

**SACRED MISSION:  
HONORING AMERICA'S VETERANS  
AND THEIR FAMILIES AT VA CEMETERIES**

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**HEARING**

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**UNITED STATES SENATE**

**ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS**

**SECOND SESSION**

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**FEBRUARY 28, 2024**  
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**WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2024**

U.S. SENATE,  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 3:30 p.m., in Room SR-418, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Jon Tester, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Tester, Brown, Blumenthal, Hirono, Manchin, Sinema, Hassan, King, Moran, Sullivan, and Cramer.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JERRY MORAN,  
RANKING MEMBER, U.S. SENATOR FROM KANSAS**

Senator MORAN [presiding]. I am pleased to be here. Senator Tester is just voting and will be here shortly.

I thank him, Senator Tester, and for our witnesses for the opportunity to have this hearing. This one I look forward to, and I think of all the times that I have visited cemeteries across the country and battle monuments around the world, and at every time, every moment that I am there it is felt with respect and high regard, and I see how well our cemeteries are maintained and how well Americans, Kansans in particular, are treated in moments of need.

And it has been going on for 50 years. Senator Tester and I acknowledged that 50-year anniversary with a Senate-passed resolution last year, and I commend the leadership and the NCA workforce for their great work.

When mourning a death, the last thing a grieving family needs is some bureaucratic hurdle or some substandard support. NCA, for the seventh consecutive ranking, has placed first among all public and private organizations recognized by the American Customer Satisfaction Index for providing exemplary service to veterans and their families.

In 2022, the NCA achieved a customer satisfaction record of 97. Matt, I do not know whether I am taking away your testimony.

Mr. QUINN. We are down to 2 minutes, sir.

[Laughter.]

Senator MORAN. That is the highest on record, and that is a testament to the wonderful work of the National Cemetery Administration's team members across the country.

To help serve more veterans with burial options, NCA grants awards to States, tribes, and territorial partners through the Vet-

eran Cemetery Grant Program. To date, NCA has awarded more than \$1 billion to assist States, territories, and tribal governments in establishing, expanding, and operating veteran cemeteries that complement NCA facilities and help expand burial access, particular in rural and underserved areas. Kansas has been the beneficiary of that on numerous occasions, and most recently in 2021 and 2023, grants were awarded to expand both our cemetery at Fort Dodge and the one in Winfield, run by our Kansas Commission on Veteran Affairs.

I look forward to hearing from all of our witnesses today and look for ways that we can be helpful to continue this success story and to honor those who served our country.

I welcome our witnesses today, including the Director of the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs, Retired Brigadier General William Turner. Director Turner, General Turner leads the commission's efforts in Kansas to assist Kansas veterans with, of course, a wide array of programs and services. Those services include filing claims for VA and State veteran benefits, assisting veterans and their families in obtaining earned medals and military awards, running two State veterans homes, one in Fort Dodge, one in Winfield, and managing our four State veterans cemeteries—WaKeeney, Winfield, Fort Dodge, and Fort Riley.

I was around when those sites were selected in Kansas. I am a western Kansan, and the one in WaKeeney surprised me. I can tell you it is one of the most beautiful places that really showcase what a western Kansas sunset is and what it would mean to be buried in a place called home.

Thank you, Director Turner, for making the trip here today and for you and your team's work on behalf of our veterans. I appreciate the way that you work very closely with me and my team on behalf of Kansas veterans.

Thank you all for being here, and I think we will call upon our first witness, who is now down to 1 minute, the Honorable Matthew Quinn, Department of Veterans Affairs. Welcome.

## PANEL I

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### **STATEMENT OF THE HON. MATTHEW QUINN, UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION, DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Mr. QUINN. Good afternoon Ranking Member Moran and Members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to discuss the National Cemetery Administration and the great things we do for America's veterans and their families. I am honored to be here to highlight some of NCA's recent accomplishments while also sharing my four key areas for this year.

NCA memorializes our Nation's heroes and provides perpetual care for more than 5 million gravesites, maintaining national shrine standards in our 155 VA national cemeteries.

Last year, which was our 50th anniversary, we interred more than 137,000 veterans and eligible family members, we provided more than 333,000 headstones and markers, and we prepared more than 427,000 Presidential Memorial Certificates.

