

Steve L. Muro, Nominee to be Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, National Cemetery Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs

Statement of Steve L. Muro, Nominee to be Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs,  
National Cemetery Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs  
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Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, distinguished Members of the Committee: good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. It is a great honor to be here today as the President's nominee to serve as Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)'s National Cemetery Administration (NCA).

I would like to introduce my family here with me—Dr. Linda Johnson, and my daughter, Amanda—and although not able to attend, I would like to acknowledge my son, Steve, my daughter-in-law, Rebecca, and my grandson, Stevie--without their help and support, I would not be here before you today.

In my current position as Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, I am honored by the trust Secretary Shinseki has placed in me, and in the dedicated men and women I am privileged to lead, in serving Veterans and their families. In concert with the Veterans Benefits and Veterans Health Administrations, the National Cemetery Administration is meeting the needs of Veterans through innovation and increased access to benefits. We are doing this today based on a long-standing tradition of providing a lasting tribute to Veterans across the centuries, from the Civil War to the conflicts today in Iraq and Afghanistan. If confirmed, I am committed to continuing that important work.

Before I continue, let me also recognize the presence here today of our Veterans Service Organizations. I have worked with many of them throughout my career and I have greatly appreciated their support and counsel. If confirmed, I intend to continue that close collaboration, leveraging their ideas to find and implement solutions for our Veterans and their families.

NCA is truly a remarkable organization where a Wage Grade auto mechanic, such as myself, may rise through the ranks based on a commitment to serve Veterans “who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan” and serve in the position of Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. I have devoted my entire career to fulfilling NCA's mission while serving in various positions throughout the organization. Following my service in the U.S. Navy, I served in many NCA leadership positions including leading and directing the staffs of six different national cemeteries, overseeing 18 cemeteries in seven western States as the Director of Memorial Service Network V, serving as the Director of the Office of Field Programs in Central Office and later as Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, leading me to my current position. In these senior leadership positions, I have had the opportunity, working with the

talented employees of NCA, to direct the largest expansion of the National Cemetery System since the Civil War - planning, constructing and opening 11 new national cemeteries.

Based on my broad experience, I can tell you that every level of the organization is committed to serving Veterans and their families with the highest level of customer service. NCA achieved the top rating in the nation four consecutive times on the prestigious American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) established by the University of Michigan. On the most recent 2010 survey and over the past decade, NCA's scores exceeded those of over 100 federal agencies and the nation's top corporations including Ford, FedEx and Coca Cola. Our own surveys of our customers confirm this exceptional level of performance. In 2010, 98% of our survey respondents rated the appearance of national cemeteries as excellent; and 95% rated the quality of service as excellent.

We are not surprised by these results since more than 70 percent of our workforce has served in our Armed Forces. NCA leads federal agencies in the percentage of employees who are Veterans, including over 190 Veterans who have served in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

NCA accomplishments are due to relentless focus on three goals: 1) fostering a culture of accountability; 2) maintaining our national cemeteries as national shrines by continually improving our operations and performance standards; and 3) most importantly, meeting and exceeding the expectations of Veterans and family members in the one chance NCA has to serve them in their hour of need, as we commit their loved ones to their final resting places.

I am proud to be part of an organization that continually seeks to raise the bar and look for new ways to serve Veterans and their families. During my 33-year career, we have expanded burial access so that nearly 90% of Veterans - about 20 million - benefit from a burial option in a National or State Veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their residence; we have incorporated state-of-the-art-technology for recordkeeping and claims processing; and we have instituted comprehensive organizational standards and performance measures across all business lines.

Our eligibility experts staff a centralized Scheduling Office operating 7:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. CST, 7 days a week (362 days/year). Our National Training Center reinforces customer service and performance standards by addressing professional development at every level of our workforce, from grounds maintenance to grief counseling and supervisor training. If confirmed, my focus will continue to be to provide the best service through efficiencies, innovations, and partnerships.

Today, by using pre-placed crypts nationwide, we save land and reduce our maintenance and operational costs; these efficiencies ensure we can provide burial access for more years and are an example of NCA leading the industry with best practices. We are generating renewable

energy by harnessing wind and solar power, employing technologies like Geographic Information Systems to improve accountability, and reaching out to the newest generation of Servicemembers and their families with social media and other emerging outlets. In addition, we are embarking on a study of emerging burial practices and surveying our Veterans and their families for their preferences for memorial benefits that honor their military service.

Our partnerships with the States through the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program are vital to meeting Veterans' burial needs in rural and tribal areas. Recently, Congress expanded the grant program, so now we may assist States in meeting national shrine standards of appearance with operations and maintenance grants.

If confirmed, I will apply my intimate knowledge of NCA in collaboration with Veterans and their families, Veterans Service Organizations and Congress to meet the evolving needs of a new generation of Veterans. I will continue to be a tireless steward of the national cemeteries entrusted to our care that serve as national shrines that honor the sacrifices of our Nation's Veterans. I am grateful for the opportunity to come before you this morning to offer my vision for this agency to which I have dedicated my life's work. Thank you again.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have.