

**VETERANS CEMETERIES:
HONORING THOSE WHO SERVED**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE
AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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VETERANS CEMETERIES: HONORING THOSE WHO SERVED

TUESDAY, MAY 8, 2007

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 2:21 p.m., in Room 334, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. John J. Hall [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Hall, Hare, Berkley, Lamborn, Bilirakis.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN HALL

Mr. HALL. The Subcommittee will proceed with the hearing on Veterans Cemeteries: Honoring Those Who Served.

And I would ask our witnesses in panel one, John Metzler, Superintendent of the Arlington National Cemetery; Fred Boyles, Superintendent of the Andersonville National Cemetery and Historic Site; and Brigadier General John W. Nicholson, U.S. Army retired, Secretary of the American Battle Monuments Commission, to join us.

Thanks again for all of you being here and thank you especially to our witnesses.

Before I make my remarks, I would just suggest that we Pledge Allegiance to the Flag. Either end of the room will do.

[Pledge of Allegiance.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you.

Today's hearing on Veterans Cemeteries: Honoring Those Who Served will provide this Subcommittee and its members with an opportunity to receive an update on the cemeteries holding the remains of our veterans.

As some may know, veterans who have served in this country's Armed Services are buried in cemeteries operated by the States, the VA, the Department of the Interior, Arlington National Cemetery, American Battle Monuments Commission, and private industry.

From all reports, it appears that the VA's National Cemetery Administration is doing a good job running the cemeteries under its jurisdiction. However, I do have some concerns which I hope will be addressed today.

First, I want the VA to expound upon its standard for creating new national cemeteries. Is the current standard adequate for both urban and rural locations and does the VA provide opportunity for public input during the new cemetery selection process?

In addition, I would like to be updated on the current status of the National Shrine Commitment.

Finally, I am looking forward to learning why it took close to a decade for the VA to display and recognize the Wiccan emblem. As most are aware, the military has long allowed Wiccans to practice their faith on military installations, but the VA, only recently, after litigation, started to allow the Wiccan symbol on gravestones.

I would like to be assured that the statements made by President Bush in 1999 had nothing to do with the VA refusing to recognize the Wiccan symbol.

Also, with respect to Arlington National Cemetery, I wish every cemetery could look as pristine and immaculate as the grounds at Arlington. However, this attractiveness does come at a cost.

It has been reported that those waiting to be buried in Arlington face a backlog. I do not think that the veterans who have sacrificed so much for our country should have to wait to be buried nor should their families. I am interested in finding out about the burial process at Arlington and whether individuals do indeed face lengthy delays.

I would also like the Superintendent to touch upon the recent burial of Jack Valenti. I would like to know why a veteran of his stature, over 50 combat missions during World War II, needed a waiver to be buried at Arlington.

Next we will hear from a representative of the National Park Service which is responsible for operating several Civil War era cemeteries. It has come to my attention that some of these cemeteries are not being maintained at an acceptable standard worthy of those who have fought for this country.

It would be nice to know if these reports are an aberration or signs of a pattern. If it is a pattern, please tell the Committee what it can do to improve the current situation.

We will also hear from the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) which very few Americans even know exists or what it is that they actually do. I am interested in learning about their efforts to educate people about Americans interred overseas.

I also would like to note the significance of having the American Battle Monuments Commission testify on the 62nd anniversary of V-E Day.

In closing, I would just like to say that I believe we must maintain our promise to those who have done so much for our country. Providing them a well-maintained and respectable final resting place is the least we can do.

And I will now yield to Ranking Member Lamborn for an opening statement.

[The prepared statement of Chairman Hall appears on p. 29.]

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. DOUG LAMBORN

Mr. LAMBORN. 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 2.8 million to 3.2 million by 2012.

Mr. Chairman, it is for that reason especially that I thank you for your leadership in helping to pass House Resolution 1660 out of this Subcommittee 2 weeks ago. This bill would establish a national cemetery in southern Colorado and greatly benefit those veterans and families in this fast-growing area.

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

That is why in the Fiscal Year 2008 Republican Views and Estimates, we recommended an additional \$9 million over the Administration's \$166.8 million request for operations and maintenance at VA's National Cemetery Administration.

Further, Mr. Chairman, we recommended an additional \$5 million for minor construction. We also recommended an additional \$60 million to accelerate VA's 5-year strategic plan to fund national cemetery gravesite expansion and shrine completion.

We should not wait for years to ensure that the resting places for these patriots reflects our Nation's recognition of their service and sacrifice.

It is my understanding that most of our national cemeteries are kept in excellent condition. Certainly my own experience at the Fort Logan National Cemetery reinforces this perception.

I am pleased to note that we have today a representative of the American Battle Monuments Commission. The Commission's standards are legendary and I hope to soon visit one or more of their cemeteries for our war dead.

Disappointing exceptions to these high standards do exist, however. Andersonville National Cemetery in Andersonville, Georgia, the site of the notorious Confederate prisoner of war camp, is one of 13 national cemeteries run by the National Park Service and it is one of two run by the Park Service that currently inters veterans.

My staff is now passing out photos that depict the deteriorating condition of gravestones and construction at Andersonville. I look forward to learning more about operations and maintenance at this and other Park Service cemeteries as well as cemeteries run by VA and the ABMC.

Mr. Chairman, 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.

[The prepared statement of Congressman Lamborn appears on p. 29.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Lamborn.

After the first panel has finished with their testimony, members will be recognized for 5 minutes to make remarks and/or ask questions.

So at this time, I would like to recognize Mr. John Metzler, Superintendent of Arlington National Cemetery. Mr. Metzler.

STATEMENTS OF JOHN C. METZLER, JR., SUPERINTENDENT, ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY, DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, AND ALSO ON BEHALF OF THE SOLDIERS' AND AIRMEN'S HOME NATIONAL CEMETERIES; FRED BOYLES, SUPERINTENDENT, ANDERSONVILLE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE AND CEMETERY, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR; AND BRIGADIER GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON, USA (RET.), SECRETARY, AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION, ACCOMPANIED BY BRIGADIER GENERAL WILLIAM J. LESZCZYNSKI, JR., USA (RET.), EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION, GUY GIANCARLO, CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER, AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION, JEANNIE FAURE, BUDGET OFFICER, AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION, AND THOMAS R. SOLE, DIRECTOR OF ENGINEERING AND MAINTENANCE, AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION

STATEMENT OF JOHN C. METZLER, JR.

Mr. METZLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee. Good afternoon.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of Arlington and the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemeteries run by the Department of the Army.

Mr. Chairman, with your permission, I would like to briefly summarize my complete statement and ask that my full statement be submitted for the record. Thank you.

Mr. HALL. That will be done.

Mr. METZLER. Thank you, sir.

In fiscal year 2006, we had an all-time record for interments at Arlington National Cemetery with 4,059 ground burials and 2,580 inurnments in the Columbarium of which 103 were related to the War on Terrorism.

I would also note that our operation costs are increasing as the cemetery continues to expand and improve as we make the overall appearance of our national shrine improve with each day.

In fiscal year 2008, our budget includes funds for the expansion needs and efforts at Arlington National Cemetery to ensure that we remain an active, open burial space well into the next century.

I am happy to report that phase one of a 40-acre land development project called LD90 has been completed. This project adds 26,000 graves to Arlington.

Phase two is about to start later this year and will add a boundary niche wall which will add 5,000 niches when completed.

In summary, Mr. Chairman, Arlington continues to be one of the most visited sacred grounds in our National Capitol region and accommodates almost 4 million visitors each year.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify before your Committee on behalf of these cemeteries.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Metzler appears on p. 30.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you very much, Mr. Metzler.

And the Chair will now recognize Mr. Boyles for his testimony.

STATEMENT OF FRED BOYLES

Mr. BOYLES. Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman. I genuinely appreciate the opportunity to represent the Department of the Interior today in talking about national cemeteries and their special place in our national parks.

My name is Fred Boyles and I am the superintendent of Andersonville National Historic Site and National Cemetery which is a unit of our National Park system.

I have been a National Park Superintendent since 1985 at three different sites. In reference to today's hearing, I have been the Superintendent at Andersonville National Cemetery since 1989.

I was recently appointed in November 2006 as an ex officio member representing the National Park Service on the National Cemetery Advisory Commission of the Department of Veterans Affairs. And in this capacity, I have been able to work closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs on improving the management of our hallowed national cemeteries and the National Park Service.

Also, as a Navy Reserve officer who was mobilized and deployed in 2004 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, I understand the meaning of these remarkable places from the perspective of our veterans.

The National Park Service manages and protects 14 of the Nation's national cemeteries. Andrew Johnson and Custer National Cemetery at the Little Bighorn National Battlefield are cemeteries that the Park Service manages that are not Civil War sites. The other 12 are all Civil War related cemeteries.

Two of our national cemeteries within the National Park Service are still open to veterans for burials. They are Andersonville National Cemetery in southwest Georgia, where I work, and Andrew Johnson National Cemetery located in east Tennessee.

In 2006, Andersonville buried 161 veterans and their dependents while Andrew Johnson buried 67. As of January 2007, Andrew Johnson had approximately 457 grave spaces available and Andersonville had 6,669 grave spaces available.

Both of these cemeteries follow the same rules and regulations for burials as those that are administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs. And I should say that in these cemeteries, the service that we give to our veterans and their families is the highest priority in our park operation.

Cemeteries that are more than a century old require constant attention. Over the past 5 years, the National Park Service has devoted more than a million dollars in project funds to protect stone walls, headstones, monuments, and walkways in our cemeteries.

Some examples of those that have recently been completed are \$675,000 to repoint and repair the cemetery walls at Andersonville, Battleground Cemetery, Fort Donelson and Fredericksburg National Cemeteries.

Recently \$145,000 was spent to realign and maintain headstones at Gettysburg, Stones River, Vicksburg National Cemetery, and also at Andrew Johnson.

In addition to these projects, each unit of the National Park Service with a national cemetery has a maintenance staff who has

dedicated at least part of their time to maintaining headstones and grounds.

In 2005, the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training delivered nine classes on cemetery preservation to some 300 National Park Service employees.

The Center has also partnered with the Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration on a multi-year project to test cleaning agents for headstones.

I should also add that the pictures that have been passed out, they are not up to date because all of our headstones have just been recently cleaned at Andersonville National Cemetery. So I think this is about 2 or 3 years old.

While we have devoted funds and employees to cemetery maintenance, as is often the case with historic resources, much still remains to be done. And we are working closely with the VA to upgrade our cemeteries to the conditions set forth in their recently updated "Cemetery Standards of Appearance."

Also, our cemeteries are part of the stories that make our parks special. Every day our park rangers give talks and programs to visitors about these cemeteries and their significance as places where conflict has shaped our past.

Once again, I thank the Committee for allowing me to present this testimony and would be happy to answer any questions that any of you have about the National Park Service's national cemeteries.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Boyles appears on p. 33.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Superintendent Boyles.

The Chair will now recognize General Nicholson.

STATEMENT OF BRIGADIER GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON

General NICHOLSON. Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, I would like to begin my statement with the words of Harry Truman when he said—

Mr. HALL. General, could you please push the button on your microphone and see if that works.

General NICHOLSON. I will start over.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I would like to begin my statement with words of Harry Truman's when he said, "Our debt to the heroic men and valiant women in the service of our country can never be repaid. They have earned our undying gratitude. Americans will never forget their sacrifices."

When visitors approach the new Normandy American Visitor Center that we will dedicate on June 6, these words of President Truman's are the first words these visitors will read. The statement mirrors the mission of the American Battle Monuments Commission which is to honor and commemorate the service, achievements, and sacrifice of America's Armed Forces.

Our fiscal year 2008 appropriation request for \$53.3 million enables us to continue that mission. It funds the Commission's expenses and salaries account as well as our foreign currency fluctuation account.

For our expenses and salaries account, we request \$42.1 million to support the Commission's requirements for service fees, sched-

uled maintenance and repairs, supplies, materials, spare parts, equipment replacement, capital improvement, and personnel costs.

Our request maintains staffing levels at 404 full-time equivalent positions and \$1.6 million for security enhancements to open and protect the Normandy Visitor Center, its employees, and its visitors. These security enhancements are required by the Regional Security Office of the U.S. Embassy in Paris.

We have also included \$1.4 million to support annual operations at the visitor center. Fiscal year 2008 funding provides the first full-year operating costs of the visitor center.

Our ongoing worldwide ABMC challenge is to sustain the high standards of excellence we have set in maintaining our commemorative sites as shrines to America's war dead while continuing to do a better job of telling the story of those we honor and persuading millions more people of all nationalities to see these splendid sites which reflect the values of our United States of America.

For our foreign currency fluctuation account, we request \$11.2 million to replenish the funds needed to defray losses experienced due to currency fluctuation so we can maintain our buying power for services and materials to operate and sustain our commemorative sites in the European and Mediterranean regions.

ABMC has struggled with maintaining our purchasing power over the years. In 2005, we needed a special foreign currency appropriation to do so. For fiscal year 2008, we propose a change in our approach to funding the foreign currency fluctuation account.

New appropriation language requests an indefinite appropriation to supply "such sums" as may be necessary to maintain buying power against the European Euro, the British Pound, and other currencies. With this legislation, the Congress could use the such sums language proposal to re-estimate our foreign currency requirements if needed during the year.

Foreign currency is very important to ABMC. As noted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), over 70 percent of ABMC's budget is paid in euros or pounds. The volatility of exchange rates combined with a weakening dollar has increased the real cost of our ABMC mission and made it more difficult to plan and budget as effectively as we would like.

An indefinite appropriation would remove some foreign currency vagaries from our budget preparation and execution. For example, we began the fiscal year 2008 budget process a year ago which was 2 years before we will actually begin to purchase foreign currency to pay our staff and suppliers abroad. Exchange rates can change significantly over 2 years. The "such sums" appropriations language would enable the Congress to remove that uncertainty.

On May 1st, 2006, one European Euro cost 1.2639 U.S. Dollars. One year later, on April 30th, 2007, one European Euro cost 1.366 U.S. Dollars, an 8 percent decrease in the purchasing power of the dollar. The "such sums" language would protect our purchasing power against such drops.

ABMC would continue to work with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), GAO, and the Congressional staff in choosing an appropriate currency rate for our budget submissions. However, the Congress by incorporating the "such sums" flexibility could prevent the situation where the foreign currency fluctuation is the de-

termining factor in selecting which activities or projects we can afford to pursue.

In other words, without “such sums” authorization, a decrease in the value of the U.S. Dollar vis-à-vis the European Euro or British Pound could necessitate a halt to vital maintenance projects in order to pay salaries or other expenses. Allowing us to focus on our mission is the real payoff of this “such sums” change in approach to foreign currency fluctuations.

Our facilities, most of which were constructed following World War I and World War II, have aged considerably. Over time, deterioration accelerates and the cost of materials, labor, and utilities are increasing around the world.

We are allocating \$3 million toward high-priority engineering projects specifically designed to protect the American people’s investment in the commemorative sites for which we are responsible. This funding will be used to perform periodic maintenance and to correct deficiencies within our infrastructure.

