

DIANE M. ZUMATTO, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR, AMVETS

STATEMENT OF DIANE M. ZUMATTO

AMVETS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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CONCERNING

THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS BUDGET REQUEST FOR FISCAL YEAR
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Independent Budget (IB), AMVETS is grateful for this opportunity to present the views of The IB regarding the funding requirements for the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) National Cemetery Administration (NCA) for Fiscal Year 2013.

The venerable and honorable history of our national cemeteries spans roughly 150 years when the earliest military graveyards were, not surprisingly, situated at battle sites, near field or general hospitals and at former prisoner-of-war sites. With the passage of the National Cemeteries Act of 1973 (P.L. 93-43), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) became responsible for the majority of our national cemeteries. The single most important obligation of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is to honor the memory of America's brave men and women who have selflessly served in this nation's armed forces. Many of the individual cemeteries, monuments, grave stones, grounds and related memorial tributes within the NCA system are richly steeped in history and represent the very foundation of these United States.

With the signing of the Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-368) which officially re-designated the National Cemetery System (NCS) to the now familiar National Cemetery Administration (NCA). The NCA currently maintains stewardship of 131 of the nation's 147 national cemeteries, as well as 33 soldiers' lots. Since 1862 when President Abraham Lincoln signed the first legislation establishing the national cemetery concept, more than 3 million burials have taken place in national cemeteries currently located in 39 states and Puerto Rico. As of late 2010, there were more than 20,021 acres of landscape, funerary

monuments, grave markers and other architectural features, much of it historically significant, included within established installations in the NCA.

VA estimates that approximately 22.4 million veterans are alive today and with the transition of an additional 1 million service members into veteran status over the next 12 months, this number is expected to continue to rise until approximately 2017. On average, 14.4 percent of veterans choose a national or state veterans' cemetery as their final resting place. As new national and state cemeteries continue to open and as our aging veterans' population continues to grow, we continue to be a nation at war on multiple fronts. The demand for burial at a veterans' cemetery will continue to increase.

The Independent Budget veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) would like to acknowledge the dedication and commitment demonstrated by the NCA leadership and staff in their continued dedication to providing the highest quality of service to veterans and their families. It is in the opinion of the IBVSOs that the NCA continues to meet its goals and the goals set forth by others because of its true dedication and care for honoring the memories of the men and women who have so selflessly served our nation. We applaud the NCA for recognizing that it must continue to be responsive to the preferences and expectations of the veterans' community by adapting or adopting new interment options and ensuring access to burial options in the national, state and tribal government-operated cemeteries. We also believe it is important to recognize the NCA's efforts in employing both disabled and homeless veterans.

NCA Accounts

In Fiscal Year 2011, the National Cemetery Administration operated on an estimated budget of \$298.3 million associated with the operations and maintenance of its grounds. The NCA had no carryover for Fiscal Year 2011. The NCA was also able to award 44 of its 48 minor construction projects and had four unobligated projects that will be moved to Fiscal Year 2012. Unfortunately, due to

continuing resolutions and the current budget situation, the NCA was not able to award the remaining four projects.

The IBVSOs support the operational standards and measures outlined in the National Shrine Commitment (P.L. 106-117, Sec. 613) which was enacted in 1999 to ensure that our national cemeteries are the finest in the world. While the NCA has worked diligently improving the appearance of our national cemeteries, they are still a long way from where they should be.

The NCA has worked tirelessly to improve the appearance of our national cemeteries, investing an estimated \$39 million into the National Shrine Initiative in Fiscal Year 2011. According to NCA surveys, as of October 2011 the NCA has continued to make progress in reaching its performance measures. Since 2006, the NCA has improved headstone and marker height and alignment in national cemeteries from 67 percent to 70 percent and has improved cleanliness of tombstones, markers and niches from 77 percent to 91 percent. Although the NCA is nearing

its strategic goal of 90 percent and 95 percent, respectively, for height and alignment and cleanliness, more funding is needed to continue this delicate and labor-intensive work. Therefore, the IBVSOs recommend the NCA's Operations and Maintenance budget to be increased by \$20 million per year until the operational standards and measures goals are reached.

The IBVSOs recommend an Operational and Maintenance budget of \$280 million for the National Cemetery Administration for Fiscal Year 2013 so it can meet the demands for interment, gravesite maintenance and related essential elements of cemetery operations. This request includes \$20 million for the National Shrine Initiative.

The IBVSOs call on the Administration and Congress to provide the resources needed to meet the critical nature of the NCA's mission and to fulfill the nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country so honorably and faithfully.

State Cemetery Grant Programs

The State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP) complements the National Cemetery Administration's mission to establish gravesites for veterans in areas where it 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 establishing a new cemetery and expanding or improving an established state or tribal organization veterans' cemetery. New equipment, such as mowers and backhoes, can be provided for new cemeteries. In addition, the Department of Veterans' Affairs may also provide operating grants to help cemeteries achieve national shrine standards.

