

Mr. David G. Greineder, Deputy National Legislative Director, AMVETS

TESTIMONY

of

David G. Greineder  
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 2007

Tuesday, February 14, 2006  
418 Russell Senate Office Building  
10:00am

Chairman Craig, Ranking Member Akaka, 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 2007. My name is David G. Greineder, 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 in fiscal year 2007.

AMVETS testifies before you as a co-author of The Independent Budget. Since 1987, AMVETS, the Disabled American Veterans, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars have pooled their resources to produce a unique document, one that has stood the test of time. It is hard to believe that twenty years have elapsed since the first Independent Budget was formulated.

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 must 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 last week.

The administration's budget requests a total of \$80.6 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Included in the spending plan is nearly \$31.5 billion dollars for veterans' health care. However, an estimated \$2.8 billion actually would come out of veterans' pockets, not the federal treasury. AMVETS, along with our Independent Budget partners, recommend Congress provide \$32.4 billion for veterans health care, an increase of \$3.7 over the FY2006 appropriation, and \$1 billion over the administration's FY2007 budget request.

AMVETS notes that the administration has re-introduced several proposals aimed at increasing revenues (via collections) through a \$250 enrollment fee and co-payment increase from \$8 to \$15. These new fees will have a dramatic impact on veterans. According to estimates, they will force over one million veterans, almost half of the Priority 7 and Priority 8 veterans, to drop out of the VA healthcare system. AMVETS disagrees with this policy and we ask Congress to reject it.

It is no secret that the VA healthcare system is the best in the country, and responsible for great advances in medical science. It is highly successful in containing cost and provides excellent care. The 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.

The system also prides itself in research and development, which AMVETS strongly supports because of its contributions to veterans' healthcare and the common good. Public investments in research projects have led to an explosion of knowledge that promises to advance science and unlock new strategies for treatment and prevention.

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.

One option, and we believe the best choice, 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

Before I address the budget recommendation for the NCA, I would like to acknowledge 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 Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration currently maintains more than 2.6 million gravesites at 125 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico. There are approximately 14,500 acres of cemetery land within established installations in the NCA. Over half are undeveloped and have the potential to provide more than 3.6 million gravesites. Of the 125 national cemeteries, 62 are open to all interments; 19 can accommodate cremated remains and family members of those already interred; and 41 are closed to new interments.

VA estimates that about 26.6 million veterans are alive today. They include veterans from World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the Global War on Terrorism, as well as peacetime veterans. With the aging veterans population continuing to climb, nearly 676,000 veteran deaths are estimated in 2008, with the death rate increasing annually and peaking at 690,000 by 2009. It is expected that one in every six of these veterans will request burial in a national cemetery.

The administration requests \$160.7 million and 23 additional FTE for NCA for fiscal year 2007. The members of The Independent Budget recommend that Congress provide \$214 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.

In regards to the National Shrine Initiative, 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 the national cemeteries. The Independent Budget recommends Congress provide \$50 million in fiscal year 2007 to begin a five-year, \$250 million program to restore and improve the condition and character of NCA cemeteries.

The National Shrine Initiative is in response to the 2002 Independent Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries. Volume 2 of the Study identifies over 900 projects for gravesite

renovation, repair, upgrade, and maintenance. According to the Study, these project recommendations were made on the basis of the existing condition of each cemetery after taking into account the cemetery's age, its burial activity, burial options and maintenance programs.

#### The State Cemetery Grants Program:

For funding the State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP), the members of The Independent Budget recommend \$37 million for fiscal year 2007, an increase of \$5 million over the administration proposal. The State Cemetery Grants Program is an important element to the NCA. It complements the NCA mission to establish gravesites for veterans in those areas where the NCA cannot fully respond to the burial needs of veterans.

Six western states do not have a single national veterans cemetery: Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. The large land areas and spread out population centers in these and most western states make it difficult for them 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. In addition, new equipment, such as mowers and backhoes, can be provided for new cemeteries. Since 1973, the Department of Veterans Affairs has more than doubled acreage available and accommodated more than a 100 percent increase in burials.

#### Burial Benefits:

There has been serious erosion in the value of 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.

In 2001, the plot allowance was increased for the first time in more than 28 years, to \$300 from \$150, which covers approximately six 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, and expanding the eligibility for the plot allowance to all veterans who would be eligible for burial in a national cemetery, not just those who served during wartime.

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 benefit from \$2,000 to \$4,100, bringing it up to a proportionate level of burial costs. The non-service-connected burial benefit was last adjusted in 1978, and also covers just six percent of funeral costs. The Independent Budget recommends increasing the non-service-connected benefit from \$300 to \$1,270. These modest increases will make a more meaningful contribution to the burial costs for our veterans.

The NCA honors veterans with a final resting place that commemorates their service to this nation. More than 2.6 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.