Since 2002, the Commission has been in the process of designing and constructing a visitor center near the D-Day beach head at the Normandy American Cemetery in France. The visitor center will tell the story of the 9,387 American soldiers buried at Normandy and the 1,557 missing in action memorialized there.

Construction is nearly complete and we will dedicate the new center 4 weeks from tomorrow, on June 6, 2007, the 63rd anniversary of the D-Day landings.

Our challenge is to sustain the high standards of excellence we have set in maintaining our commemorative sites as shrines to America’s war dead. Concurrently, we are doing a better job of telling the story of these uniquely splendid cemeteries and memorials which inspire patriotism, evoke gratitude, and teach history to all who visit.

We are grateful for the support we receive from the House. The trust you place in us and your understanding of our operational needs ensures that we have sufficient resources when we need them to sustain our operations.

I would like to close by introducing the members of my staff that accompanied me today, and I will begin with introducing Brigadier General William Leszczynski, Jr., U.S. Army retired, who is the Executive Director and Operating Officer at ABMC.

Next, I would like to introduce Guy Giancarlo, the Chief Financial Officer. Next Jeannie Faure, our Budget Officer and Tom Sole, the Director of Engineering and Maintenance.

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

[The prepared statement of General Nicholson appears on p. 34.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, General, and thank you to your staff. Thank you to our other witnesses.

I will just kick off with a couple of questions. Superintendent Metzler, would you estimate how long, on average, does a veteran have to wait to be buried? Is there a backlog for burials and does it matter whether the veteran died in OIF/OEF?

Mr. METZLER. Mr. Chairman, there is no easy answer to your question, so let me see if I can take some of it apart. Let me go with the last of it first.

On our servicemembers who are killed in active duty, we push those to the top of the schedule and we get as creative as we can with those burials to accommodate the families and make those funerals happen within 2 weeks if not sooner.

The other question is asked about veterans being buried in the cemetery. It depends upon whether they are being inurned in the Columbarium or being buried in the ground, whether they have received full military honors, standard military honors, or request a chapel service. Each of these contribute to the delay, if you will, and often referred to as the backlog.

The challenge I have is I have one chapel that is available to me, two caissons which are administered by the Department of the Army that we use for all branches of the military. Each of these funerals are more complicated. They take more time. I can only do eight of these funerals a day. I am currently averaging between 25 and 30 funerals each workday.

So the average wait for someone who is asking for a full-honor funeral with a chapel service in the middle of the workday and asking for a Catholic priest or a Jewish rabbi as they are not bringing their own clergy with them could be 4 to 5 weeks.

And that unfortunately happens all the time during this peak season, the spring and the summer when people are coming to Arlington in greater numbers. The numbers seem to fall off a little bit in the wintertime. But once the spring weather comes and people start traveling, with school breaks and so on, our funeral rate increases pretty much to a full schedule every day.

Mr. HALL. And thank you, sir. I just wanted to ask you also, do you have currently any unfunded requirements?

Mr. METZLER. My budget right now is sufficient to carry me forward with the projects that we have laid out at this time.

Mr. HALL. Thank you. You are in a very small minority and we appreciate your saying that.

Superintendent Boyles, I wanted to ask if there is anything the VA Committee can do to help the state of the gravesites under your jurisdiction. You mentioned before that it is not as bad as it was and there is, I guess, periodic cleanups or dealgaefication or whatever the term is. Can we help you more at this point?

Mr. BOYLES. Yes, sir, Mr. Chairman. It is interesting because these are dramatic pictures. And what you have is when these headstones, which were all placed in 1878, is that when you clean them, you are taking a little bit of a layer off of them. And so it has always been our desire to wait as long as possible before cleaning the stones because we want them to last as long as we can.

And so it is generally either, one, we will clean them all, usually in the summer, every 2 or every 3 years and depending on how long we can get them to last. And one of the factors that contributes to that is how much it has rained. So if we have a very rainy season, we get more mildew and algae growing on them. And so we do our best to wait as long as possible.

Mr. HALL. Thank you.

And, lastly, General Nicholson, in your testimony, you request a change in the approach to funding. Specifically you request new language that allows for "such sums" as may be necessary to compensate for fluctuations in currency.

Do any other Federal entities that you are aware of who operate overseas use similar language, and what is the genesis for the idea?

General NICHOLSON. Yes, sir. I would like to answer the question.

Mr. HALL. Would you turn your microphone on again, please. Thank you.

General NICHOLSON. Sir, I am glad you asked that question. I believe the Justice Department uses that and I would ask Guy Giancarlo to elaborate on this.

We did not originate the idea. The idea was suggested to us. I believe it is from OMB. And it has been working successfully with the other department. I believe it is the Justice Department.

Guy, is that right?

Mr. GIANCARLO. Yes, sir. If I may, I am Guy Giancarlo, CFO. It is used by the Justice Department, their independent councils, and allows Congress to continue maintaining oversight.

But because we are such a small agency, our total budget, \$42 million in expenses, over 70 percent of those affected by foreign currency fluctuation, we cannot predict the tremendous decrease in the value of the dollar purchasing power vis-à-vis the European Euro that we have experienced this past year nor should we as such a government agency be forecasting what the exchange rate should be. So OMB suggested that we go the route similar to the Justice Department in terms of the independent councils. The question is indefinite appropriation.

Mr. HALL. Thank you very much.

My time is expired. So the Chair will now recognize Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Metzler, could you please describe the process to the Committee for getting a waiver from someone who wants to be buried in Arlington and then apart from that, what are the current requirements without a waiver?

Mr. METZLER. Yes, sir. Anyone requesting a waiver, their letter would come into wherever it came into the government. It would eventually work itself to my office. We request that they provide a copy of their military records, any extenuating circumstances that would credit this individual with extraordinary contributions, and then a public disclosure consent form.

We would take this, package it up, and submit it to the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower Affairs with my recommendation. From that office, it would be staffed to various offices around the Pentagon and then eventually up to the Secretary of the Army for his decision.

Once a decision is rendered, it would come back to my office and then we would inform the family as to whether or not the request has been approved or disapproved.

As far as eligibility is concerned, there are two tracts at Arlington Cemetery, traditional ground burial. Anyone who dies on active duty is entitled to ground burial. Anyone who has retired from the military with 20 years of active-duty service or greater, anyone who has retired from the Reserves age 60 and one period of active-duty service is entitled.

Veterans who are honorably discharged and also in receipt of our Nation's highest military awards, the Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Service Cross, Distinguished Service Medal, Silver Star, or the Purple Heart, former prisoners of war who have served honorably, honorably discharged veterans who also hold the office of Vice President, members of Congress, the members of the Supreme Court, and Ambassadors at a level one posting. The President of the United States or former Presidents of the United States do not have to have military service. All the individuals I referenced, their spouses or dependent children, and then any honorably discharged veteran with one period of active-duty service is entitled to have his or her cremated remains placed into our Columbarium.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you.

Mr. METZLER. Yes, sir.

Mr. LAMBORN. And a second question is after the Project 90 land is used up, do you have any further sites in mind that could be used beyond Project 90?

Mr. METZLER. Yes. We are currently working three different other initiatives right now. The Millennium Project which is a piece of property that consists of a part of Arlington Cemetery, a former part of the National Park Service, and part of Fort Myer, all these pieces of property touch each other and will form a new burial section.

Also Public Law 106-65 was passed a few years ago that would send to us the Navy Annex once it comes out of service. The Pentagon is currently using the Navy Annex as swing space for its renovation.

And then finally, we have an initiative to relocate all our utilities that are currently in the grass underneath roadways. That will open that land up and give us additional grave space.

Those three additional initiatives, plus the LD 90 Project that has just recently been completed will take us to the year 2060 and we will have gravesites available for Arlington Cemetery for additional burials.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you.

Mr. METZLER. Yes, sir.

Mr. LAMBORN. Those are all the questions I have at this time, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Lamborn.

The Chair will now recognize Mr. Hare.

Mr. HARE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I could not concur more in terms of the sites for our veterans being considered shrines giving everything they have ever had for this country. I am fortunate to have one in my district, the Rock Island Army Arsenal Cemetery which I think is a wonderful facility.

I just have one quick question for you, Mr. Metzler. You said that there is significant crowding, in your testimony, you said this is occurring at the Arlington National Cemetery, and you said this crowding is compromising the dignity of the funerals by distracting families at nearby services.

I wonder if you could expand on that. What sort of delays are you experiencing and what actions are being taken to address it?

Mr. METZLER. Well, the delays fall into what the families are asking for. If we have a standard military honors which consist of a firing party, a casket team, a bugler, and a chaplain, those funerals generally can be done within 2 weeks of the time of eligibility being established.

It is when we get beyond and ask for what they call full-honor funerals which only Arlington Cemetery has the capability of asking. Those amenities could include a caisson, a fly-over, the escort that marches along with the troops, and a band.

The first challenge is are the military available the day you are asking. They have other duties and obligations around the National Capitol region. As an example right now, Queen Elizabeth is in our country visiting and some of those resources are dedicated to her visit. So when they are at that location, they may not be available to Arlington Cemetery.

The next, of course, is training and availability with the horses. Anyone who is entitled to a full-honor funeral generally wants that full-honor funeral and wants the caisson as part of that service that is provided for them at Arlington.

We only have two caisson units. On average, it takes about 2 hours to start a funeral, to finish a funeral, and turn around to start again. So with two caissons, the maximum funerals we can do in 1 day are eight. People are very willing to wait for that honor and it may take several weeks for that to happen.

All I can do is I can address it to the military. I can explain to them what our challenges are, ask them for their cooperation. They have been very willing to listen to me, but they are like everyone else. They have requirements and they can only provide to me what is available each day.

Mr. HARE. I wonder if you would comment though. You said there is significant crowding and you stated that it is compromising the dignity of the funerals. What do you mean by that? In terms of the space limitations or—

Mr. METZLER. Well, one of the things on the crowding is we do not want to have two funerals within the same visual or in the hearing area so that we do not have one funeral taking place two or three hundred yards away and another funeral taking place at the same time so you are hearing the firing parties going off simultaneously or hearing taps going off within a few seconds of each other. We are trying to make each funeral as special as possible and allow the family that moment while they are in the cemetery to think that they are the only thing going on while they are at Arlington. So we want to spread out our funeral areas to allow that to happen.

Typically we are doing four and five funerals simultaneously in the cemetery throughout the workday.

Mr. HARE. Well, it is a wonderful cemetery and I just commend you for all the hard work you have done.

And I would yield back, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Hare.

I will now recognize Representative Bilirakis.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it very much.

I wanted to ask Doug's question. How many waivers, sir, are submitted and how many are granted within a year?

Mr. METZLER. On any average year, we receive about 20 to 25 waivers. Most of the waivers that we receive are for family members that do not meet our normal eligibility criteria. They are going into the same grave that has already been established by a family member who is authorized. All of those are approved provided that they are not bringing along with them someone else in their family. So the benefit is limited to one person.

For people who are asking for new graves, first-time burial in the cemetery, they are rare. We have not approved one since 2001 at the Army level.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you.

Mr. Metzler, what steps has Arlington National Cemetery taken to implement the "Respect for America's Fallen Heroes Act" that was passed last Congress?

Mr. METZLER. I am sorry, sir. I did not quite understand the last part of your question.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. "America's Fallen Heroes Act" which was passed recently in the last Congress, what steps has Arlington National Cemetery taken to implement that Act?

Mr. METZLER. Sir, I am not familiar with that. I need a little more information to answer your question.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Yeah. We worked on this in the legislature in Florida and it is the military demonstration. In other words, interrupting nuisances at funerals, what have you, and, you know, I was just told that—but I know we worked on that in the State of Florida. So you are familiar.

Mr. METZLER. Now I am familiar with it. Thank you, sir.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay.

Mr. METZLER. We have worked extensively with the United States Park Police who have the jurisdiction for Arlington Cemetery to ensure that when we do have a demonstration protest at Arlington Cemetery that they stay the proper distance away, that they do not interrupt the flow of traffic or funerals coming in and out of the cemetery, and that they are confined to an area that has no effect on the visiting public if they are walking to the cemetery as well. So for us, it has worked very well in the past few years.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Very good. So it is being enforced. Thank you.

Mr. METZLER. Yes, sir.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you.

Mr. HALL. I just wanted to comment on that, "Respect for America's Fallen Heroes Act," which was enacted on May 29th of 2006, prohibiting protests within 300 feet of the entrance of a cemetery under the control of the National Cemetery Administration.

We all can find out the details to that if we want, but it is passed unanimously by the Senate and overwhelmingly by the House and signed by the President.

Representative Berkley.

Ms. BERKLEY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and I will be brief because I know we want to get to the third panel.

I just wanted to thank all of you gentlemen for the extraordinary service that you provide for our country and for our fallen heroes. While I have never had the honor and privilege of going overseas

and seeing our cemeteries there, I have spent considerable time at Arlington both as a civilian visiting and enjoying it with my family and also as a member of Congress attending a number of services there.

It is magnificent, and I thank you very much for what you have done. And you have my full support in helping you to continue the extraordinary work that you do.

Mr. METZLER. Thank you.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Ms. Berkley.

With that, I believe our first panel may be excused. Thank you, gentlemen. Superintendent Metzler, Superintendent Boyles, and General Nicholson, thank you very much for your testimony.

And we will ask our second panel, Kimo Hollingsworth, the National Legislative Director of AMVETS; Lesley Witter, Director of Political Affairs for the National Funeral Directors Association; Colonel George S. Webb, U.S. Army retired, Executive Director of the Kansas Veterans Commission, to join us, please.

Thank you all for being here and for your patience. The Chair will now recognize Mr. Hollingsworth.

STATEMENTS OF KIMO S. HOLLINGSWORTH, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR, AMERICAN VETERANS (AMVETS); LESLEY WITTER, DIRECTOR OF POLITICAL AFFAIRS, NATIONAL FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION; AND COLONEL GEORGE S. WEBB, USA (RET.), CHAIRMAN, MEMORIAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE DIRECTORS OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, KANSAS COMMISSION ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF KIMO S. HOLLINGSWORTH

Mr. HOLLINGSWORTH. Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this hearing regarding the National Cemetery Administration.

AMVETS would like to say that overall, although burial benefits are that, benefits, this issue really transcends the issue of veterans' benefits. Both VA and State-sponsored VA cemeteries, they really define America's past, present, and it is really about preserving our history and our culture. Their final resting places are filled with history of a great Nation and we have said it before, but they really truly are national shrines.

Mr. Chairman, Public Law 106-17 required VA to contract for an independent study on improvements to veterans cemeteries. Overall, VA provided this Committee with three volumes as part of the study on improvements to veterans cemeteries. I am not going to recap those in depth.

Volume I provided an assessment of the number of additional cemeteries that would be required to ensure that 90 percent of the veterans live within 75 miles of a national cemetery beginning in 2005 and projecting out to about 2020.

The national shrine commitment condition facility assessment report, it really provided the first independent systemwide comprehensive review of the conditions at 119 national cemeteries at that time.