NCA supports families at their most difficult times, with the unwavering promise to care for their deceased loved ones in perpetuity. Thanks to the outstanding NCA professionals we are consistently recognized for excellent customer satisfaction. We know we have just one chance to get it right, to honor veterans and their families for their service and sacrifice at their most vulnerable time.

My four main focus areas are awareness, access, modernization, and memorialization. These will ensure that NCA continues providing the best possible service to veterans. These priorities align with our core mission and long-range plan.

Increasing awareness is a top priority, as we ensure veterans are aware of the memorial benefits they have earned. One way we are doing this is by working with VBA and VHA to encourage all veterans to consider end-of-life planning long before they will need it. Together we educate veterans, their families, VSOs, and other stakeholders on end-of-life benefits and services administered by the entire VA.

We are also committed to increasing access to dignified burial options for veterans close to where they live. Nearly 94 percent of all veterans live within 75 miles of a national or grant-funded cemetery. We are close to our strategic goal of 95 percent, and we will soon open cemeteries in New York, Nevada, and Utah. Partnering with States, territories, and tribes helps us reach our goal. Last year our Veteran Cemetery Grants Program surpassed \$1 billion in funding since the program's inception in 1978. We currently support 122 cemeteries through this exemplary Federal-State partnership.

Modernizing our information technology systems has been a priority, and we have made substantial progress. Previously, veterans waited 60 to 90 days for pre-need eligibility determinations. Today, most have an answer within days, and we continue to streamline other eligibility determinations.

We also use technology to improve how we memorialize 10 million veterans through our online Veterans Legacy Memorial. Last year we added 5 million veterans and are exploring the possibility of enabling living veterans to help prepare their own online memorial pages by uploading photos, stories, and mementos.

At NCA we do what we can to preserve the legacies of all who served. Just days ago, we helped right a wrong from a century ago, when soldiers of the 24th Infantry were executed following mass courts martial after the 1917 Houston riots. Last November, the Army overturned its own unjust convictions of these soldiers and upgraded their discharges to honorable. This allowed NCA to engrave and install new headstones at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, reflecting the same information found on every other headstone—the soldier's unit, rank, home state, and date of death.

Mr. Chairman, since joining VA I have witnessed firsthand how NCA's burial and memorial benefits have made a profound difference in the lives of veterans and their families, underscoring the Nation's gratitude to those who wore the uniform to defend the freedoms we enjoy. I know you and the Committee share my admiration for this organization, and we are grateful for your enduring support.

I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Quinn appears on page 39 of the Appendix.]

**HON. JON TESTER, CHAIRMAN,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM MONTANA**

Chairman TESTER [presiding]. Secretary Quinn, thank you for being here. I apologize for being a little late, but I also want to thank my Ranking Member, Senator Moran, for keeping the train somewhat on time. I appreciate what you have done and what you are doing, and thank you for being here today.

I am going to start where you ended, and that is the 17 new headstones for the veterans at Fort Sam Houston who were wrongly accused of murder and mutiny. The families fought for decades, got the record righted, and you guys stepped up.

What else can you do, NCA do, to help bring more stories like this to light and help the wrongs of the past, and are you working on anything specifically right now?

Mr. QUINN. Yes, Senator. Again, this was an incredible ceremony to attend. I attended the ceremony in Houston when the Army announced that they had overturned the convictions and again when we unveiled the markers.

I will tell you, making sure that all veterans are honored in the fashion that they should be honored really was the theme of what we did last week. We have got a team that continues to work with underserved communities across the Nation. We were up in York, Pennsylvania, last Martin Luther King Day, making sure that veterans in that cemetery—the cemetery had been run down, if you will—making sure that those veterans' markers were restored to the condition that they should be, or we ordered new markers. And we will continue to do that in underserved communities.

I would tell you the Veterans Legacy Grant Program is another way that we look at underserved communities and make sure that veterans who have served are properly honored and building that history of the veteran's service.

So those are ways that we will continue to honor those.

Chairman TESTER. I appreciate that. We are going to kind of continue down the line. You are leading. It is on the States and tribal organizations to maintain and operate these cemeteries after they are established. We are talking the grants, the granted ones. They must comply with the same shrine standards as national cemeteries. So the question is a multi-question. Are the grant program cemeteries maintaining these standards, and what are the consequences if they fail to maintain these standards?