In Fiscal Year 2011, the SCGP operated on an estimated budget of \$46 million, funding 16 state cemeteries. These 16 state cemeteries included the establishment or ground breaking of five new state cemeteries, three of which are located on tribal lands, expansions and improvements at seven state cemeteries, and four projects aimed at assisting state cemeteries to meet the NCA national shrine standards. Since 1978, the Department of Veterans' Affairs has more than doubled the available acreage and accommodated more than a 100 percent increase in burials through this program.

With the enactment of the "Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 1998," the NCA has been able to strengthen its partnership with states and increase burial services to veterans, especially those living in less densely populated areas without access to a nearby national cemetery. Through Fiscal Year

territories. Furthermore, in Fiscal Year 2011 VA awarded its first state cemetery grant to a tribal organization.

The Independent Budget veterans' service organizations recommend that Congress fund the State Cemetery Grants Program at \$51 million for Fiscal Year 2013. The IBVSOs believe that this small increase in funding will help the National Cemetery Administration meet the needs of the State Cemetery Grant Program, as its expected demand will continue to rise through 2017. Furthermore, this funding level will allow the NCA to continue to expand in an effort of reaching its goal of serving 94 percent of the nation's veteran population by 2015.

Veteran's Burial Benefits

Since the original parcel of land was set aside for the sacred committal of Civil War Veterans by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, more than 3 million burials have occurred in national cemeteries under the National Cemetery Administration.

In 1973, the Department of Veterans' Affairs established a burial allowance that provided partial reimbursement for eligible funeral and burial costs. The current payment is \$2,000 for burial expenses for service-connected deaths, \$300 for non-service-connected deaths and a \$700 plot allowance. At its inception, the payout covered 72 percent of the funeral costs for a service-connected death, 22 percent for a non-service-connected death and 54 percent of the cost of a burial plot.

Burial allowance was first introduced in 1917 to prevent veterans from being buried in potter's fields. In 1923 the allowance was modified. The benefit was determined by a means test until it was removed in 1936. In its early history the burial allowance was paid to all veterans, regardless of their service connectivity of death. In 1973, the allowance was modified to reflect the status of service connection.

The plot allowance was introduced in 1973 as an attempt to provide a plot benefit for veterans who did not have reasonable access to a national cemetery. Although neither the plot allowance nor the burial allowance was intended to cover the full cost of a civilian burial in a private cemetery, the recent increase in the benefit's value indicates the intent to provide a meaningful benefit. The Independent Budget veterans' service organizations are pleased that the 111th Congress acted quickly and passed an increase in the plot allowance for certain veterans from \$300 to \$700 effective October 1, 2011. However, we believe that there is still a serious deficit between the original value of the benefit and its current value.

In order to bring the benefit back up to its original intended value, the payment for service-connected burial allowance should be increased to \$6,160, the non-service-connected burial allowance should be increased to \$1,918 and the plot allowance should be increased to \$1,150. The IBVSOs believe Congress should divide the burial benefits into two categories: veterans within the accessibility model and veterans outside the accessibility model.

Congress should increase the plot allowance from \$700 to \$1,150 for all eligible veterans and expand the eligibility for the plot allowance for all veterans who would be eligible for burial in a national cemetery, not just those who served during wartime. Congress should also increase

the service-connected burial benefits from \$2,000 to \$6,160 for veterans outside the radius threshold and to \$2,793 for veterans inside the radius threshold.

Congress should increase the non-service-connected burial benefits from \$300 to \$1,918 for all veterans outside the radius threshold and to \$854 for all veterans inside the radius threshold. The Administration and Congress should provide the resources required to meet the critical nature of the National Cemetery Administration's mission and to fulfill the nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country so honorably and faithfully.

Education, Employment and Training

During this time of persistent unemployment in our country, the veterans' community as a whole has been hit disproportionately hard, but for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and Reserve Component members, the job prospects are particularly bleak. Estimates as recent as October 2011 suggest that the unemployment rate among veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are at least 3 percent greater than the national average. In consideration of the tremendous sacrifices our veterans have made for this nation, Congress and the Administration must make a concerted effort to guarantee that all veterans have access to education, employment and training opportunities to ensure success in an unfavorable civilian job market.

Assisting those who have honorably served to secure the proper skills, certifications and degrees so that they can achieve personal success is and should always be central to our support of veterans. In addition, disabled veterans often encounter barriers to entry or reentry into the workforce. The lack of appropriate accommodations on the job can make obtaining quality training, education and job skills especially problematic. These difficulties, in turn, contribute to low labor force participation rates and leave many disadvantaged veterans with little choice but to rely on government assistance programs. At present funding levels, entitlement and benefit programs cannot keep pace with the current and future demand for such benefits. The vast majority of working-age veterans want to be productive in the workplace, and we must provide greater opportunities to help them achieve their career goals. Thankfully, this Congress passed the VOW to Hire Heroes Act in recognition of these veterans' employment challenges, an important step in improving veterans' job prospects.

Education

In 2008, Congress enacted the Post-9/11 GI Bill and ensured that today's veterans have greater opportunities for success after their years of voluntary service to our nation. The Independent Budget veterans' service organizations (IBVSOs) were pleased with the quick passage of this landmark benefit and worked with Congress to quickly correct unforeseen inequities via the "Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Improvement Act of 2010." When it was signed into law, leaders in Congress and in the veterans' advocacy community touted the prospect that

the Post-9/11 GI Bill could create a new "Greatest Generation," offering critical job skills and training to a new generation of leaders.