Last but not least, cemetery standards of appearance address the requirements related to the feasibility of establishing standards of appearance for our national cemeteries commensurate with those of some of the finest cemeteries in the world.

I think the important point on that one is that there was no real consistency in terms of defining a national standard, so to speak, that each cemetery is somewhat unique and there is different ways that you can have standards of excellence with regards to how they look and appear.

Overall, AMVETS believes that honoring those who served through the NCA, as I stated, is an important part of our culture and history and national identity. As we have testified in the past, we support NCA as it seeks to develop additional national cemeteries, expand existing capabilities, and also to encourage individual States to develop State cemeteries through the State Cemetery Grants Program.

Overall, we continue to recommend that Congress establish a 5-year, \$250 million National Shrine Initiative to restore and improve the condition and character of national cemeteries.

One final word is that overall, you know, national cemeteries, the maintenance of them, it is a very expensive proposition. And in order to bring them up to speed and continuing to honor those who serve, it is not a once done deal. You have to continue to make investments and reinvestments in those initiatives.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hollingsworth appears on p. 35.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Hollingsworth.

The Chair will now recognize Ms. Witter.

STATEMENT OF LESLEY WITTER

Ms. WITTER. Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of the members of the National Funeral Directors Association.

I am Lesley Witter, NFDA's Director of Political Affairs. The National Funeral Directors Association represents more than 13,000 funeral homes and over 21,000 licensed funeral directors and embalmers in all 50 States.

The NFDA has a great interest in veterans cemeteries as our members provide both funeral and burial services for our Nation's veterans on a daily basis. As a result, they use national veterans cemeteries as well as State veterans cemeteries often.

In a recent survey of our members, we have received an almost unanimous response that our Nation's veterans cemeteries operate efficiently, effectively, and with much compassion for those being buried there as well as for their families.

Our members have found the management and operation of these cemeteries to be courteous, flexible, and accommodating to the needs of the funeral director and the family members of the deceased veterans. From our members' standpoint, the operation and management of our veterans cemeteries is of the highest caliber.

However, while most of our members are well satisfied with the services provided to them by veterans cemeteries, there are some improvements that could be made. For example, one NFDA member from Massachusetts explains that he is a funeral director in

Brockton, Massachusetts, who has interments at the Massachusetts National Cemetery in Bourne probably 40 to 50 times a year.

He goes on to state that the entire staff of Bourne is fantastic. They are very helpful and accommodating to the families and the funeral director's staff. He notes that he especially appreciates the improvement of being able to call the Jefferson Barracks in Missouri on weekends to schedule funerals in Bourne.

NFDA would like to note that we know of no veterans cemeteries that are available for burials on weekends except in special circumstances. In fact, weekend burials in veterans cemeteries appear to be a general problem for many of our members.

In our dealings with the National Cemetery Administration on issues, problems, or questions that arise from time to time, our members have found them to be very responsive and eager to assist in any way possible to find a solution.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would like to express our strong support for House Resolution 358, a bill that would expand and make permanent the Department of Veterans Affairs benefit for government markers for marked graves of veterans buried in private cemeteries.

In addition, House Resolution 1273 which was introduced by Subcommittee member, Representative Berkley, that would restore the plot allowance and marker allowance for veterans who want to be buried in a private cemetery and want a non-government headstone or marker, but who are eligible for a free government headstone or marker is currently being reviewed by our Advocacy Committee.

I would also like to commend the Committee on its passage of legislation that prohibits demonstrations at the funerals and burials of our fallen heroes in Afghanistan and Iraq. Our members very much appreciate the concern of Congress in protecting the privacy of these very solemn and emotional occasions.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my testimony. I hope it has been helpful. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear and present the views of the National Funeral Directors Association. I will be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Witter appears on p. 36.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Ms. Witter.

And the Chair will now recognize Colonel Webb.

STATEMENT OF COLONEL GEORGE S. WEBB

Colonel WEBB. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and distinguished members. I am George Webb, Executive Director of the Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs and Chairman of the Memorial Affairs Committee of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs or NASDVA.

On behalf of our President, Secretary John Garcia of New Mexico, I thank you for the opportunity to testify and present our views of our State Directors of Veterans Affairs from all 50 States and our commonwealths and territories.

Each State Director or Secretary is appointed by his or her Governor. And collectively we are the Nation's second largest provider of services to veterans. Our State Directors spend a total of over

\$4 billion of State money annually to ensure that veterans receive all benefits due. We run State veterans homes, oversee the management of State veterans cemeteries, and employ accredited and trained Veteran Service Officers.

While each State's structure differs slightly, these are the principal responsibilities of most of us. In some States, the Director also oversees the process of job training and employment for veterans. We are on the frontline assisting America's veterans with the benefits that they deserve.

The mission of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs is to work in collaboration with the Federal Government as it strives to disseminate information regarding all laws beneficial to veterans, their widows, and their children; to assist veterans and their dependents in the preparation and initiation of claims against the United States by reason of military service; and to assist veterans, widows, and children of veterans in establishing the privileges to which they are entitled.

Our Association recognizes the great worth and merit of all existing veterans organizations and we assert our willingness and determination to cooperate with them.

Today I would like to address the Subcommittee on State veterans cemeteries. Each State now has a national cemetery or a State veterans cemetery or more. Like others, we State Directors consider these cemeteries as shrines to veterans who helped preserve our freedom and memorials to those who contributed to the growth, development, and preservation of the United States.

This final veteran's salute honors those who have served our grateful Nation, so we State Directors are committed to ensuring that all veterans are buried with the respect and dignity they deserve.

During our Association conference in February, NASDVA members unanimously passed three resolutions: increase the burial plot allowance, increase funding for the State Veterans Cemetery Grant Program, and establish a State Veterans Cemetery Operations Grant Program.

Briefly stated, when a State veterans cemetery project is approved, the VA fully funds its construction and initial equipment outlay. And the State then assumes operational costs in perpetuity.

Mr. Chairman, Committee members, the average operational cost of interment in a State veterans cemetery is \$2,000. And, of course, that differs widely by the number of burials. Yet, the current burial plot allowance of \$300 per qualified interment covers only 15 percent of that cost.

NASDVA recommends the plot allowance be increased to \$1,000 in order to offset operational costs borne by the States. The increase should also apply to the plot allowance for veterans interments in private ceremonies.

Second, the State Veterans Cemetery Grant Program has greatly expanded our ability to provide gravesites for veterans and their eligible family members in areas where national cemeteries cannot fully satisfy burial needs, particularly in rural and remote areas.

The program has allowed the number of State cemeteries to grow by nearly 40 percent over the past 5 years with a corresponding increase in interments.

Currently over 40 project pre-applications are pending totaling \$180 million. Yet, VA funding for these projects has remained flat at \$32 million for several years. We ask that grant funding be increased to \$50 million.

Third, eligible States receive construction grants for veterans cemeteries and a limited burial plot allowance as discussed. Operational costs for State and national veterans cemeteries continue to rise. But once a State establishes a State veterans cemetery, there is no further source of Federal operational funding.

NASDVA recommends the establishment of a Federal grant program to assist State veterans cemeteries with operational costs.

Last year, the Congress authorized veterans cemeteries on Native-American tribal lands. The funding for this program is expected to come from the same flat \$32 million appropriated for State veterans cemeteries.

In addition, the VA uses a 75-mile radius calculation in determining where a State veterans cemetery should be built. States with more traffic congestion would like some consideration by using driving time as an additional determinate.

Finally, our State Directors wish to thank the Congress for two bills passed last year. Preventing persons convicted of capital crimes from being eligible for burial in our State cemeteries, as well as national cemeteries, is important.

Second, the bill passed in December, which became Public Law 109-454, is an important step in keeping military funerals dignified and respectful.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members, we respect the important work that you have done to improve benefits to veterans who have answered the call to serve our Nation. NASDVA remains dedicated to doing its part, but we urge you to be mindful of the increasing financial challenge that States face, just as you address the fiscal challenge at the Federal level.

We remain dedicated to our partnership with the VA in the delivery of services and care to our Nation's veterans. This concludes my statement, and I am ready to answer any questions that you may have.

[The prepared statement of Colonel Webb appears on p. 38.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Colonel, and thank you to all of our witnesses.

My first question would be to Ms. Witter. What is the single biggest challenge facing your members with respect to conducting funerals for veterans?

Ms. WITTER. We recently surveyed our members on that exact topic and overwhelmingly they said that because of the passage of the bill last year, they are not running into very many problems.

However, we talked with several of our members in the Washington, D.C. area about the issue of timing to get the bodies buried in Arlington and generally speaking, our members refrigerate a body after it is embalmed, so we questioned whether that charge was then passed on to the family.

Our members do not charge for storing a body initially in the first 2 weeks. But if the burial at Arlington is delayed, they sometimes charge \$300 for refrigeration and storage if the body is not

buried until between 2 to 6 weeks. So this expense is passed on to the family.

But we have also found that generally the families are willing to wait for the burial at Arlington and they do not mind paying that extra cost.

Mr. HALL. Thank you.

And, Colonel Webb, could you elaborate on your comments on driving time criteria requirements as opposed to mileage?

Colonel WEBB. Certainly, Mr. Chairman.

The VA uses a calculation of a 75-mile radius and the calculation is based on 90 percent of the veterans of America should be within 75 miles driving time of a national cemetery or a State veteran cemetery. That just sort of puts the mark on the wall.

Clearly 75 miles in western Kansas is very different from where you are from, or Long Island, or mountainous country of Pennsylvania. So some of the State Directors have asked that the VA loosen those rules by counting driving time.

Mr. HALL. You do not have a specific number in mind or formula or anything?

Colonel WEBB. No, Mr. Chairman. If we took the 75 miles and compared it to flatlands, you know, we are probably talking maybe about an hour, hour and a half driving time.

Mr. HALL. Thank you.

Mr. Hollingsworth, could you elaborate on any actions AMVETS or the other VSOs are doing to help develop or undertake volunteer opportunities in conjunction with our VA cemeteries?

Mr. HOLLINGSWORTH. The door was opening, Mr. Chairman. Could you repeat the question?

Mr. HALL. Yes. Can you elaborate on what AMVETS or other VSOs may be doing to help develop or undertake volunteer opportunities in conjunction with VA cemeteries?

Mr. HOLLINGSWORTH. Not necessarily with regards to VA cemeteries in particular, but part of the veterans community, there were several laws passed several years ago to provide color guards and firing details where the Department of Defense was then able to fill that role.

To the best of my knowledge, that is probably the biggest area that the Veteran Service Organizations are filling in that process aside from clearly obviously with regards to the budget process, expressing our views and estimates we believe where they should be funded.

Mr. HALL. Do you think that Congress should deny veterans who are convicted of serious felonies from being buried in VA or State cemeteries?

Mr. HOLLINGSWORTH. AMVETS currently does not have a position on that that I am aware of and I would have to answer that one for the record.

Mr. HALL. Colonel, do you have a position on that question?

Colonel WEBB. Mr. Chairman, Kansas, and I cannot say this is nationwide, but Kansas has Dennis Raider incarcerated. You may recall that he was the BTK killer that was on the lam for a long time and recently apprehended. And because he is a veteran, he would have been eligible to be buried in one of our State veterans cemeteries or in a national cemetery.

I can tell you that my Commission was very glad to see the law changed so that he would be excluded. And all the veterans organizations that I have spoken with have that same position.

Mr. HALL. Thank you very much.

Those are all my questions, and I will now recognize Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Witter, do you or any of the membership that you represent know about demonstrators who have violated the provisions of the Act that my colleague, Representative Bilirakis, was referring to earlier?

Ms. WITTER. Congressman, that is another question I asked in preparation for today's testimony. I asked had any of our members had firsthand experience and I have not received any reports of any veterans funerals being attended by demonstrators at a funeral that our members were involved in.

So I do not have any firsthand knowledge from our members, but I will continue to research it and get that information to you whenever possible.

Mr. LAMBORN. So, in other words, you think that it is working successfully at this point?

Ms. WITTER. Our members indicated that it has been very successful. They have not had any problems.

Mr. LAMBORN. Okay. Thank you.

And, Colonel Webb, how much variation is there among the 50 States in either the funding or the quality of the cemeteries that are established at the State level?

Colonel WEBB. I would hope to say that the quality does not vary very much. I mean, part of what we get when the VA builds a cemetery for us and provides all the associated equipment for that is the book of standards that we are obliged to follow. And we consider that a good thing that we have those standards and then we go to our legislatures and we explain to them what it takes to enforce them.

In terms of funding, it really is a matter of what it takes for upkeep in a particular cemetery, the size of the cemetery, the number of interments that occur at that cemetery. It depends on the newness of the cemetery versus the age.

This year in Kansas, we have three State veterans cemeteries already and one on the way. We will probably have about 140 interments total for the year. But we have new cemeteries and sometimes those take a while to get mature in people's minds and then that is where they want to go, whereas in New Jersey, you may see 30 burials a day in Doyle Cemetery that they have.

So I cannot give you a figure because every cemetery in every State is different. I apologize. But if you would like further information, I can see what I can do.

Mr. LAMBORN. Okay. Thank you.

And I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. Hare.

Mr. HARE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I just have one question, Ms. Witter. What do you think could be done to improve veterans' outreach about eligibility and the availability of veterans' cemeteries?

Ms. WITTER. Congressman, I think I am going to have to respond to that in writing. I do not have any information available to me at the moment. But I will go back and make sure that I discuss it with my members, get their opinion on it, and I will submit it in writing.

Mr. HARE. Thank you very much. I yield back.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Hare.

Ms. Berkley or, I am sorry, Mr. Bilirakis first.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. I will defer to her. No problem.

Mr. HALL. I made a mistake. We are supposed to go from one side to the other.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Ms. Witter, I have a question. Your members, let us say a veteran is indigent or the family cannot afford a funeral or all the services, what happens? What do you do? Obviously I know that a lot of the members pay for the funeral out of their pockets pro bono. Tell me if this is a problem. Do you face it? I imagine you face it quite a bit.

Ms. WITTER. Congressman Bilirakis, it is not an issue that has ever been brought to my attention. I am not sure how our membership handles veterans who do not have the financial backing to pay for a funeral. I am sure there is some process. So what I will do is I will talk to our membership about it and again I will submit something in writing to you.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Yes, please get that back to me because I understand also that there is only a \$300 benefit for a person that is buried in a non-veteran cemetery and I think that is a little low too. So we need to address that issue.

One more question, Ms. Witter. What percentage of the general public chooses cremation of veterans?

Ms. WITTER. Of veterans?

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Yes.

Ms. WITTER. Again, I do not have that information at hand. I can get that to you pretty quickly. I am not entirely sure how many veterans choose it. I know that now it is easier to get into Arlington Cemetery if cremation is the chosen method. So I will get the exact information for you.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. I would like to get some information on that because I think it would be pretty high.

But thank you very much. I appreciate it, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Bilirakis.

[The information requested by Congressmen Hare and Bilirakis was provided in a May 17, 2007, followup letter from Ms. Witter, which appears on p. 46.]