Mr. QUINN. Yes, sir. So we inspect our grant-funded cemeteries and our national cemeteries at the same standards every 4 years, so we have been out to the grant-funded cemeteries. Are all of them at the same standards? No. But I would also tell you I have been to some grant-funded cemeteries that look a little bit better than our national cemeteries. So we will go out and continue to inspect all of those cemeteries, to include our own.

Here last year, we were working with a State, and we continue to work with a State, that wasn't upkeeping the standards that

they need to keep. So we sent a letter to the State. I communicated with the Governor. I communicated with the Director of Veterans Affairs and said, okay, for these three cemeteries that we have been working with and have not seen any progress we are going to withhold future grants. So for that cemetery to get a future grant they are going to have to bring their cemetery up to all of the critical standards that we inspect them on, and 90 percent of the high priority standards.

So these are through an inspection that we do, but that is where we are going to hold States responsible.

Chairman TESTER. Just kind of carrying on on that, when folks apply for these grants are they informed of their obligation that it is grant money but they still have an obligation to make sure these cemeteries are up to the standards that our veterans deserve?

Mr. QUINN. Absolutely aware of it. And again, last year the steps we took, that is the first time I am aware that the steps have been taken that we have withheld future grants.

Chairman TESTER. Yep.

Mr. QUINN. States are aware of their responsibilities. Yes, sir.

Chairman TESTER. You correct me if I am wrong, but I believe there are 120 cemeteries in 49 States that have utilized the Veteran Cemetery Grant Program. That should be pretty accurate. It came from my crack staff.

Mr. QUINN. Your crack staff is two shy. It is 122 grant-funded State, territorial, and tribal.

Chairman TESTER. All right. We will dock some pay on that.

Okay. Because of a lack of resources NCA has been able to fulfill their priority one list of grant applications, priority one list, causing those proposals to carry over to the following year. Could you tell us, Secretary Quinn, how many grant proposals are over a year old and how many are over 5 years old?

Mr. QUINN. Yes, sir. So we are going to get through about 18 grant requests this year off of that list. So we have 51 that won't be included on this year's funding—

Chairman TESTER. So they would be—

Mr. QUINN [continuing]. So those would be considered 1 year old.

Chairman TESTER. Okay.

Mr. QUINN. Of those 51, 26 have aged more than 5 years.

Chairman TESTER. Any idea on how much it would cost to complete the 26?

Mr. QUINN. Yes, sir. So it would be about 200-and-some million dollars, about \$220 million. Now, Senator, they will submit a grant request. We look to make sure it is conforming to all the regs and requirements. But it would be about \$226 million to get all the way through the list. We prioritize expansions. We do not want cemeteries to close. The second priority is establishments of new cemeteries. And then you have got O&M, operations and maintenance, and you have got infrastructure. So it would 220-and-some million dollars.

Chairman TESTER. Okay. Thank you.

Mr. QUINN. Yes, sir.

Chairman TESTER. I was not here when the Senators came in so I am just going to go with the nicest Senator first, Senator Hassan.

**HON. MARGARET WOOD HASSAN,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE**

Senator HASSAN. Thank you but, you know, I have a really nice neighbor from Maine here too. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Secretary Quinn, for being here.

You know, every time I visit our New Hampshire State Veterans Cemetery in Boscawen. I am obviously reminded of the incredible sacrifices that our servicemembers and their families make. I am also reminded of how important the cemetery is to our State, our communities, whether it is people gathering to place flags on graves on Memorial Day, whether it is holiday time and a wreath goes on every grave. People come, and it is like they are remembering what is important again—freedom and family and home, right.

So I am very grateful to all of you. I am grateful to the State cemetery staff who do a wonderful job keeping our beautiful cemetery beautiful and meaningful.

But today I also want to talk about Sergeant David LeBlanc and his wife, Cheryl, of Nottingham, New Hampshire. Cheryl never stopped believing that maybe one day her husband would be able to be interred in Boscawen. David and Cheryl were high school sweethearts at Manchester High School West. Cheryl remembers David's National Guard service in the 1970s and his deep commitment to serving our country.

Sergeant David LeBlanc died on June 8, 2016, and for 6 years Cheryl kept his urn at home because she hoped that some day he could be buried among his peers in the State veterans cemetery. David initially was not eligible for burial at Boscawen because despite his 6 years of service to our country he was part of the National Guard, so until recently he was not eligible.

