

**STATEMENT OF KELLY ACKERMAN, ADMINISTRATOR  
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MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AFFAIRS  
FOR THE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS ON  
"SACRED MISSION: HONORING AMERICA'S VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES AT  
VA CEMETERIES."  
February 28, 2024**

Thank you, Chairman Tester and ranking member Senator Moran, and committee members.

I appreciate the opportunity to share information about Montana's State Veterans Affairs Cemetery Program.

We currently have 3 state veterans' cemeteries, all established using the National Cemetery Administration Veterans Cemetery Grant Program, and we've been approved by state legislature and National Cemetery Administration for 1 additional state veteran cemetery.

Our Eastern Montana State Veteran Cemetery in Miles City was constructed in 2002, and recently finalized a National Cemetery Administration expansion grant. It's our Eastern most State Veteran Cemetery, allowing veterans in rural eastern Montana a state burial option.

Western Montana State Veteran Cemetery in Missoula was established in 2009. This cemetery is scheduled to receive a National Cemetery Administration expansion grant in federal fiscal year 2025.

Montana State Veteran Cemetery at Fort Harrison is the state's oldest veteran cemetery being established in 1988 and is the largest of the 3 existing state veteran cemeteries. We just began the design phase of a \$2M expansion grant.

Because Montana is a predominately rural state, we understand that not all veterans and their family members will want or be able to be buried in a veteran's cemetery, which seems to be an

ongoing challenge. One of the most effective tools we have determined to help veterans in remote locations is to educate them on the Veterans Affairs benefits available to them. These VA benefits include a free headstone to veterans buried in a private cemetery, a medallion to affix to private headstone, and potential burial benefits to help with the cost of funeral expenses. Our staff help service members and veterans preregister for burial in one of our state veteran cemeteries or help order VA headstones for private cemeteries. These are just a few of the benefits available to veterans during the burial process.

We have a tremendous amount of National Guardsman in Montana, so there has been quite a bit of interest in the Burial Equity for Guards and Reserves Act of 2021. Because this is considered an “unfunded” bill, many of my counterparts across the country have chosen not to participate in this program. However, in Montana even though we had to wait for additional funding from legislature, we are participating as of July 1, 2023.

The operations and maintenance at each of our cemeteries runs a little differently depending on the number of active acres or plots, and the number of FTE assigned. We were successful in getting an additional FTE for each of our 3 cemeteries during our last legislative session. However, we will still need to request more FTE for 2 of our larger cemeteries very soon.

Through each Veterans’ Cemetery Grant Program process, National Cemetery Administration staff have made themselves available for questions, concerns, or walked our new staff through processes. This is true for my Budget staff and our department A&E staff. There are on-going webinar calls for training and information sharing. The working relationship we have with National Cemetery Staff is excellent and has provided for a solid foundation.

I want to thank the committee for allowing me to share this information with you and this concludes my formal testimony.