And now Ms. Berkley.

Ms. BERKLEY. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Hall.

Mr. Hollingsworth, when I first—I guess this is directed to everybody, but the question will be to you—when I first started running for Congress back in 1998, one of the first groups I spoke to were my veterans groups and each one of them at every veterans meeting that I attended, they were concerned about their benefits when

it came to burial. And this seemed to be a very big issue for the families and there were many stories that they shared with me.

So in the past, when I was the Ranking Member of this Committee, I had introduced legislation that I have reintroduced and that would be House Resolution 1273. And the reason for that was before 1990, a veteran who was eligible to be buried in a national cemetery but chose to be buried in a private cemetery was eligible to receive reimbursement for the cost of the headstone or the marker in lieu of a VA provided headstone, a grave marker.

In 1990, long before I came here to serve, the headstone and marker allowance was eliminated in the budget reconciliation bill. I have introduced 1273 to restore reimbursement to the pre-1990 levels and I am wondering if you have an opinion on that and whether you think that will be of some help to our veterans.

Mr. HOLLINGSWORTH. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. BERKLEY. The families, I should say.

Mr. HOLLINGSWORTH. Yes, ma'am. AMVETS does have a position on that. We testified earlier this year during the views and estimates process and AMVETS fully supports several initiatives with regards to some of the burial benefits. Some of those are an increase in the plot allowance and that would be from \$300 to \$745.

In addition, the burial allowance for service-connected deaths was recently increased from \$500 to \$2,000 and I believe AMVETS and the Independent Budget partners would recommend an increase from the \$2,000 to \$4,100.

Both of those figures are derived at in trying to restore parity to the original figure from when burial benefits first started.

Last but not least, since it was mentioned here earlier, AMVETS also does support reimbursement for headstones for burials in private cemeteries.

Ms. BERKLEY. Thank you very much.

And, Ms. Witter, I would appreciate as you testified that your group is still reviewing the legislation, I would appreciate if you took back the information that you gleaned today and would love to have support from the Funeral Directors Association.

And I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Ms. Berkley.

And thank you to all of our witnesses on the second panel. Mr. Hollingsworth, Ms. Witter, and Colonel, thank you all. You are now free to go on with the rest of your day.

And we will ask our last panel, the Honorable William F. Tuerk, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, to come forward, please, and make yourself comfortable. Have some of the Capitol's best water. You can start whenever you are ready. You are recognized.

STATEMENT OF HON. WILLIAM F. TUERK, UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. TUERK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on veterans cemeteries and the activities of the National Cemetery Administration.

With the Committee's permission, I will offer a relatively brief summary statement and request that my written testimony be accepted by the Committee and placed in its hearing record.

Mr. HALL. So ordered.

Mr. TUERK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it.

For the past year and a half, I have been privileged to lead the 1,500 plus men and women of NCA—men and women who each day, fulfill our Nation's final promise of care to veterans, our promise to provide final resting places of honor and dignity and to preserve in monuments and memorials the accomplishments of our Nation's heroes.

The average age of still-surviving World War II veterans is now 83, and the average age of surviving Korean War veterans is now 75. The average age of the Vietnam generation now approaches 60.

These demographic facts have led the Congress to direct—and NCA to oversee and manage—an unprecedented expansion in the Nation's veterans cemeteries. This unprecedented expansion—the largest such expansion since the Civil War—is necessary if we are to meet the need for convenient, close-to-home burial options for our older veterans, and for all of our veterans.

VA's 125th national cemetery—South Florida VA National Cemetery, in Palm Beach County—is now in its first month of operation providing a convenient burial option to over 400,000 previously-unserved veterans who reside in the South Florida region.

Similarly, the opening of veterans cemeteries in four major cities in the past 2 years—Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Sacramento, and Detroit—have allowed us to expand our reach to veterans who had previously been unserved.

Just 3 years ago, a burial option—that is, an active, open cemetery within 75 miles of one's residence—just 3 years ago such a burial option was available to only 75 percent of our Nation's veterans. Today, such an option is available to 83 percent of the Nation's veterans. And by 2010, we will have an operating cemetery in proximity to 90 percent of the Nation's veterans.

VA is now committed to building six new national cemeteries—each with initial sections open for burials by the end of 2008—in the regions of Bakersfield, California; Birmingham, Alabama; Columbia, South Carolina; Jacksonville, Florida; Sarasota, Florida; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Since 2001, 22 State veteran cemeteries have opened in 17 States, providing additional burial options for veterans living in less densely populated areas. Five new State veterans cemeteries are currently under construction—in Anderson, South Carolina; Shreveport, Louisiana; Radcliff, Kentucky; Glennville, Georgia; and Williamstown, Kentucky. We anticipate that several more State grant applications will be ripe for grant funding during the next fiscal year. This program is truly one of the finest examples one could find of collaboration between the Federal Government and the States. It represents, I think, an outstanding investment for veterans and for all the citizens we serve.

Yes, we are expanding, and we are expanding as rapidly as we can—though not as rapidly as many, me included, would wish. That said, let me assure the members of the Subcommittee that even while NCA administers a program of growth that would be

challenging for any organization to manage, we have not lost sight of—we will not lose sight of—properly executing our current responsibilities at our existing cemeteries. The people of NCA remain sharply focused on providing responsive, caring, and compassionate service at our existing cemeteries to every veteran and every veteran family member who has occasion to call on us.

We will continue to do that for families who find themselves in one of life's most difficult circumstances—at the burial of a loved one—and we will continue to do that for family members—and members of the general public—who visit our cemeteries at times other than to attend a burial.

In our most recent customer survey, 94 percent of respondents agreed that the quality of service they received at our existing national cemeteries was excellent. Ninety-seven percent stated that the overall appearance of our existing cemeteries is excellent. A study led by Michigan State University—the American Customer Satisfaction Survey—gave us a customer satisfaction rating of 95 out of 100. That is the highest score ever achieved by any organization, public or private, in the history of that survey.

We intend to maintain—and improve upon—those numbers. Professional and caring service will remain a hallmark of NCA. My greatest privilege has been to witness the manner in which VA employees carry out their honored duty of comforting veterans and families during a time of grief, and operating and maintaining national shrines in tribute to those who served and sacrificed on behalf of our Nation.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for the opportunity to share with you an overview of our current activities at NCA. I look forward to working with the members of this Subcommittee as we jointly work to meet the burial needs of veterans and family members we are entrusted to serve.

I would be pleased to answer any questions that you might have.

[The prepared statement of Secretary Tuerk appears on p. 39.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Secretary Tuerk, and thank you for the work you do.

First of all, I want to ask do you think the 170,000 veterans within a 75-mile radius requirement for new cemeteries unfairly burdens rural locations; and sort of part two of the question, you heard before another witness suggest that the mileage perhaps be modified to include driving time in those areas where traffic or road conditions make 75 miles a longer time than is perhaps possible?

Mr. TUERK. I do not believe, Mr. Chairman, that it is unfair per se to rural areas. With respect to the standard that NCA has adopted and the United States Congress has adopted in enacting two statutes directing us to build cemeteries at ten locations that were not rural, I believe the thinking behind both NCA's use of that methodology and Congressional endorsement was to try to measure relative need, to try to place the dollars in locations where we could serve the most veterans.

Until very recently, there were not national cemeteries in cities as big as Chicago, Seattle, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Detroit, Atlanta, Miami—very significant population centers that were not served with a burial option at all for the residents of those areas.

So I think the use of a methodology that counted the number of veterans within proximity to a given site—what we have used is a 75-mile radius—and applying the resources to the places where we could serve the most veterans, expressed a sense by NCA and a sense by the Congress that we ought to do the most we can for the most people. And that is what is behind our current construction projects and our strategic goal of reaching access to 90 percent of the veteran population within the Nation.

Mr. HALL. Thank you. And could you please explain the VA's process for selecting a location other than proximity to veterans, a certain number of veterans? Can citizens participate in the site selection process and how does that public input occur?

Mr. TUERK. What we have used and what the Congress has heretofore used has relied strictly on the numbers. We contracted in 1999 with an outside consultant to do an analysis of every location in the United States that did not currently have a cemetery and we asked the contractor to analyze census data to tell us how many people in proximity to that site were not served. We ranked the cities in question, in order—starting with those with the greatest number that were unserved—and ranking down in order.

When the Congress in both the “Millennium Act” and Public Law 108–109 directed us where to devote our resources, it took the names of the cities from the list in the order that our contractor had ranked them, and that contractor ranked them strictly on the basis of the number of veterans in proximity to the given site.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, sir.

And in the interest of our moving along briskly, I will turn to Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will try to be brisk.

Mr. Tuerk, how often does the NCA use donated land or does it ever for building a national cemetery?

Mr. TUERK. Well, let me cite the most recent projects that we are engaged in. As we speak right now, we are acquiring land at the six sites that I mentioned in my testimony: Bakersfield, Birmingham, Columbia, Jacksonville, Philadelphia, and Sarasota. In two of those six sites, we have been offered land by donation—one from a private landowner in Bakersfield, one by the Department of the Army from Fort Jackson to serve the Columbia area. In two of those six, then, we are getting donations. At the other four sites, we are purchasing.

Mr. LAMBORN. Okay. Thank you. Moving along, would you say that you did in the 1999 evaluation? When you looked at unserved veterans areas, did you take into account State cemeteries?

Mr. TUERK. Yes, we do. When we look at a given site to determine whether that site is currently served with a burial option, we take into account the presence of both a national cemetery in proximity and a State cemetery in proximity.

Mr. LAMBORN. Okay. Thank you. And, lastly, Mr. Hollingsworth testified that one thing that his organization is concerned about is how many additional cemeteries would be required to ensure that 90 percent of veterans live within 75 miles of a national cemetery. Do you happen to know what that number is?

Mr. TUERK. Yes, I do, sir. In 2010, when we have opened the six cemeteries that are mandated by Public Law 108–109 and the ad-

ditional State cemeteries that we anticipate we will be ripe for grant funding before that time are opened, at that point in time, we will have reached the 90 percent strategic goal that we are shooting for right now.

I would also add that we are not necessarily proposing to stop at that point. My written testimony, and this comes back to an issue that was raised by the Chairman, my written testimony indicates that I have already contracted for a program analysis of the methodology that we currently use.

Among the things that the contractor is going to analyze for us will be the utility of 170,000 threshold, the validity of the 75-mile radius, whether we ought to take into account geographic factors, such as traffic congestion, travel over mountains, that sort of thing. That contractor will take into account all of the elements that go into decisionmaking now, and at that point, we will be prepared to revisit the question of where we ought to go after 2010.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. Hare.

Mr. HARE. Thank you.

Mr. Secretary, I know my office has been in contact with you about the Rock Island Arsenal in terms of enclosures, and I know we have votes. So with your indulgence I would like to at some point maybe sit down and have the opportunity to converse with you about it.

Let me just tell you what I am seeing anyway. And I understand, but from a lot of the funerals, at the least the cemetery in my district that I see, very small committal area, extremely tough weather conditions, either hot in the summer, very cold for the family. The color guard which are obviously World War II vets, a lot of them Korean vets, awfully difficult for them standing out in weather like that.

And the other problem is, it seems to me, and I realize I was talking to some of the people, there is almost like a very hurried-up atmosphere. And I think this is the time when people are really wanting to maybe have a little bit of time. You cannot do that when you are shivering in the cold or having somebody fan you so you do not pass out in the heat.

And the other concern that I have and I want to talk to you about is the way it is, at least at our cemetery, when the committal service is completed and the one family leaves, there is another funeral waiting to drive into the driveway. They can see the VA people coming in, two of them loading the casket onto the back of a pickup truck or something.

It does not appear to me to be the most gracious way, if you will, of seeing that happen. I mean, there should be a way, I think, that the family is not exposed to that.

So I would like to, with your okay at some point, and I appreciate the time you spent with Amanda on it, and I know there are concerns, but, again, I would like to explore the possibility with you because my real concern is I have seen funeral directors or ministers looking at their watches like how fast can we get out of this place because of the wind. And it just appears to me to be very dis-

respectful for the family. And, I would very much like to have the opportunity to talk to you about that.

Mr. TUERK. I could not agree with you more that we have to show proper respect. We have to conduct dignified services, and looking at one's watch does not meet that standard.

I would be delighted to visit your cemetery. I grew up just about 80 miles down I-74 from Rock Island National Cemetery.

Mr. HARE. Oh, great.

Mr. TUERK. I know the weather well. We have tried, I will tell you, we have tried enclosed committal shelters in areas where the weather is even worse—Fort Snelling National Cemetery in Minneapolis. We are tearing them down. They were an abysmal failure. We have tried in some other places to have removable panels—both wood and glass. There have been difficulties.

But I am not close-minded to this thought. It certainly passes the “common-sense” test, it seems to me. I would be happy to spend time with you, at your cemetery in your district reviewing the situation out there. Certainly, we can address the vehicles that are used, and the way the staff is comporting themselves.

We are expanding significantly at Rock Island National Cemetery. We are going to have a new committal shelter. That should spread things out—the way Mr. Metzler talked about—you do not want committal services in proximity to one another.

Mr. HARE. Correct.

Mr. TUERK. That might also give us an opportunity to be a little bit less hurried in moving through the schedule.

But, I will tell you we pride ourselves in our ability to provide respectful, dignified committal services even at our “high volume” cemeteries. In some of our cemeteries, we bury as many as 8,000 persons per year. That is 175 a week, sometimes 30 a day. That is never reason to do committal less than respectfully—to do them hurriedly, to do them without proper dignity—and we never accept the volume of burials as an excuse for inappropriate staff behavior.

We have engineered our systems to prevent that sort of perception coming across. And I think we have generally succeeded—as reflected in our customer satisfaction scores. But if there are problems in Rock Island National Cemetery, we will attend to them, sir.

Mr. HARE. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Let me just quickly close by saying it is a beautiful cemetery and the staff there are very decent people. I think it is more logistically in terms of the way the drive is. But I would love to have you come out and we could spend a few hours and just sit down and talk and see if we can work something out.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Hare. Thank you, Mr. Tuerk.

And, Ms. Berkley, if perhaps you would agree to come back after votes.

Ms. BERKLEY. Thirty seconds. I am not coming back.

Mr. HALL. Thirty seconds? Okay.

Ms. BERKLEY. First of all, it is a pleasure to see you again. The last time I saw you was when we toured the Boulder City Cemetery and I would urge my colleague to bring you over to his cemetery as well.

Mr. TUERK. You were a gracious hostess, Ms. Berkley.

Ms. BERKLEY. Thank you. My pleasure. We said with the Wiccan symbol, as you know, it was a person from Nevada that led the charge so that her husband could get that symbol on his gravestone. We okay with that now?

Mr. TUERK. We are set.

Ms. BERKLEY. It is recognized?

Mr. TUERK. It is recognized.

Ms. BERKLEY. Do you do it as a matter of course?

Mr. TUERK. It is on our list. Any person of that religious persuasion who requests that emblem will now get it on his or her headstone in a VA national cemetery.