But I was so pleased and honored to be able to work with Senator Cramer and others to pass the Burial Equity for Guard and Reserve Act into law in 2022, which enabled States to expand burial eligibility to members of the National Guard and Reserve without losing the cemetery's VA funding.

David was the first Granite Stater to benefit from this change of law, and he was laid to rest in Boscawen on the sixth anniversary of his death. David's years in the National Guard showed his commitment to our Nation, and as Cheryl put it, this expanded eligibility helps to show that these servicemembers are never forgotten.

So the Burial Equity Act has helped additional veterans like David LeBlanc be laid to rest in State veterans cemeteries. As you mentioned in your testimony, the Veteran Cemetery Grants Program helps State veterans cemeteries improve and expand. Can you please discuss the importance of the Veteran Cemetery Grants Program and its support to State veterans cemeteries, especially as these cemeteries allow more families to bury their loved ones who served with the National Guard and Reserve.

Mr. QUINN. Senator, a great question, and I will tell you, and I tell every State that I visit too, the partnership between the Federal Government and the State, tribal, and territorial governments through the Veteran Cemetery Grant Program I think is one of the best relationships that is out there. I mentioned 94 percent of veterans have a cemetery within 75 miles of where they live. Through

the NCA we would only be at about 77 percent, so the States have augmented that and we see States continuing to want to build those cemeteries—and then augment that with—I served in the National Guard 28 years, so augment that support that they provide to all veterans with the ability of Guard Reservists to be interred within that cemetery with those that they have served with. I have seen Guard members do a lot of things that they just did not meet the active duty time. So I greatly appreciated the Guard Reserve Burial Equity Bill, but that partnership, I think, is the best between the Federal Government and the State, tribal, and territorial governments.

Senator HASSAN. Well, thank you, and I look forward to continuing to work with you on that.

I wanted to turn to kind of the more general issue of supporting families. Most, if not all, veterans will tell you that their service required sacrifices of their families, something we all try to recognize as much as we can. In your testimony you touched upon how the VA supports veterans' families, including through the availability of burial to spouses and certain family members. You also mentioned how comforting it can be to families when they learn of these benefits.

How can the VA better communicate to veterans and their families that they may be eligible for these benefits, because I think some families really do not know.

Mr. QUINN. Yes, Senator. So only 22 percent of veterans take advantage of interment within a national or a grant-funded cemetery, 16 percent in a national cemetery and about 6 percent in grant-funded cemeteries. So that is why we are doing this end-of-life planning, talking to veterans, talking through VSOs. VHA is on board. VBA is on board. But we need to get the word out that this is the final benefit that the Nation will be able to provide to you for your service, and so we have got to get the word out. We will continue to beat that drum, but we need to increase that knowledge of the benefit that is out there.

Senator HASSAN. Well, thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and Secretary Quinn, thank you for your service as well.

Chairman TESTER. Most Honorable Senator King.

Senator KING. Too late, Mr. Chairman. The damage is done.

[Laughter.]

**HON. ANGUS S. KING, JR.,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM MAINE**

Senator KING. Thank you so much for being with us today. This is a sacred topic. One of the first national cemeteries was in Maine, in Togus, in 1866. That cemetery is full and it has no greater capacity. We now have another national cemetery at Acadia National Cemetery in Jonesboro. We also have four State veterans cemeteries in Maine, and I am proud to say that as Governor, Earl Adams, my Adjutant General, and I worked hard to establish two of those, in Caribou and Springvale, Maine. And I have spent hours at both of those. They are inspiring, wonderful places.

I want to go back to the awareness. My question was what percent, and you just answered it, 22 percent. I find that surprising. You mentioned awareness, and do you work through the VSOs? It

would be interesting to do a poll of veterans and say do you know that there is interment opportunity for you and members of your family.

Mr. QUINN. Yes, Senator, I would tell you we have polled. It was a fairly small number, but we did a polling through our Veterans Experience Office, and only about 35 percent were aware of the benefit that was out there.

Senator KING. Or even aware that it was available.

Mr. QUINN. Yes, sir. So 22 percent, 16 percent in the national, 6 percent in grant-funded cemeteries. But we are working very hard to get the word out.

