

STATEMENT OF DAVID G. GREINER, AMVETS, DEPUTY NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

STATEMENT OF

DAVID G. GREINER
AMVETS DEPUTY NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE

ON

THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION BUDGET REQUEST FOR FISCAL YEAR
2008

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2007
412 RUSSELL SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
9:30AM

Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Craig, and members of the Committee:

AMVETS is honored to join our fellow veterans service organizations and partners at this important hearing on the Department of Veterans Affairs budget request for fiscal year 2008. My name is David G. Greiner, Deputy National Legislative Director of AMVETS, and I am pleased to provide you with our best estimates on the resources necessary to carry out a responsible budget for VA.

AMVETS testifies before you as a co-author of The Independent Budget. This is the 21st year AMVETS, the Disabled American Veterans, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars have pooled their resources together to produce a unique document, one that has stood the test of time.

The IB, as it has come to be called, is our blueprint for building the kind of programs veterans deserve. Indeed, we are proud that over 60 veteran, military, and medical service organizations endorse these recommendations. In whole, these recommendations provide decision-makers with a rational, rigorous, and sound review of the budget required to support authorized programs for our nation's veterans.

In developing this document, we believe in certain guiding principles. Veterans should not have to wait for benefits to which they are entitled. Veterans must be ensured access to high-quality medical care. Specialized care must remain the focus of VA. Veterans must be guaranteed

timely access to the full continuum of health care services, including long-term care. And, veterans must be assured burial in a state or national cemetery in every state.

Today, I will specifically address the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), however, I would like to briefly comment on the administration's budget request coming out of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) just three days ago.

Everyone knows that the VA healthcare system is the best in the country, and responsible for great advances in medical science. VHA is uniquely qualified to care for veterans' needs because of its highly specialized experience in treating service-connected ailments. The delivery care system can provide a wide array of specialized services to veterans like those with spinal cord injuries and blindness. This type of care is very expensive and would be almost impossible for veterans to obtain outside of VA.

Because veterans depend so much on VA and its services, AMVETS believes it is absolutely critical that the VA healthcare system be fully funded. It is important our nation keep its promise to care for the veterans who made so many sacrifices to ensure the freedom of so many. With the expected increase in the number of veterans, a need to increase VA health care spending should be an immediate priority this year. We must remain insistent about funding the needs of the system, and the recruitment and retention of vital health care professionals, especially registered nurses. Chronic under funding has led to rationing of care through reduced services, lengthy delays in appointments, higher co-payments and, in too many cases, sick and disabled veterans being turned away from treatment.

Looking at the administration's budget, released last Monday, The Independent Budget recommends Congress provide \$36.3 billion to fund VA medical care for fiscal year 2008. We ask you to recognize that the VA healthcare system can only bring quality health care if it receives adequate and timely funding.

The best way to ensure VA has access to adequate and timely resources is through mandatory, or assured, funding. I would like to clearly state that AMVETS along with its Independent Budget partners strongly supports shifting VA healthcare funding from discretionary funding to mandatory. We recommend this action because the current discretionary system is not working. Moving to mandatory funding would give certainty to healthcare services. VA facilities would not have to deal with the uncertainty of discretionary funding, which has been inconsistent and inadequate for far too long. Most importantly, mandatory funding would provide a comprehensive and permanent solution to the current funding problem.

The National Cemetery Administration

The Independent Budget acknowledges the dedicated and committed NCA staff who continue to provide the highest quality of service to veterans and their families despite funding shortfalls, aging equipment, and increasing workload. The devoted staff provides aid and comfort to hurting veterans' families in a very difficult time, and we thank them for their consolation.

The NCA currently maintains more than 2.7 million gravesites at 124 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico. At the end of 2007, 66 cemeteries will be open to all interments; 16 will accept only cremated remains and family members of those already interred; and 43 will only perform interments of family members in the same gravesite as a previously deceased family member.

VA estimates that about 27 million veterans are alive today. They include veterans from World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Global War on Terrorism, as well as peacetime veterans. With the anticipated opening of the new national cemeteries, annual interments are projected to increase from approximately 102,000 in 2006 to 117,000 in 2009. It is expected that one in every six of these veterans will request burial in a national cemetery.