Ms. BERKLEY. You are a good man. Thank you.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. I just request, if we may, that if members have questions they want to submit in writing to you that you would respond to the Committee at a later date with your answers.

Now we are going to go. They are holding a vote open on the floor for us. So thank you again for your testimony and you are excused.

The hearing is now adjourned.

Mr. TUERK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Whereupon, at 3:48 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

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

Thank you all for coming. Today's hearing, "Veterans Cemeteries: Honoring Those Who Served," will provide this Subcommittee an opportunity to receive an update on the cemeteries that hold the remains of our veterans.

As some may know, veterans, who have served in this country's Armed Services, are buried in cemeteries operated by the States, VA, the Department of Interior, Arlington National Cemetery, American Battle Monuments Commission and private industry.

From all reports, it appears that VA's National Cemetery Administration is doing a good job running the cemeteries under its jurisdiction. However, I do have some concerns, which I hope will be addressed today. First, I want the VA to expound upon its standard for creating new national cemeteries. Is the current standard adequate for both urban and rural locations? And, does the VA provide opportunity for public input during the new cemetery selection process? In addition, I want to be updated on the current status of the National Shrine Commitment.

Finally, I want to know why it took close to a decade for the VA to display and recognize the Wiccan emblem. As most are aware, the military has long allowed Wiccans to practice their faith on military installations, but the VA, only recently, after litigation, started to allow the Wiccan symbol on gravestones. I would like to be assured today that the statements made by President Bush in 1999 had nothing to do with the VA refusing to recognize the Wiccan symbol.

Also, with respect to Arlington National Cemetery, I wish every cemetery could look as pristine and immaculate as the grounds at Arlington. However, this attractiveness does come at a cost. It has been reported that those waiting to be buried in Arlington face a backlog. I don't think veterans who have sacrificed so much for our country should have to wait to be buried. I am interested in finding out about the burial process at Arlington and whether individuals do indeed face lengthy delays. I would also like the Superintendent to touch upon the recent burial of Jack Valenti. I want to know why a veteran of his stature—over 50 combat missions during World War II—needed a waiver to be buried in Arlington.

Next, we will hear from a representative of the National Park Service, which is responsible for operating several Civil War-era cemeteries. It has come to my attention that some of those cemeteries are not being maintained at an acceptable standard worthy of those who have fought for this country. I would like to know if these reports are an aberration or signs of a pattern. If it is a pattern, please tell the Committee what it can do to improve the current situation.

We will also hear from the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), which very few Americans even know exists or what it is that they actually do. I am interested in learning about their efforts to educate people about Americans interred overseas. I also would like to note the significance of having the ABMC testify on the 62nd anniversary of V-E Day (Victory in Europe Day).

In closing, I would just like to say that I believe we must maintain our promise to those who have done so much for our country. Providing them a well-maintained and respectable final resting spot is the least we can do.

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 national cemeteries will rise from the current level of 2.8 million to 3.2 million by 2012.

Mr. Chairman, it is for that reason especially that I thank you for your leadership in helping to pass H.R. 1660 out of this Subcommittee 2 weeks ago. This bill would establish a national cemetery in southern Colorado and greatly benefit those veterans and families in this fast-growing area.

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

That is why in the Fiscal Year 2008 Republican Views and Estimates, we recommended an additional \$9 million over the Administration's \$166.8 million request for operations and maintenance at VA's National Cemetery Administration.

Further, Mr. Chairman, we recommended an additional \$5 million for minor construction.

We also recommended an additional \$60 million to accelerate VA's 5-year strategic plan to fund national cemetery gravesite expansion and shrine completion: we should not wait for years to ensure that the resting places for these patriots reflects our Nation's recognition of their service and sacrifice.

It is my understanding that most of our national cemeteries are kept in excellent condition; certainly my own experience of the Fort Logan National Cemetery reinforces this perception.

I am pleased to note that we have today a representative of the American Battle Monuments Commission. The Commission's standards are legendary, and I hope to soon visit one or more of their cemeteries for our war dead.

Disappointing exceptions to these high standards do exist, however.

Andersonville National Cemetery in Andersonville, Georgia, the site of the notorious Confederate prisoner of war camp, is one of 13 national cemeteries run by the National Park Service. Andersonville is one of two run by the Park Service that currently inters veterans.

My staff is now passing out photos that depict the deteriorating condition of gravestones and construction at Andersonville. I look forward to learning more about operations and maintenance at this and other Park Service cemeteries, as well as cemeteries run by VA and the ABMC.

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.

**Prepared Statement of John C. Metzler, Jr.
Superintendent, Arlington National Cemetery, Department of the Army
U.S. Department of Defense, and also on behalf of the
Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemeteries**

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this Subcommittee in support of the Department of the Army's Cemeterial Expenses program. I am testifying on behalf of the Secretary of the Army, who is responsible for operating and maintaining Arlington and Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemeteries, as well as making necessary capital improvements to ensure their long-term viability.

Arlington National Cemetery is the Nation's premier military cemetery. It is an honor to represent this cemetery and the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery. On behalf of these two cemeteries and the Department of the Army, I would like to express our appreciation for the support that Congress has provided over the years.

FISCAL YEAR 2008 BUDGET OVERVIEW

The FY 2008 budget is \$26,892,000, which is \$342,000 more than the FY 2007 request of \$26,550,000. The FY 2008 budget will support Arlington National Cemetery's efforts to improve its infrastructure and continue working toward implemen-

tation of its Ten-year Capital Investment Plan. The funds requested are adequate to support the work force, assure adequate maintenance of buildings and grounds, acquire necessary supplies and equipment, and provide the standards of service expected at Arlington and Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemeteries. It should be noted that operation and maintenance costs are increasing as the cemetery expands and improvements are made in the overall appearance of this national shrine.

GRAVESITE DEVELOPMENT

The budget also includes funds to pursue expansion efforts needed to ensure that Arlington National Cemetery remains an active burial place for servicemen and women into the next century. The following table displays how long gravesites will remain available in both developed and undeveloped areas that are currently part of the Cemetery. It is presented to illustrate the importance of proceeding with expansion projects in a timely manner so that there will be no disruption in services for deceased veterans and to relieve significant crowding of funeral services. Significant crowding is already occurring due to the ever-shrinking land available in the Cemetery. This is compromising the dignity of funerals by distracting families at ongoing nearby services, as well as disruptions caused by daily maintenance required to be performed at new gravesites.

Note that the gravesite capacity shown in the table for the undeveloped area includes Project 90 and utility relocations, but does not include the Millennium Project. Nor does the table reflect future land expansion projects programmed in the Ten-year Capital Investment Plan, such as the Navy Annex and Ft. Myer parking lot, which are currently authorized and addressed in the Concept Land Utilization Plan.

Arlington National Cemetery Gravesite Capacity as of September 30, 2006						
Gravesite Capacity—Developed Areas	Total Gravesites Used	Gravesites Currently Available	Year Available Capacity Exhausted	Gravesite Capacity—Undeveloped Area	Total Gravesite Capacity	Year Total Capacity Exhausted
243,373	221,453	21, 920	2015	36,000	279,373	2030

Project 90 Land Development. As the table illustrates, capacity in the currently developed area of Arlington National Cemetery is becoming more concentrated and will be exhausted by 2015. In order to extend the Cemetery's useful life to 2030, it was necessary to develop the 40 acres of open land within its current boundaries known as Project 90. This involved the development of gravesite areas, roads, utilities and a boundary wall with niches for the placement of cremated remains. Approximately 26,000 additional gravesites and 5,000 niches will be provided when the development is complete.

Phase I of the Project 90 land development effort, which consisted of grading the site, relocating utilities, constructing roads and landscaping gravesite areas, is complete. Phase II primarily entails construction of a new boundary niche wall that will hold the ashes of cremated remains on the inside of the wall. The niches and covers will be the same size and resemble those currently used at the existing Columbarium Complex. Construction of Phase II is scheduled to begin in FY 2007 and be completed in FY 2009, using prior year appropriations. At the current rate of niche use (without Phase II of Project 90), it is estimated that the additional niches will be needed by the year 2012.

Utility Relocations. Arlington County is planning to replace an aging sanitary sewer line that runs through Arlington National Cemetery with a new line known as the Potomac Interceptor. The presence of the existing sewer line prevents burials in approximately 10 acres of land along Eisenhower Drive. The new sewer line would be placed directly under the existing roadway, and if the other utilities (i.e., electric, telephone and water) that run through that area are also relocated, it is estimated that approximately 8 to 10 thousand more gravesites could be developed. As directed in House Report 109-464 accompanying the FY 2007 appropriations bill, a report is being prepared to determine what needs to be done to relocate the utilities so that the land can be developed for gravesites. Toward that end, \$1,700,000 is included in the FY 2008 budget to move the Federally owned water line.

Phase IV B Columbarium Complex. As the option for cremation becomes more acceptable and because eligibility in the Columbarium at Arlington National Cemetery is less restrictive than eligibility for in-ground interment, use of the Columbarium will increase. The recently completed Phase IV A court has 7,672 niches and

Phase IV B will have about the same number. Construction of the next court began in Fiscal Year 2006 to be sure that niches will be available when required.

Ten-year Capital Investment Plan. On February 5, 2007, the most recent update of the plan that identifies the Cemetery's new construction, major rehabilitation, major maintenance and study proposals for the next 10 years was provided to the House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies. It addresses projects identified in the 1998 Master Plan and other projects needed to ensure that the Cemetery remains open for burials into the twenty-second century. It also serves as a guide for annually recurring maintenance needs of the Cemetery.

The FY 2008 budget includes \$75,000 to continue developing and refining this multi-year plan for funding projects in a technically sound and financially efficient manner. This is a living document that will be periodically updated to reflect the latest information, identify new requirements and improve the quality of cost estimates. It is an essential tool in developing a credible long-term investment strategy and the budget recommendations that emanate from it.

Concept Land Utilization Plan. We have also developed a plan (transmitted to the House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies on October 27, 2000) that identifies the requirements for developing adjacent land for future expansion. The first site to be developed is the Millennium Project, which consists of the development of 36 acres of land into gravesite areas, roads, utilities, columbarium walls, and a boundary wall with niches for the placement of cremated remains. Approximately 19,000 additional gravesites and 26,000 niches will be provided when development is complete. Actual yields could change significantly, depending upon final design. The Millennium Project would extend the useful life of the Cemetery beyond 2025 to somewhere between 2038 and 2047, depending upon final implementation.

The Millennium Project consists of three parcels of land. The first parcel (7 acres) is land within the boundaries of Arlington National Cemetery made available by demolition of the old warehouse buildings. The second parcel (12 acres) was transferred to the Cemetery from the National Park Service on January 28, 2002, pursuant to the authority contained in Section 2863 of Public Law 107-107, the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2002. The final piece of the Millennium Project is a 13-acre parcel of adjacent land formerly owned by Fort Myer (picnic area), which was transferred to the Cemetery on January 21, 2004, in accordance with Section 2882 of the FY 2000 Defense Authorization Act (Public Law 106-65). The first phase of construction is anticipated to start in FY 2007.

The Concept Land Utilization Plan also includes the Navy Annex and Fort Myer parking lot, which would extend the Cemetery's life to somewhere between 2054 and 2068, again depending upon how these sites are ultimately developed. Increasing capacity beyond this timeframe will require additional land expansion for gravesites or more columbarium niches.

AMPHITHEATER RENOVATION/TOMB REPLACEMENT

The Memorial Amphitheater reception building has recently been renovated to address waterproofing needs. Problems with the aging structure included water damage throughout the building, interior drainage system, flooding in the women's restroom and lower level chapel area. Renovation addressed water damage throughout the structure and improving the general appearance of the building.

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery has been deteriorating. Replacement options are being considered as part of the National Historic Preservation Act consultation process. At the conclusion of that process, we will know what work needs to be done, when it will need to be done and how much it will cost. We will include any funding needs associated with the replacement in future budgets.

FUNERALS

In FY 2006, an all time record was set with 4,095 interments and 2,580 inurnments, of which 103 were related to the War on Terrorism. In FY 2007, we estimate there will be 4,084 interments and 2,600 inurnments. Looking ahead to FY 2008, we estimate there will be 4,084 interments and 2,600 inurnments.

CEREMONIES AND VISITATION

Millions of visitors, both foreign and American, come to Arlington to view the Cemetery and participate in ceremonial events. During FY 2006, about 3,400 ceremonies were conducted, with the President of the United States attending the ceremonies on Veterans Day and Memorial Day.

During FY 2006, Arlington National Cemetery accommodated approximately 4 million visitors, making it one of the most visited historic sites in the National Cap-

itol region. A study conducted in the 1998/1999 timeframe confirmed this estimate. A customer survey system has been designed and will be implemented in conjunction with the Cemetery's overall automation plan and will be used to collect, enter and analyze the survey data.

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

**Prepared Statement of Fred Boyles
Superintendent, Andersonville National Historic Site and Cemetery
National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior**

I wish to thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear today to discuss the national cemeteries that are managed by the National Park Service. It is a great honor to protect the memories of those who have served our country and to interpret the conflicts in which they served.

The National Park Service (NPS) protects and manages 14 of our Nation's national cemeteries. With the exception of Andrew Johnson National Cemetery and Custer National Cemetery at Little Bighorn Battlefield, all of 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 were established soon after the battle ended. In some, such as Yorktown National Cemetery, 1,434 of the 2,183 soldiers interred were unidentified, a reminder of the scale of brutality and loss suffered by soldiers and families during this war between the American States. 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, many of these cemeteries, with their monuments and memorials, were transferred to the National Park Service as part of the national battlefields, national historic sites, and national military parks that interpret the campaigns, conflicts, and ordeals that the soldiers endured.

Two of the national cemeteries within the National Park Service are still open to veterans for burial. They are Andersonville National Cemetery located in southwest Georgia and Andrew Johnson National Cemetery located in east Tennessee. In 2006, Andersonville buried 161 veterans and their dependents and Andrew Johnson buried 67. As of January 2007, Andrew Johnson had approximately 457 grave spaces available and Andersonville had 6,669 grave spaces available for future gravesites. Both of these cemeteries follow the same rules and regulations for burials that apply to cemeteries administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Cemeteries that are more than a century old require constant attention. Over the past 5 years, the NPS has devoted more than \$1 million in project funds to repair stone walls, headstones, monuments, and walkways. Examples of projects completed with these funds include \$675,000 to repoint and repair cemetery walls at Andersonville, Battleground, Fort Donelson, and Fredericksburg National Cemeteries; \$145,000 to realign and maintain headstones at Gettysburg, Stones River, and Vicksburg National Cemeteries; and \$118,000 to repair sidewalks at Andrew Johnson National Cemetery.

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. In FY 2005, the NPS's National Center for Preservation Technology and Training (Center) delivered nine classes on cemetery preservation to 300 employees of the NPS, an effort to increase the technical skills of our maintenance employees and managers responsible for these sacred places. The Center has also partnered with the VA's National Cemetery Administration on a multi-year project to test headstone cleaning agents.