Senator KING. Well, I hope you will continue to do that because it is such a meaningful benefit and it is so meaningful to the families. The times that I have spent at those cemeteries have been enormously moving.

The other piece that I think deserves some mention is the volunteers. Being at these, particularly at the grant-funded cemeteries, tremendous volunteer support. There are people that really made those cemeteries go, and I hope that there is an ability to recognize and support those volunteer organizations.

Mr. QUINN. Yes, Senator, I will take that back. I will tell you, not only the Honor Guard, which are typically volunteers or will work with the military, but also when I go to visit our national cemeteries or grant-funded cemeteries, the volunteers that are sitting at the front desk—

Senator KING. Right.

Mr. QUINN [continuing]. Helping people who are there to visit, I think those are the unsung heroes. And I think our cemeteries that operate the most efficiently and the best in terms of information, it is those volunteers that are manning the desk, talking to fellow veterans when they come in. I think they are—

Senator KING. Raising money.

Mr. QUINN. Raising money for the cemetery, yes sir.

Senator KING. Raising awareness. So I hope that might be a bit of a focus of your work is to find ways to recognize and acknowledge those volunteers because I think they are really important.

Now I have a really important question. The flagpole at Togus has been damaged severely in a storm. We are having trouble getting it fixed because of some difficulty in the payment methodology with the VA and the cemetery. So if you can help me with getting the flagpole at Togus back into service that would be important to veterans in Maine.

Mr. QUINN. Sir, it would not be the first flagpole I noticed that was not operational that I ended up getting fixed, so I will take that on, and I will find out what is going on in Togus.

Contracting support has been tough post-COVID.

Senator KING. Sure.

Mr. QUINN. We have seen higher costs. But we will work on Togus. We will get that flagpole fixed. It is important to have a flag over our national cemetery.

Senator KING. It certainly is, and particularly one of our oldest. What is our oldest national cemetery?



Mr. QUINN. So usually about 1862 is when Abraham Lincoln said, "Hey, we need national cemeteries" for our Civil War dead. So 1862 would be the oldest, when we first established.

Senator KING. Thank you. Thank you very much for your work and for your testimony. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. QUINN. Thank you, Senator.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Hirono.

Senator HIRONO. You are going to need to give me a minute.

Chairman TESTER. No, I am sorry. If you are going to not ask questions right now then I am going to Moran.

[Laughter.]

Senator MORAN. I suggested that he go to you, Senator Hirono, and I was hoping to get a pat on the back from you, but apparently I made a mistake.

[Laughter.]

Senator HIRONO. I never know when you are pulling my leg.

Chairman TESTER. That is true.

**HON. MAZIE K. HIRONO,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM HAWAII**

Senator HIRONO. Okay. So I do have some questions for the Secretary. I have heard from those who oversee our State veterans cemeteries that they do struggle year after year with two key issues, one, to ensure enough funding is available for day-to-day operations, and two, to maintain proper training for staff in high turnover positions.

How frequently does NCA hear about State veterans cemeteries dealing with funding and personnel issues, and are there ways Congress and VA can better support State veterans cemeteries, particularly when it comes to training in high turnover positions?

Mr. QUINN. Yes, Senator. So we are routinely visiting with cemeteries and the States that are operating grant-funded cemeteries. And we have done specific training. Congress passed a law recently that allowed for us to pay for the training of cemetery employees through the grant program.

But I will tell you, also in Hawaii, we invited some of the neighboring island cemetery employees over to the Punchbowl to train with our crews, to learn what they are looking for in a national cemetery, how best to operate and maintain a national cemetery. And we will continue to offer that to our State partners.

Again, I think we pushed harder on that than we have in the past, and I will continue to push hard. I want that partnership not only at the national level, between national and States, but I also want it between a national cemetery within a State and those State grant-funded cemeteries and the employees that are there.

Senator HIRONO. So do we need to provide more funding to enable you to reach out in this way?

Mr. QUINN. I think we can continue to reach out—I hate to stay away from the funding question—but we can continue to reach out and bring those employees to our cemetery to train, and we will. I think it is a matter of, you know, some States see it, well, that is a national cemetery and you have your own funding, and we have to deal with our own issues. And certainly they are unique issues.

But I think bringing those crews together, I think we can learn from the States, frankly, and I think the States can learn from us. I will continue to push that, Senator.