The NCA is responsible for five primary missions: (1) to inter, upon request, the remains of eligible veterans and family members and to permanently maintain gravesites; (2) to mark graves of eligible persons in national, state, or private cemeteries upon appropriate application; (3) to administer the state grant program in the establishment, expansion, or improvement of state veterans cemeteries; (4) to award a presidential certificate and furnish a United States flag to

deceased veterans; and (5) to maintain national cemeteries as national shrines sacred to the honor and memory of those interred or memorialized.

NCA Budget Request

The administration requests \$166.8 million for the NCA for fiscal year 2008. The members of The Independent Budget recommend that Congress provide \$218.3 million and 30 FTE for the operational requirements of NCA, the National Shrine Initiative, and the backlog of repairs. We recommend your support for a budget consistent with NCA's growing demands and in concert with the respect due every man and woman who wears the uniform of the United States Armed Forces.

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

In accordance with "An Independent Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries," which was submitted to Congress in 2002, The Independent Budget again recommends Congress establish a five-year, \$250 million "National Shrine Initiative" to restore and improve the condition and character of NCA cemeteries as part of the FY2008 operations budget.

It should be noted that the NCA has done an outstanding job thus far in improving the

appearance of our national cemeteries, but we have a long way to go to get us where we need to be. By enacting a five-year program with dedicated funds and an ambitious schedule, the national cemetery system can fully serve all veterans and their families with the utmost dignity, respect, and compassion.

The State Cemetery Grants Program

The State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP) complements the NCA mission to establish gravesites for veterans in those areas where the NCA cannot fully respond to the burial needs of veterans. Several incentives are in place to assist states in this effort. For example, the NCA can provide up to 100 percent of the development cost for an approved cemetery project, including design, construction, and administration. In addition, new equipment, such as mowers and backhoes, can be provided for new cemeteries. Since 1978, the Department of Veterans Affairs has more than doubled acreage available and accommodated more than a 100 percent increase in burials through this program.

To help provide reasonable access to burial options for veterans and their eligible family members, The Independent Budget recommends \$37 million for the SCGP for fiscal year 2008. The availability of this funding will help states establish, expand, and improve state-owned veterans' cemeteries.

Many states have difficulties meeting the requirements needed to build a national cemetery in their respective state. The large land areas and spread out population in these areas make it difficult to meet the "170,000 veterans within 75 miles" national veterans cemetery requirement. Recognizing these challenges, VA has implemented several incentives to assist states in establishing a veterans cemetery. For example, the NCA can provide up to 100 percent of the development cost for an approved cemetery project, including design, construction, and administration.

Burial Benefits:

There has been serious erosion in the value of the burial allowance benefits over the years. While these benefits were never intended to cover the full costs of burial, they now pay for only a small fraction of what they covered in 1973, when the federal government first started paying burial benefits for our veterans.

In 2001 the plot allowance was increased for the first time in more than 28 years, to \$300 from \$150, which covers approximately 6 percent of funeral costs. The Independent Budget recommends increasing the plot allowance from \$300 to \$745, an amount proportionally equal to the benefit paid in 1973.

In the 108th Congress, the burial allowance for service-connected deaths was increased from \$500 to \$2,000. Prior to this adjustment, the allowance had been untouched since 1988. The Independent Budget recommends increasing the service-connected burial benefit from \$2,000 to \$4,100, bringing it back up to its original proportionate level of burial costs.

The non-service-connected burial allowance was last adjusted in 1978, and also covers just six 6 percent of funeral costs. The Independent Budget recommends increasing the non-service-connected burial benefit from \$300 to \$1,270.

The NCA honors veterans with a final resting place that commemorates their service to this nation. More than 2.7 million soldiers who died in every war and conflict are honored by burial in a VA national cemetery. Each Memorial Day and Veterans Day we honor the last full measure of devotion they gave for this country. Our national cemeteries are more than the final resting place of honor for our veterans, they are hallowed ground to those who died in our defense, and a memorial to those who survived.

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