While we have devoted funds and employees to cemetery maintenance, as is often the case with historic resources, much remains to be done. We are working closely with the VA to upgrade our cemeteries to the conditions set forth in their recently updated "Cemetery Standards of Appearance." In 2006, the Department appointed me to serve as an ex-officio member of the VA's National Cemetery Advisory Committee. I am working closely with the VA to help NPS cemeteries achieve VA standards and to coordinate the efforts of the two entities.

Once again, I thank the Committee for allowing me to present this testimony on this issue and 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;
 Andrew Johnson National Cemetery at Andrew Johnson National Historic Site;
 Antietam National Cemetery at Antietam National Battlefield;
 Battleground National Cemetery at Rock Creek Park;
 Chalmette National Cemetery at Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve;
 Custer National Cemetery at Little Bighorn National Battlefield;
 Fort Donelson National Cemetery at Fort Donelson National Battlefield;
 Fredericksburg National Cemetery at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park;
 Gettysburg National Cemetery at Gettysburg National Military Park;
 Poplar Grove National Cemetery at Petersburg National Battlefield;
 Shiloh National Cemetery at Shiloh National Military Park;
 Stones River National Cemetery at Stones River National Battlefield;
 Vicksburg National Cemetery at Vicksburg National Military Park; and
 Yorktown National Battlefield at Colonial National Historical Park.

**Prepared Statement of Brigadier General John W. Nicholson, USA (Ret.)
 Secretary, American Battle Monuments Commission**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:
 I open my statement with the words of Harry Truman:

“Our debt to the heroic men and valiant women in the service of our country can never be repaid. They have earned our undying gratitude. Americans will never forget their sacrifices.”

When visitors approach the new Normandy American Cemetery Visitor Center that we will dedicate on June 6th, these are the first words they will read. The statement mirrors the mission of the American Battle Monuments Commission, which is to honor and commemorate the service, achievements and sacrifice of America’s Armed Forces.

Our fiscal year 2008 appropriation request for \$53.3 million enables us to continue that mission. It funds the Commission’s Salaries and Expenses Account as well as our Foreign Currency Fluctuation Account.

For our Salaries and Expenses Account, we request \$42.1 million to support the Commission’s requirements for personnel costs, service fees, scheduled maintenance and repairs, supplies, materials, spare parts, equipment replacement, and capital improvement.

Our request maintains staffing levels at 404 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) positions and \$1.6 million for security enhancements to open and protect the Normandy Visitor Center, its employees and visitors. These security enhancements are required by the Regional Security Office of the U.S. Embassy in Paris. We have also included \$1.4 million to support annual operations at the Visitor Center. FY 2008 funding provides the first full-year operating costs.

Our ongoing worldwide ABMC challenge is to sustain the high standards of excellence we have set in maintaining our commemorative sites as shrines to America’s War Dead, while continuing to do a better job of telling the story of those we honor and persuading millions more people of all nationalities to see these splendid sites, which reflect the values of our United States of America.

For our Foreign Currency Fluctuation Account, we request \$11.2 million to replenish the funds needed to defray losses experienced due to currency fluctuation, so we can maintain our buying power for services and materials to operate and sustain our commemorative sites in the European and Mediterranean regions.

ABMC has struggled with maintaining our purchasing power over the years; in 2005 we needed a special foreign currency appropriation to do so. For FY 08, we propose a change in our approach to funding the Foreign Currency Fluctuation Account. New appropriation language requests an indefinite appropriation to supply “such sums” as may be necessary to maintain buying power against the European Euro, the British Pound and other currencies. With this legislation, the Congress could use the “such sums” language proposal to re-estimate our foreign currency requirements, if needed, during the year.

Foreign currency is very important to ABMC. As noted by the GAO, over 70% of ABMC’s budget is paid in euros or pounds. The volatility of exchange rates, combined with a weakening dollar, has increased the real cost of our ABMC mission and made it more difficult to plan and budget as effectively as we would like. An

indefinite appropriation would remove some foreign currency vagaries from our budget preparation and execution.

For example, we began the FY 08 budget process a year ago, which was 2 years before we will actually begin to purchase foreign currency to pay our staff and suppliers abroad. Exchange rates can change significantly over 2 years. The “such sums” appropriations language would enable the Congress to remove that uncertainty. On May 1, 2006, 1 European Euro cost 1.2639 U.S. Dollars. On April 30, 2007, 1 European Euro cost 1.36600 U.S. Dollars, an 8% decrease in purchasing power. The “such sums” language would protect our purchasing power against such drops.

We would continue to work with OMB, GAO and the Congressional staffs in choosing an appropriate currency rate for our budget submissions. However, the Congress by incorporating the “such sums” flexibility could prevent the situation where the foreign currency fluctuation is the determining factor in selecting which activities or projects we can afford to pursue. In other words, without “such sums” authorization, a decrease in the value of the U.S. Dollar vis-à-vis the European Euro or British Pound could necessitate a halt to vital maintenance projects in order to pay salaries or other expenses. Allowing us to focus on our mission is the real payoff of this change in approach to foreign currency fluctuations.

Our facilities, most constructed following World War I and World War II, have aged considerably. Over time, deterioration accelerates, and the costs of materials, labor, and utilities increase around the world. We are allocating \$3 million toward high-priority engineering projects specifically designed to protect the American people’s investment in the commemorative sites for which we are responsible. This funding will be used to perform periodic maintenance and to correct deficiencies within our infrastructure.

Since 2002, the Commission has been in the process of designing and constructing a visitor center at the Normandy American Cemetery in France. The center will tell the story of the 9,387 American soldiers buried at Normandy and the 1,557 missing in action memorialized there. Construction is nearly complete and we will dedicate the new center 4 weeks from tomorrow, on June 6, 2007, the 63rd anniversary of the D-Day landings.

Our challenge is to sustain the high standards of excellence we have set in maintaining our commemorative sites as shrines to America’s War Dead. Concurrently, we are doing a better job of telling the story of these uniquely splendid cemeteries and memorials. They inspire patriotism, evoke gratitude, and teach lessons of history to all who visit.

We are grateful for the support we receive from the House. The trust you place in us and your understanding of our operational needs ensures that we have sufficient resources, when we need them, to sustain our operations.

I would like to close by introducing the members of my staff that accompanied me today:

- Brigadier General William Leszczynski, Jr., U.S. Army (Retired), Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer;
- Guy Giancarlo, Chief Financial Officer;
- Jeannie Faure, Budget Officer; and
- Tom Sole, Director of Engineering and Maintenance.

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

**Prepared Statement of Kimo S. Hollingsworth
National Legislative Director, American Veterans (AMVETS)**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to appear today to offer testimony on behalf of American Veterans (AMVETS) regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration.

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is a unique organization within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). While the NCA provides a direct benefit to veterans for service to this Nation, the stakeholders of VA burial programs are varied, diverse and many. The NCA transcends the issue of veterans’ benefits—VA and State-sponsored VA cemeteries define America’s past, present and future. These final resting places are filled with the history of this great Nation and are truly national shrines.

Mr. Chairman, Public Law 106–117 required VA to contract for an independent study on improvements to veterans' cemeteries. Overall, VA provided this Committee three volumes as part of the *Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries*.

The *Future Burial Needs* report (volume 1) provided an assessment of the number of additional cemeteries that will be required to ensure that 90 percent of veterans live within 75 miles of a national cemetery beginning in 2005 and projecting out to 2020. In addition, the report identified those areas in the United States with the greatest concentration of veterans whose burial needs are not served by a national cemetery, as well as an estimate of the costs to construct, staff and equip a new cemetery.

The *National Shrine Commitment—Condition Facility Assessment* report (volume 2) provided the first independent, systemwide comprehensive review of the conditions at 119 national cemeteries. The study reviewed each cemetery and made recommendations for projects based on cemetery age, topography, space and burial options. Approximately 13 cemetery specific elements and over 60 specific features were evaluated for each cemetery. The study identified over 900 projects with an estimated cost of \$280 million. Some of these projects have received funding and some have been completed. Many of the projects and repairs will require continued attention as the care and maintenance of cemetery grounds and facilities requires continuing efforts.

The *Cemetery Standards of Appearance* report (volume 3) addressed the requirements related to the feasibility of establishing standards of appearance for our national cemeteries commensurate with those of the finest cemeteries in the world, as well as the use of upright headstones and flat grave markers in national cemeteries. Overall, this volume did not find any "single cemetery that qualifies for distinction on elements of appearance." The study also recommended a set of 122 standards for consideration by NCA as criteria by which to judge success.

Mr. Chairman, AMVETS fully supported the *Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries* and believes it serves as a valuable planning tool for VA and Congress in establishing standards and priorities with regards to VA national cemeteries.

Annual veteran deaths will remain high and annual interments will increase from approximately 97,000 in 2006 to an estimated peak of 115,000 in 2009. If VA cemetery service capabilities are allowed to decline, then veterans and their families will lose access to burial options located within reasonable distances from their homes. AMVETS believes that honoring those who served through the NCA is an important part of our culture, history and national identity. We would encourage Congress to support NCA as it seeks to develop additional national cemeteries, expand existing capabilities, and also encourage individual States to develop State veterans cemeteries through the State Cemetery Grants Program.

AMVETS continues to recommend that Congress establish a 5-year, \$250 million "*National Shrine Initiative*" to restore and improve the condition and character of NCA cemeteries. Enacting a 5-year program with dedicated funds and an ambitious schedule, the national cemetery system holds the potential to fully serve all veterans and their families with the utmost dignity, respect, and compassion.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony.

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

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of the members of the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) regarding Veterans' Cemeteries. I am Lesley Witter, NFDA's Director of Political Affairs.

The National Funeral Directors Association represents more than 13,000 funeral homes and over 21,000 licensed funeral directors and embalmers in all 50 States. The average NFDA member is an independently owned and operated business with fewer than 10 employees and has been in the same family for over 60 years. NFDA is the leading funeral service organization in America, providing a national voice for the profession.

The NFDA has a great interest in veterans' cemeteries as our members provide both funeral and burial services for our Nation's veterans on a daily basis. As a result, they use national veterans' cemeteries as well as State veteran's cemeteries often.

In a recent survey of our members, we have received an almost unanimous response that our Nation's veterans' cemeteries operate efficiently, effectively and with much compassion for those being buried there, as well as for their families.

Our members have found the management and operation of these cemeteries to be courteous, flexible and accommodating to the needs of the funeral director and the family members of the deceased veterans.

While most of our members are well satisfied with the services provided to them by veterans' cemeteries, there are some improvements that could be made. As one of our Board members from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania recently stated: *"In Western P.A., we have been blessed with a National Cemetery with burials taking place for the past 18 months. In my experience, those folks have done a superior job in scheduling and taking care of veterans' families. Every instance of burials in the National Cemetery of the Alleghenies has been respectful and dignified. My only concern is that there are not enough brochures to allow us to publicize its existence and availability."*

An NFDA member from Maine stated that *"Togas National Cemetery, the only national cemetery in Maine, is now inactive but well-kept and is the final resting place for 5,373 veterans from the War of 1812 through the Korean War. It was first opened in 1867 and was closed to new burials in 1961. Of historical interest, a Medal of Honor recipient from the "Boxer Rebellion" and three "Buffalo Soldiers" rest there. Additionally, a member of the Army detachment that located and killed John Wilkes Booth is buried there. The closest national cemetery to Maine is Massachusetts National Cemetery in Bourne, Massachusetts. Additionally, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont do not have any national cemeteries."*

One NFDA member from Florida stated: *"Being in Southwest Florida and with the amount of retired veterans that have come to our beautiful side of the State, we deal regularly with the Florida National Cemetery as well as many times with Arlington National Cemetery. I couldn't be more pleased with how we are taken care of when we call the Florida National Cemetery. Everyone is pleasant, efficient and knowledgeable and the cemetery is kept up beautifully."*

A Massachusetts member writes: *"I am a funeral director in Brockton, Mass. We have interments at the Massachusetts National Cemetery in Bourne probably 40-50 times a year. The entire staff at Bourne is fantastic. They are very helpful and accommodating to our families and us. I especially appreciate the improvement of being able to call the Jefferson Barracks in Missouri on weekends to schedule funerals in Bourne."* NFDA would like to note that no veterans' cemeteries are available for burials on weekends, except in special circumstances. In fact, weekend burials in veterans' cemeteries appear to be a general problem for many of our members.

An Illinois member stated: *"We use the Rock Island National Cemetery quite often; in fact, I have expressed my desire to be buried there since I am an eligible veteran of the Vietnam War. I really do not know of any way to make improvements. It is impossible to say enough good about the management, the way families are treated and the way funeral directors are treated. Please encourage the Veteran's Administration to leave it just as it is."*

A comment from our New Jersey State Funeral Directors Association stated: *"New Jersey has one of the highest per capita population rates in the country. In addition, New Jersey and the surrounding States have some of the most congested roadways in the nation. Unfortunately, New Jersey veteran families are underserved by the location of the Mid-Atlantic National Cemeteries. Funeral processions from the Garden State (originating in the North, Central or Southern part of the State) travel a minimum of 3 hours to the closest cemetery (Calverton, Arlington, or Indian Gap). Such excessive travel adds to the cost of the funeral and creates a travel burden on families who would like to visit the grave. Considering the population that would be served, the National Cemetery System should build a new cemetery that would be more convenient for New Jersey Veteran families."*

Finally an Arizona member wrote: *"I am very pleased to be able to respond to your request regarding our National Cemeteries—in a positive light. We have a wonderful National Cemetery and Staff here in Phoenix. We have no problems with scheduling; if we need a "favor" every now and then, they are willing to go the extra mile for us. They are compassionate with families and are attentive to their needs as well as ours. I'm sure if you spoke with any of our other Directors they would agree."*

I use these examples from around the country to illustrate that from our member's standpoint the operation and management of our veterans' cemeteries is of the highest caliber. Believe me, if it was not, our members would say so. They tend to be very protective of the families they serve, and want to ensure that all families are treated with respect and dignity during all phases of the funeral and interment.

In our dealings with the National Cemetery Administration on issues, problems or questions that arise from time to time, our members found them to be very responsive and eager to assist in any way possible to find a solution. For example last year, one of our members in South Yarmouth, Massachusetts called to express concern over the number of broken or damaged markers they were receiving and the

problems that caused for the families. We contacted NCA and they were very helpful in solving this matter directly with the funeral home. NCA advised the funeral home to be sure that their staff inspected the markers before accepting them and to report any damages to NCA. They also indicated that they would look into revising their transportation requirements for the vendors who manufacture and ship the markers to ensure they are being adequately packed and protected. We could not ask more from them.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would like to express our strong support for H.R. 358, a bill that would expand and make permanent the Department of Veterans Affairs benefit for government markers for marked graves of veterans buried in private cemeteries. In addition, H.R. 1273 which was introduced by Subcommittee member Rep. Berkley and would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to restore plot allowance eligibility for veterans of any war and to restore the headstone or marker allowance for eligible persons, is currently being reviewed by our Advocacy Committee.