The IBVSOs are concerned that the Post-9/11 GI Bill may be vulnerable to budgetary attacks as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan draw to a close. The benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill must continue to remain available to honor the sacrifice of our nation's veterans. To support this request, the Department of Veterans Affairs must develop the metrics to accurately measure the short- and long- term impacts of these educational benefits. The IBVSOs believe that the Post-9/11 GI Bill is an investment not only in the future of our veterans but also our nation.

Training and Rehabilitation Services: Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment

Vocational rehabilitation for disabled veterans has been part of this nation's commitment to veterans since Congress first established a system of veterans' benefits upon entry of the United States into World War I in 1917. Today the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Service, through its VetSuccess Program, is charged with preparing service-disabled veterans for suitable employment

or providing independent living services to those veterans with disabilities severe enough to render them unemployable. Approximately 48,000 active duty, Reserve and Guard personnel are discharged annually, with more than 25,000 of those on active duty found "not fit for duty" as a result of medical conditions that may qualify for VA disability ratings. With a disability rating the veteran would potentially be eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment services. According to the most recent report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on VR&E services, the ability of veterans to access VR&E services has remained problematic.

The task before Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment's (VR&E) VetSuccess program is critical, and the need becomes clearer in the face of the statistics from the current conflicts. Since September 11, 2001, there have been more than 2.2 million service members deployed. Of that group, more than 941,000 have been deployed two or more times. As a result, many of these service members are eligible for disability benefits and VR&E services if they are found to have an employment handicap. Specifically, 43 percent may actually file claims for disability. Due to the increasing number of service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with serious disabilities, VR&E must be provided the resources to further strengthen its program. There is no VA mission more important than that of enabling injured military personnel to lead productive lives after serving their country. In the face of these facts, of concern to The Independent Budget veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) are the current constraints placed on VR&E as a result of an average client to counselor ratio of 145:1 compared to the VA standard of 125:1. VR&E, working through outside contractors, continues to refine and refocus this important program so it can maximize its ability to deliver services within certain budgetary constraints. Given the anticipated caseload that future downsizing of the military will produce, a more concise way to determine staffing requirements and a more rigorous manpower formula must be developed.

With this in mind, the IBVSOs recommend that VA needs to strengthen its Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program to meet the demands of disabled veterans, particularly those returning from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. It must provide a more timely and effective transition into the workforce and provide placement follow-up with employers for a minimum of six months. Congress must provide the resources for VR&E to establish a maximum client to counselor standard of 125:1 and a new ratio of 100:1 to be the standard. VR&E must place a higher emphasis on academic training, employment services and independent living to achieve the goal of rehabilitation of severely disabled veterans. Congress should provide the resources to support the expansion of VR&E's quality assurance staff to increase the frequency of site visits. Congress and the Administration must ensure that VR&E is provided the necessary resources to upgrade its legacy Corporate WINRS and the new VetSuccess information technology platform as part of the Veterans Benefits Administration's upgrade of its larger IT systems.

Congress must also conduct oversight to ensure that Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program services are being delivered efficiently and effectively. VR&E must develop and implement metrics that can identify problems and lead to solutions that effectively remove barriers to veteran completion of VR&E programs.

Transition Assistance Programs

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was developed to assist military families leaving active service. The Department of Labor (DOL) began providing TAP employment workshops in 1991, pursuant to section 502 of the "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991" (P.L. 101-510). It is an interagency program delivered in partnership by DOL and the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense (DOD) and Homeland Security (DHS). Returning to civilian life is a complex and exciting time for service members. TAP and the Disabled Transition Program (DTAP) will, generally, now be mandatory thanks to the "VOW to Hire Heroes Act" (P.L. 112-56) and will result in the program becoming an even greater benefit in meeting the needs of separating service members as they transition into civilian life.

As part of the new TAP, eligible members will be allowed to participate in an apprenticeship or pre-apprenticeship program that provides them with education, training and services necessary to transition to meaningful employment. These new TAP classes will also upgrade career counseling options and resume writing skills, as well as ensuring the program is tailored for the 21st century job market. TAP is also available for eligible demobilizing service members in the National Guard and reserves. The news is that efforts to improve both TAP and DTAP are under way.

The IBVSOs recommend that all Transition Assistance Program (TAP) classes should include in-depth VA benefits and health-care education sessions and time for question and answer sessions. The Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense, Labor and Homeland Security should design and implement a stronger Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) for wounded service members who have received serious injuries, and for their families. Chartered veterans service organizations should be directly involved in TAP and DTAP or, at

minimum, serve as an outside resource to TAP and DTAP. The DOD, VA, DOL, and DHS must do a better job educating the families of service members on the availability of TAP classes, along with other VA and DOL programs regarding employment, financial stability and health-care resources. Congress and the Administration must provide adequate funding to support TAP and DTAP to ensure that active duty, as well as National Guard and reserve service members, receive proper services during their transition periods.