial resources.	***Recommendation 4.2:*** That NCA consider an outreach program that encourages veterans to pre-register for eligibility for VA veterans burial benefits.	***Non-Actionable:*** Eligibility for burial in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) national cemeteries and for providing headstones or markers and Presidential Memorial Certificates are made at the time of need. Eligibility determinations are made at the time of death of a veteran or his or her eligible dependents in accordance with the current statutory and regulatory authority. At the time of need, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is expeditious in responding to family schedules. Currently, about 83 percent of veterans have access to a burial option within 75 miles of their residence. VA's strategic goal is to serve 90 percent of veterans with a burial option at a National Cemetery or State veterans Cemetery within 75 miles of their residence by fiscal year 2010. These burial options are addressed in current NCA outreach materials and programs and a new fact sheet, in development, on End of Life Considerations that further address the necessary documents a veteran and their family should have so that eligibility for VA memorial benefits can be made quickly at the time of need.	*NOTE: Currently 87.4 percent of veterans have access to a burial option within 75 miles of their residence. The 90 percent goal will be achieved in FY 2011.*

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Goal 4 cont'd: Provide One VA world-class service to veterans and their families through the effective management of people, technology, processes and financial resources.	***Recommendation 4.3:*** That NCA develop a Public Service Announcement (PSA) regarding burial benefits that may be used to highlight memorial benefits where new national cemetery dedication ceremonies are taking place.	***Actionable:*** VA restrictions on advertising were lifted on June 16, 2008. The Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs may now purchase advertising in media outlets to promote awareness of benefits and services in coordination with the Departments Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (OPIA). OPIA is evaluating the possibility of a PSA/Advertising campaign through a partnership with the Ad Council and the possibility of hiring contractors to develop a VA benefits PSA campaign. NCA will coordinate with OPIA to incorporate memorial benefits into any overall OPIA PSA/Advertising campaign.	*NCA developed and used an audio public service announcement at the Sarasota National Cemetery Groundbreaking/Dedication ceremony.* *Currently NCA has two advertising initiatives:* *(1) National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) Web-based TV show, available to NFDAs 10,000 funeral homes and 35,000 members. Funeral Directors are key players in providing veterans and family members information on VA memorial benefits.* *(2) Sponsorship of Reflections: The "American Funeral," one-of-a-kind mobile exhibition trailer displaying the history of American funeral traditions. Sponsorship of Reflections would provide VA access to core stakeholders and the general public through a new venue, allowing VA to provide information about memorial benefits to veterans and dependent populations who may not be familiar with VA memorial benefits.* *NCAs new outreach video "A Sacred Trust" is now available on the VA Internet and YouTube sites.*

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Goal 4 cont'd: Provide One VA world-class service to veterans and their families through the effective management of people, technology, processes and financial resources.	***Recommendation 4.4:*** The Advisory Committee requests the opportunity to review and provide comments on the draft VA Burial Benefits Program Evaluation and if feasible for the authors to conduct outreach to the Committee.	***Non-Actionable:*** VA appreciates the work that the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials has done by providing thoughtful and valuable input to the Burial Benefits Program Evaluation. Committee members participated in stakeholder sessions as the contract Statement of Work was developed and with the Program Evaluation contractor, Caliber/ICF, as part of the analysis plan development. The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) will brief the Committee on its findings and recommendations after the report is finalized. VA looks forward to continuing to work with the Committee in the future and considers the Committees continued interest and input regarding these findings and recommendations of value in assisting NCA to make informed decisions regarding memorial benefits.	*NOTE: The "Evaluation of the VA Burial Benefits Program" was delivered to VA by the contractor in August 2008. VA has reviewed the study's recommendations. If any changes to current burial policies are proposed, they would be included in a future budget request.*
	Recommendation 4.5: The Committee endorses continued evaluation and efforts to study burial benefits including service area and population threshold.	***Non-Actionable:*** A joint effort is underway to conduct a comprehensive program evaluation of the full array of burial benefits and services that VA provides. The program evaluation conducted by NCA, in partnership with the Veterans Benefits Administration and the Office of Policy, Planning, and Preparedness, will assess, develop, and update program outcomes, goals, and objectives, and compare actual program results with established goals. It is anticipated that the study is to be completed in FY 2008.	*NOTE: The "Evaluation of the VA Burial Benefits Program" was delivered to VA by the contractor in August 2008. VA has reviewed the study's recommendations. If any changes to current burial policies are proposed, they would be included in a future budget request.*

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Goal 4 cont'd: Provide One VA world-class service to veterans and their families through the effective management of people, technology, processes and financial resources.	***Recommendation 4.6:*** That VA, through an award from the Sec VA, acknowledges Worchester Wreath Co. for their philanthropic efforts in organizing their Wreaths Across America (WAA) program. Additionally, that all VA national cemeteries support and participate in Wreaths Across America.	***Actionable:*** VA agrees that the Wreath Across America program has promoted volunteerism and goodwill, and raised awareness of veterans, NCA, and VA. The Department will consider appropriate ways to recognize the Worchester Wreath Co. for the program. All VA national cemeteries currently participate in WAA. Each VA national cemetery has a WAA ceremony and prepares a media advisory and news release to generate public and media interest.	*Almost 59,000 wreaths were laid in ceremonies at 125 VA national cemeteries in 2008. Former Secretary of Veterans Affairs James B. Peake M.D. expressed his appreciation to company president Morrill Worcester, by presenting him with the Secretary's VA Commendation Award (December 13, 2008) during a ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery.*

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