I would also like to commend the Committee on its passage of legislation that prohibits demonstrations at the funeral and burials of our fallen heroes in Afghanistan and Iraq. Our members very much appreciate the concern of Congress in protecting the privacy of these very solemn and emotional occasions.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my testimony. I hope it has been helpful.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear and present the views of the National Funeral Directors Association. I will be happy to answer any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have.

**Prepared Statement of Colonel George S. Webb, USA (Ret.)
Chairman, Memorial Affairs Committee
National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, and
Executive Director, Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs**

Subcommittee Chairman Hall, Ranking Subcommittee member Lamborn, and distinguished members of the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee, I am George Webb, Executive Director of the Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs and Chairman of the Memorial Affairs Committee of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs. On behalf of the President of our National Association, Secretary John Garcia of New Mexico, I thank you for the opportunity to testify and present the views of our State Directors of Veterans Affairs from all 50 States and our commonwealths and territories.

We greatly appreciate the leadership of Chairman Filner, Ranking Member Buyer, and the entire membership of the House Veterans Affairs Committee for their past support of building upon the administration's budget, and we hope that it continues.

Each State Secretary or Director is appointed by his or her Governor, and collectively we are the Nation's second largest provider of services to veterans. Our State Directors spend a total of over \$4 billion in State money annually to ensure that veterans receive all benefits due. We run State veterans' homes, oversee the management of State veteran cemeteries, and employ accredited and trained Veteran Service Officers. While each State structure differs slightly, these are the principal responsibilities of most of us. In some States, the Director also oversees the process of job training and employment for veterans. We are on the frontline assisting America's veterans with the benefits they have earned.

The mission of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs is to work in collaboration with the Federal Government as it strives to disseminate information regarding all laws beneficial to veterans, their widows, and their children; to assist veterans and their dependants in the preparation and initiation of claims against the United States by reason of military service; and to assist veterans, widows, and children of veterans in establishing the privileges to which they are entitled. Our Association recognizes the great worth and merit of all existing veterans organizations, and we assert our willingness and determination to cooperate with them.

Today I would like to address the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs regarding State veterans cemeteries. Each State now has a National Cemetery and/or a State Cemetery—or more. Like others, we State Directors consider these cemeteries as shrines to veterans who helped preserve our freedom and memorials to those who contributed to the growth, development, and preservation of the United States. This final veteran's salute honors those who served our grate-

ful Nation, so we State Directors are committed to ensuring that all veterans are buried with the respect and dignity they so deserve.

During our Association conference in February, NASDVA members unanimously passed three resolutions: increase the Burial Plot Allowance, increase funding for the State Veterans Cemetery Grant Program (SCGP), and establish a State Veterans' Cemetery Operations Grant Program.

Briefly stated, when a State veterans' cemetery project is approved, the VA fully funds its construction and initial equipment outlay, and the State then assumes operational costs in perpetuity. Mr. Chairman and Committee members, the average operational cost of interment in a State veterans' cemetery is \$2,000, yet the current burial plot allowance of \$300 per qualified interment covers only 15% of that cost. NASDVA recommends the Plot Allowance be increased to \$1,000 in order to offset operational costs borne by the States. The increase should also apply to the plot allowance for veterans' interments in private cemeteries. Second, the State Veterans Cemetery Grant Program (SCGP) has greatly expanded our ability to provide gravesites for veterans and their eligible family members in areas where national cemeteries cannot fully satisfy burial needs, particularly in rural and remote areas. The program has allowed the number of State cemeteries to grow by nearly 40% over the past 5 years, with a corresponding increase in interments. Currently, over 40 project pre-applications are pending, totaling \$180 million—yet VA funding for these projects has remained flat at \$32 million for several years. We ask that SCGP funding be increased to \$50M. Third, eligible States receive construction grants for veterans' cemeteries and a limited burial plot allowance as discussed above. Operational costs for State and national veterans' cemeteries continue to rise, but once a State establishes a State veterans' cemetery, there is no further source of Federal operational funding. NASDVA recommends the establishment of a Federal grant program to assist State veterans' cemeteries with operational costs.

Last year the Congress authorized veterans' cemeteries on Native-American tribal lands, but funding for this is expected to come from the same flat \$32 million appropriated for State veterans' cemeteries.

In addition, the VA uses a 75-mile radius calculation in determining where a State veterans' cemetery should be built. States with more traffic congestion would like some consideration by using driving time as an additional determinant.

Finally, our State Directors wish to thank the Congress for two bills passed last year. Preventing persons convicted of capital crimes from being eligible for burial in our State cemeteries—as well as national cemeteries—is important. Second, the bill passed in December, which became PL 109-464, is an important step in keeping military funerals dignified and respectful.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, we respect the important work that you have done to improve benefits to veterans who have answered the call to serve our Nation. NASDVA remains dedicated to doing its part, but we urge you to be mindful of the increasing financial challenge that States face, just as you address the fiscal challenge at the Federal level. We remain dedicated to our partnership with the VA in the delivery of services and care to our Nation's veterans. This concludes my statement, and I am ready to answer any questions you may have.

Prepared Statement of Hon. William F. Turek 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 veterans cemeteries and the current activities of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA).

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 the VA's burial and funeral benefits for veterans. We, in NCA, have four statutory missions under Title 38, United States Code:

- To provide burial for eligible veterans and their eligible dependents, 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, as grants, up to 100 percent of the development cost for establishing, expanding and improving veterans cemeteries owned and operated by the States; 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 veterans' service.

NCA currently maintains more than 2.8 million gravesites at 125 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 about 97,000 in FY 2006. (We expect to perform nearly 105,000 interments in 2008, an 8.3-percent increase over the number performed in 2006.) NCA processed more than 336,000 applications for Government-furnished headstones and markers for the graves of veterans worldwide in FY 2006. In FY 2006, NCA also issued nearly 406,000 Presidential Memorial Certificates to the families of eligible veterans. Sixty-five State veterans cemeteries funded under the SCGP are operated in 33 States, Guam and Saipan.

This is a very important period in NCA history as we experience an unprecedented expansion to match the unprecedented growth in the population of veterans we serve. We seek to undergo this expansion while maintaining the highest level of service to our veterans in all our program areas. The results of the reports required by the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act of 1999 have served as valuable tools for the Department by providing data for use in our planning processes. Armed with the data generated by these reports, we have been able to plan effectively, particularly in the areas of meeting the burial needs of veterans and in maintaining our national cemeteries as national shrines. I appreciate this opportunity to describe some of our current initiatives and several of our major accomplishments.

Meeting the Burial Needs of Veterans

One of VA's primary missions is to ensure that the burial needs of veterans are met. In support of this mission, VA's goal is to increase service delivery by providing more veterans with reasonable access to a burial option (whether for casketed or cremated remains) in a national or State veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their residence. VA's current policy is to locate national cemeteries in areas with the largest concentration of *unserved* veterans. VA and Congress have determined that new national cemeteries will be established in areas with an *unserved* veteran population threshold of 170,000 within a 75-mile service radius. This policy has enabled VA to focus resources on serving areas in which high concentrations of veterans do not have access to a burial option.

Annual veteran deaths have increased significantly over the years as World War II and Korean War-era veterans have advanced in age. Based on the 2000 U.S. Census, there were an estimated 644,000 veteran deaths in FY 2000. Annual veteran deaths were projected to peak at 688,000 in FY 2006 and then to slowly decline. However, with the opening of new national cemeteries, annual NCA interments are projected to increase from 97,000 in FY 2006 to 115,000 in FY 2009, an increase of 19 percent.

We are working diligently to meet the burial needs of individuals who served during previous periods of conflict. But we are working even harder to do everything possible to accommodate the special needs of family members who have lost a loved one serving overseas in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF). As of the end of April 2007, 686 OEF/OIF servicemen and women have been interred in either a VA or a State veterans cemetery. In addition, 1,347 headstones or markers have been provided for fallen OEF/OIF servicemembers who are buried in private cemeteries. To honor these brave men and women, we expedite the placement of headstones or markers and, where possible, we accommodate burial requests even in closed national cemeteries if a gravesite is available due to, for example, the reclamation of a previously-obstructed or previously-reserved gravesite.

Of the 125 national cemeteries operated by NCA, 65 cemeteries have gravesites available for the first interment of casketed and cremated remains; 21 cemeteries can accommodate the first interment of cremated remains only (along with the remains of subsequent family members); and the remaining 39 cemeteries can only provide burial for the remains of subsequent family members.

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. Currently, over 80 percent of all veterans in the Nation reside within a 75-mile radius of a

national or State veterans cemetery. NCA intends to increase the percentage of veterans served to 90 percent by FY 2010. Strategic initiatives are in place to meet this goal. They are:

- Establishment of additional national cemeteries in unserved areas;
- Expansion of existing national cemeteries to provide continued service; and
- Establishment or expansion of State veterans cemeteries through the SCGP.

The *Future Burial Needs* report, completed in 2002, is the most recent demographic study completed to assist the National Cemetery Administration in its long range planning. The report 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 spaces. In June 2003, VA transmitted to Congress revised veteran population estimates, based on 2000 United States Census data, for all locations identified in the report. From these two listings, 12 locations were identified as having the greatest number of veterans with unserved burial need; all met VA's veteran population threshold of 170,000 for planning new national cemeteries. Public Law 106–117 directed the Secretary to build six new national cemeteries; six additional locations were identified in Public Law 108–109, the National Cemetery Expansion Act of 2003. In tandem, then, these statutes mandated that NCA construct 12 new national cemeteries.

Establishing New National Cemeteries

As required by law, VA is well along in establishing 12 new national cemeteries. The first six of these new national cemeteries—those mandated by Public Law 106–117—are currently open for burials, providing service to veterans in six geographic areas: Atlanta, Georgia; Detroit, Michigan; Ft. Sill, Oklahoma; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Sacramento, California; and South Florida. These cemeteries now provide service to 2 million veterans who had resided in areas not previously served by a national or State veterans cemetery.

Forearmed with the VA's veteran population threshold for establishing new cemeteries and the locations recommended by the *Future Burial Needs* report, Congress enacted the National Cemetery Expansion Act of 2003 (Public Law 108–109) in November 2003. This legislation directs VA to establish six additional national cemeteries near Bakersfield, California; Birmingham, Alabama; Columbia/Greenville, South Carolina; Jacksonville, Florida; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Sarasota County, Florida. Funding of \$41 million was appropriated in FY 2006 for land acquisition costs, and \$12 million was appropriated in FY 2007 for preliminary design work. Funding of \$137 million is included in NCA's FY 2008 major construction request for the six new cemeteries.

At this point, we have identified cemetery sites for all six locations specified in Public Law 108–109, and we have taken title to one of these six sites. We anticipate taking title to the other five sites this year. Our goal is to have early turnover gravesite sections open in all six new cemeteries by 2009. NCA has begun opening early turnover "fast track" gravesite sections in new cemeteries to expedite the initiation of burial operations. We have found that the families of veterans prefer this approach to the alternative of waiting for the construction of the entire first phase of a cemetery to be completed.

Expanding and Improving Current National Cemeteries

NCA will continue to expand, and make improvements to, existing national cemeteries by acquiring additional land and completing development projects that make additional gravesites or columbaria available for interments. We have major and minor construction projects underway to expand the life cycles of several national cemeteries so that they can continue to meet the burial needs of veterans in their geographic regions. Included in the President's FY 2008 budget request is a major expansion project at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery for \$29.4 million. Also included is \$24.4 million for the minor construction program which will focus primarily on gravesite expansion projects.

We are also looking at our internal processes to ensure that we are maximizing the use of resources and giving veterans ever-improving services. These activities range from establishing a national training center to prepare the next generation of cemetery directors to restructuring the processing of both interment and headstone and marker applications to better serve the needs of families and funeral directors. In the area of facilities, we are implementing multiple efficiencies in our cemeteries to maximize the yield of burial spaces from our cemetery properties and, simultaneously, reduce future grounds maintenance costs. This includes the use of pre-placed graveliners that are installed at the time of burial section's construction.

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.

We are also responding to changes in burial preferences by veterans and their families by constructing a greater number of columbaria for the interment of cremated remains. This permits us to increase the number of burials that can be accommodated at a given site, and at the same time, be responsive to demand for this burial option. The choice of cremation over full-casket burial continues to increase in private and national cemeteries. The Cremation Association of North America projects that the national cremation rate will increase from 31 percent (in 2004) to 38 percent (in 2010) and to 51 percent (in 2025). In some States, the projected national average is already exceeded. In 2004, California had a cremation rate of 51 percent and Florida had a cremation rate of 48 percent. For fiscal year 2006, NCA's cremation rate was 40 percent of all interments performed. We anticipate that this number will continue to increase consistent with the national trend.

Providing Grants for State Veterans Cemeteries

The State Cemetery Grants Program is vital to achieving NCA's burial access goal and permitting NCA to meet the needs of veterans in less populated areas where the concentration of veterans cannot meet NCA's criterion for the establishment of a national cemetery. NCA provides funding up to 100 percent of the development and start up equipment costs for State veterans cemetery projects. The SCGP was first established by Public Law 95-476 in 1978 to complement VA's network of national cemeteries. The program received permanent authority in 2003 with the enactment of Public Law 108-183.

The purpose of NCA State cemetery grants is to establish, expand or improve veterans cemeteries that are owned and operated by the States. 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 servicemembers who die on active duty and veterans, and their spouses, minor children, and disabled adult children.

To date, VA has awarded 153 grants totaling more than \$271 million to establish, expand or improve 70 veterans cemeteries in 35 States plus Guam and Saipan. Sixty-five cemeteries are now operational. Five new State cemeteries are now under construction. There is no limit to the number of veterans cemeteries a State may have under the grant program. Some States, such as Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin, have been pro-active and have opened State veterans cemeteries to coincide with the anticipated closure of nearby VA national cemeteries. In FY 2006, State veterans cemeteries provided for 22,434 burials.

When the SCGP was established, the program provided grants of only 50 percent of the total cost of the establishment, expansion or improvement of a State veterans cemetery. Under the original law, the value of the land could be counted toward the State's matching share, with certain limitations. The Veterans Benefits Enhancement Act of 1998, Public Law 105-368, authorized NCA to pay up to 100 percent of the development cost of establishing, improving or expanding State veterans cemeteries—but States are now required to furnish the land upon which the cemetery will be built. In addition, VA may provide funding for the purchase of equipment needed to operate a new State veterans cemetery at the time the cemetery is first established.

Largely in response to this recent legislation, State interest in participating in the SCGP has increased. Since 2001, 22 new State veterans cemeteries have opened in 17 States. (With the opening of the Idaho Veterans Cemetery in 2004, there is now a national or State veterans cemetery in each State in the Union.) In addition, States have submitted 43 "pre-applications" for grant funding, totaling an estimated \$170 million, that have been preliminarily approved by VA. These projects include 21 projects to establish new cemeteries. Several would be built near major military installations such as Fort Riley, Kansas; Fort Stewart, Georgia; Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri; and Fort Polk, Louisiana. Others would serve veterans in moderately-sized metropolitan areas such as Des Moines, Iowa and Abilene, Texas. Many are in rural areas remote from existing national or State veterans cemeteries, such as Missoula, Montana and Alliance, Nebraska.

As the National Cemetery Administration proceeds with construction of the last 6 of the 12 new national cemeteries mandated by Congress, and as it continues to provide grants to the States for construction of State veterans cemeteries, we believe it is time to reassess current policies and to think strategically about how we will meet the needs of veterans in the future. To do this, VA has commissioned a burial needs assessment study that will address issues such as:

- 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 will be pleased to share this needs assessment study report with the Congress as soon as we receive it early next year.

Maintaining National Cemeteries as National Shrines

One of NCA's statutory mandates is to maintain national cemeteries as national shrines. A national shrine is a place of dignity, a place that declares to the visitor that each veteran who rests within is honored for his or her service and sacrifice. Our visitors should depart feeling that the grounds, the gravesites and the environs of the national cemetery are a beautiful and awe-inspiring tribute to those who gave much to preserve our Nation's freedom and democratic way of life. As national shrines, VA's cemeteries serve a purpose that continues long after burials have ceased and visits from immediate families and loved ones have ended.

National cemeteries carry expectations of appearance that set them apart from their civilian counterparts. As required by the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act, VA contracted for an independent study to identify the repairs needed to ensure a dignified and respectful setting at each national cemetery. The report, *National Shrine Commitment*, was delivered to Congress in August 2002. This report provided the first independent, systemwide, comprehensive assessment of the condition of VA assets at 119 national cemeteries. It also identified 928 projects needed to repair, alter, or improve existing cemetery elements at a then-estimated cost of \$280 million. Through 2006, NCA had expended \$99 million to complete work on 269 of these projects. We anticipate expending an additional \$16 million on such projects in FY 2007.

NCA is making steady progress to address cemetery maintenance and repair needs. We are using the information in the *National Shrine Commitment* report to plan and accomplish the repairs needed at each cemetery in addition to performing upgrades by means of normal maintenance operations and as part of larger-scale construction projects. We are also using data from NCA's Annual Survey of Satisfaction with National Cemeteries to factor in the viewpoint of veterans and their families when determining project priorities. Project priorities are reevaluated on a semi-annual basis within NCA's facilities and construction planning process. I participated in the most recent review just 2 weeks ago.

We are addressing long-standing deferred maintenance needs in a variety of ways. Repair and renovation projects to improve the overall appearance of national cemeteries remain a high priority in allocating operational resources. These projects include establishing a healthy stand of turf appropriate for the geographic area, renovating gravesites to ensure a level grade and that there are no sunken graves, and realigning and cleaning headstones and markers. Improvements to cemetery infrastructure, including repairs to buildings, roads, committal shelters, irrigation systems and historic structures, are being addressed through major and minor construction projects. In addition, cemetery staff members are able to complete some of the identified repairs without resorting to outside contracts.

NCA has implemented several management initiatives to make the most effective use of existing resources to ensure that national cemeteries are maintained in a manner befitting their status as national shrines. For example, we have established operational standards and a new accountability system for assessing progress toward achieving our performance goals. In January 2003, NCA issued a comprehensive set of standards for performance in the key cemetery operational areas of Interments, Grounds Maintenance, Headstones and Markers, Equipment Maintenance, and Facilities Maintenance. These standards were developed to provide guidance and direction for maintaining national cemeteries as national shrines. The standards and measures provide quantifiable goals and expectations that are applied at both open and closed national cemeteries. In November 2004 and again in February of this year, we updated our standards and measures based on input received from NCA managers and field operations staff who serve our veterans on the frontline.

NCA has also established a comprehensive program by which the performance of all organizations within NCA is assessed, monitored, and reported. The Organizational Assessment and Improvement Program (OAI) combines the traditional elements of an inspections program with the proven concepts of organizational excellence. The program is structured after the quality criteria contained in the VA Carey Performance Excellence program which, in turn, is based on the Malcolm Baldrige criteria for organizational excellence. The structure assesses organizational leadership, planning, customer-focused quality, performance measurement, human

resources, and process management to ensure the effective and efficient delivery of benefits and services to our Nation's veterans. The concept incorporates both a focus on operational processes and compliance with internal controls as well as a management program to improve organizational performance. 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 identify projects, and allocate valuable resources, objectively. The program is in its third year and has become a valuable tool in assessing performance measures at all VA national cemeteries.

Additional NCA Achievements. NCA will continue to focus on meeting both the short- and long-term burial needs of veterans and fulfilling the public's expectation of appropriate maintenance standards. We have undertaken numerous related projects; I would like to share some additional recent successes and accomplishments with you.

Timeliness of Marking Graves in National Cemeteries. The amount of time it takes to mark the grave with a Government-furnished headstone or marker after an interment is important to veterans and their family members. Consequently, 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. In addition, it often brings a sense of closure to the family to see the grave marked. We have sought and achieved significant reductions in the time required to mark a grave. In 2006, 95 percent of graves in national cemeteries were marked within 60 days of interment, a significant improvement over the performance level of 49 percent in 2002. Today we exceed the goal of 90 percent, and we strive to have the grave marked at the time of interment for OEF/OIF servicemembers.

NCA Training Center. In order to ensure a high-performing, well-trained work force, the National Cemetery Administration Training Center was established in 2004. The Training Center emphasizes core leadership skills and provides the training necessary to assure that high quality service is provided to veterans and their families and that the national cemeteries are maintained as national shrines. Initially focused on training cemetery directors and assistant directors, the new facility has expanded its classes to train supervisors, equipment operators, grounds keepers, cemetery representatives, and other NCA and State veteran cemetery employees. As 12 new national cemeteries become operational, the Training Center will ensure consistency in operations throughout all national cemeteries. It will also ensure that a high-performing work force and a well-trained staff is on hand in key cemetery positions. The third class of cemetery director interns will graduate in August 2007. These new graduates join a national cemetery work force comprised of more than 70 percent veterans.

NCA Nationwide Scheduling Center. Located in St. Louis, the NCA Nationwide Scheduling Center was opened in January 2007 to increase efficiencies and expedite eligibility determinations and interment scheduling. As a one-stop phone-in Center, it ensures consistent eligibility determinations and provides faster interment scheduling for families and funeral homes. Funeral homes are no longer required to provide a paper application—veteran or dependent information can now be provided via phone or fax.

Memorial Programs Service Initiatives. NCA operates an applicant assistance call center here in Washington that provides information on headstone and marker delivery status, as well as general information about Memorial Programs Service benefits. The call center responds to approximately 1,500 calls weekly. Additionally, to improve customer service and the efficiency of our headstone and marker program for veterans buried in private cemeteries, NCA implemented a toll-free fax line in 2002 that allows us to accept and transfer applications electronically, as images, into our automated application processing system. The incoming documents are not printed; they are managed strictly as electronic images. In FY 2006, we received 37 percent of our applications—about 78,000 per year—in this manner. The process has been extremely popular with funeral homes and with veterans service organizations that help families apply for headstone or marker benefits.

Headstone and Marker E-Application Initiative. This initiative will allow families and their representatives to submit applications for Government headstones and markers using a Web-based version of the VA Form 40-1330. We recently tested this initiative at a conference, and the feedback from the general public was positive. The e-application will be available to the public within the next 2 months.

Nationwide Gravesite Locator. In 2004, NCA launched a Web-based Nationwide Gravesite Locator (NGL) system. This innovation makes it easier for anyone with Internet access to search for the gravesite locations of deceased family mem-

bers and friends, and to conduct genealogical research. The nationwide grave locator currently contains more than 6 million records. It provides interment information for veterans and dependents buried in VA's 125 national cemeteries since the Civil War, and more recent records (1999 to the present) for burials in State veterans cemeteries and Arlington National Cemetery. Information on headstones and markers sent to private cemeteries for placement on veteran's graves was recently added to assist families. The NGL is accessed approximately 1.5 million times annually.

Outreach Activities. Last week I attended NCA's first annual vendor conference designed to share information on NCA's procurement processes. Approximately 85 vendors, many Service Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Businesses and Veteran-Owned Small Businesses, attended this event which we believe will encourage increased participation by such businesses in our contracting process. Public outreach activities continue to increase with NCA participation at 10 national conferences last year, including the National Funeral Directors Association conference. Additionally, I conduct bi-annual meetings with Veterans Service Organization representatives to exchange information and to ensure they are informed of current NCA program initiatives.

Memorial Inventory Project. Working with Save Outdoor Sculpture! (SOS!), a non-profit organization that uses volunteers to survey public outdoor sculpture nationwide, NCA has developed its first comprehensive inventory of memorials located in VA national cemeteries and in our soldiers' lots and monument sites. Since national cemeteries were established in 1862, they have become the sites of memorials erected to recall distinctive heroics, group burials, and related commemorations. The inventory, which identifies over 850 monuments and memorials, will help NCA prioritize conservation needs and develop a maintenance plan for all of its memorials. Nearly 400 volunteers participated in this inventory project. The results will be searchable on NCA's Website.

American Customer Satisfaction Survey. As part of the 2004 American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) surveys, NCA's national cemeteries achieved a customer satisfaction rating of 95 out of a possible 100 points. This is the highest score ever achieved 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 the past 6 months to 1 year. 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.

Increased Volunteerism. NCA works closely with the VA's Voluntary Service Program (VAVS) to increase opportunities for individuals to perform volunteer work at VA national cemeteries. VAVS coordinates with public and private voluntary service programs to match volunteers with our national cemeteries needs. Volunteers are an enthusiastic force dedicated to serving veterans. During the past few years, NCA has developed volunteer opportunities ranging from the provision of military funeral honors to supporting historic preservation needs at our cemeteries. We have also partnered with VBA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program "Coming Home to Work" initiative to place OEF/OIF veterans in vacant positions throughout the NCA system.

Innovation. In our search to identify how best to accomplish our mission, NCA has formalized a Research and Development program to encourage and share innovation throughout our system. Through this program, we have received provisional patents on a Mower/Trimmer that was developed at Calverton National Cemetery and a pivotal casket carrier—a device that allows cemetery staff to maneuver caskets easily between headstones—developed at Rock Island National Cemetery. Toro is building prototypes of both innovations, based on our designs, for possible commercial application. Also, we have partnered with the National Park Service to test biological cleaning products on marble headstones. The goal here is to find products that effectively clean headstones, and are user-friendly, environmentally safe, and cost effective.

Closing

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to share with you an overview of NCA's current activities. I look forward to working with the members of this Subcommittee as we jointly meet the burial needs of the veterans we are trusted to serve. I would be pleased to answer any questions.

POST-HEARING QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD

Questions from Hon. Phil Hare, Member, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, and Responses from Hon. William Turek, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, National Cemetery Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

“Veterans Cemeteries: Honoring Those Who Served”

Question 1: Traditionally, the VA has not only provided benefits, but has also offered opportunity for gainful employment for many veterans. What percentage of cemetery jobs are held by veterans?

Response: At the end of fiscal 2006, veterans held 70 percent of cemetery field operations positions within the National Cemetery Administration (NCA).

Question 2: What has the VA response been to recent concerns raised by the American Federation of Government Employees’ reports that VA National Cemeteries are contracting out Federal work without benefit of any public-private competitions?

Response: NCA has notified the American Federation of Government Employees that we are researching the issue of competitive sourcing used to achieve our mission of establishing and maintaining national shrines for our Nation’s veterans and their families. We will provide a comprehensive response upon completion of the review.

National Funeral Directors Association
Washington, DC.
May 17, 2007

Committee on Veterans’ Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, on May 8, 2007, on behalf of the members of the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) regarding Veterans Cemeteries. I am responding to questions asked by Members of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs.

Congressman Bilirakis (R–FL) requested more information on what happens to veterans who are indigent or whose family can not afford to pay for a funeral or burial.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has procedures in place to deal with this issue. VA burial benefits help to offset the costs of the veteran’s burial, funeral, and plot-interment. If a military service-related injury or disease caused the veteran’s death, the DVA will pay up to \$2,000 toward burial expenses. If the veteran is buried in a VA national cemetery, some or all of the costs for transporting the veteran’s remains may be reimbursed. In certain non-service-related deaths, the DVA will pay up to \$300 toward burial and funeral expenses, and \$300 as a plot-interment allowance. If the veteran died in a VA hospital or under VA contracted home care, some or all of the costs for transporting the deceased’s remains may be reimbursed.

The DVA has also established eligibility criteria for non-service-related death benefits, which are applicable if the veteran was receiving VA compensation or pension at the time of death, or the veteran was entitled to receive VA compensation but decided not to reduce his/her military retirement or disability pay, or the veteran died in a VA hospital or while in a nursing home under VA contract, or while in an approved state nursing home, or there is no next of kin or other person claiming the remains of the veteran, and there are not available sufficient resources to cover burial and funeral costs, and the veteran served honorably in the U.S. Armed Forces during any war or was discharged from the military because of a service-connected disability.

Generally, the DVA will pay the allowances to the person (or entity) who paid for the veteran’s burial or funeral, if he/she has not been reimbursed by another Gov-

ernment agency or some other source such as the veteran's employer. There is no time limit for claiming reimbursement of burial expenses for a service-related death. In non-service-related deaths, the claim must be filed within 2 years of the veteran's burial.

Mr. Bilirakis also requested information on what percentage of veterans chose cremation.

In the general population, it is estimated that roughly 70% of annual dispositions are ground burials, whereas 30% are cremations. The Cremation Association of North America projects that the national cremation rate will increase from 31 percent (in 2004) to 38 percent (in 2010) and to 51 percent (in 2025). The current War on Terrorism has resulted in approximately 10–11% of those being buried at Arlington National Cemetery choosing cremation, whereas the overall cremation rate at Arlington National Cemetery is much lower.

Congressman Hare (D-PA) requested information regarding what NFDA members think can be done to improve veterans outreach about eligibility and availability of veterans cemeteries.

The National Funeral Directors Association works diligently to keep our members apprised of information relating to veterans' burials and memorial benefits and veterans cemeteries. Our Website hosts a great deal of information, and Web links, designed to help our members provide meaningful burials for veterans. Topics on our Website include: Department of Veterans Affairs—Burials and Memorials, United States Navy: Burial at Sea Program, Proposed Changes to VA Headstone and Marker Application, Nationwide Gravesite Locator, Allowance for Private Purchase of an Outer Burial Receptacle in Lieu of a Government-Furnished Grave Liner for a Grave in a VA National Cemetery, Service Regulations Related to the Purchase of Uniforms and Accessories by Veterans for Wear During a Military Funeral, Military Family Tax Relief Act, Veterans Benefits, Veterans Survivors' Benefits, Military Funeral Policy, Military Funeral Honors, Military Repatriation and Funeral Protocol, DoD Ceremonial Bugle, Bugles Across America, Burial of Unclaimed, Indigent Veterans and a listing of Veterans Affairs Offices.

While NFDA makes every effort to ensure that our members are up to date on information regarding eligibility and availability of veterans' cemeteries, we believe that the issue of how best to improve outreach to veterans is best handled by the DVA.

I hope these answers suffice in response to the questions posed by the members of the Subcommittee.

Sincerely,

Lesley Witter
Director of Political Affairs

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