Senator HIRONO. I think that is a very good approach, that it is not just you are in your silo and they are in theirs. So thank you very much for that kind of cooperative effort. I appreciate it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman TESTER. You are very welcome.

Senator KING. Mr. Chairman, could I interject for one moment, please?

Chairman TESTER. Let me ask, Senator Moran. Can he—

Senator KING. May I?

Chairman TESTER [continuing]. Yes, go ahead.

Senator MORAN. Yes.

Senator KING. I want to mention, and I should have mentioned before, I mentioned the Caribou cemetery. One of the key people in establishing that cemetery was Senator Collins' father—

Chairman TESTER. Oh, no kidding.

Senator KING [continuing]. Don Collins. And I just wanted to acknowledge that. He was a key mover in getting that cemetery established.

Chairman TESTER. That is cool. Senator Manchin.

**HON. JOE MANCHIN III,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM WEST VIRGINIA**

Senator MANCHIN. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Quinn, first of all, we had a chance to speak and I appreciate it very much. And I want to go over this, and I think it would be of great interest to both the Ranking Member and the Chair.

Hershel "Woody" Williams, as I think you will recall, he was the last surviving Medal of Honor winner from World War II. He passed away and he was from West Virginia. But there were five of them, and Woody outlasted the other four. He was the last one standing and went down a couple of years ago. He had something which he was really committed to for a long, long time, and that is the, oh, we called it the committal shelters, you know, when they go to the cemetery. These are open areas, and it is very, very inclement weather in Montana, Kansas, West Virginia. And we are talking about trying to get a pilot program, and I have a bill that we have written. But I wanted to see if it would be a bill that the Committee here would entertain to work with Mr. Quinn.

He and I have talked about this, and it is a pilot project. It is a \$2 million pilot project. It is 50 percent from the Feds, from the VA, and 50 percent from the locals to build these. And we would fund three of them, and basically inclement weather and things of that sort, because some of them, families cannot even attend it is so bad.

So this is what we have been working on, and I would like to have any type of input you might have on that, Mr. Quinn, because like I said, we have all of our approved VA cemeteries, and then we have State cemeteries that are for veterans only. So we do not want to exclude anybody at the primary veteran cemetery.

But what are your thoughts on that, and how could we proceed with this?

Mr. QUINN. Senator, I appreciated the call earlier and your interest in this. Coming from the great State of Montana, the committal shelters are an area where families are gathering. I do know that the bill is out there. We will take a look. If you ask for technical assistance or views on it we will take a look at it and see the mechanics of how best to do it.

But certainly I appreciate your compassion for this. I certainly appreciate your interest and the honor of the great Woody Williams, and we will work hard on this.

Senator MANCHIN. Well, those that come from Hawaii we understand that sometimes they might not be as concerned because they are enjoying the beautiful breeze and the nice warm weather, and all that goes with Hawaii. But some of us who live in Maine and some of the tougher areas, it is a tough time having funerals. And this is a shelter it's just a total enclosed shelter that we have been thinking of, up to 50 people. So that would handle most of our interments.

So we would really appreciate that. And I do have the bill, which I would like to submit to the Committee to see if the Committee would like to sponsor this bill with all of us, in a bipartisan way, if that would be accepted.

Chairman TESTER. We can take a look at it and then we can tell you, Joe.

So here are my thoughts, in consultation with the Ranking Member, we will take a look at the bill and then get a hearing on it, gather some information, find out how many of these are needed, get the Secretary's opinion on how best to implement this bill, and then we will see if we can move from there.

Senator MANCHIN. We can do it on a pilot. The way the bill is written is on a pilot.

Chairman TESTER. Well, as long as the pilot is in Kansas and Montana we are okay with that.

[Laughter.]

Senator MANCHIN. And West Virginia. Well, we might have to put four. We have to have Maine, West Virginia—well, we will gladly switch.

Senator HIRONO. We have these in Hawaii, too.

Senator MANCHIN. Anyway, if I could do that. But I do appreciate it, Mr. Quinn, and it is something that I think you all will have to agree on, and all of our veterans here would agree, if you have attended any of these funerals in some of the harshest, inclement weather, it is unbelievable. And these are older people, a lot of them, and it makes it very difficult for them. So I think it is really a labor of love, if you will.

So without objection, I want to submit this for the record.

Chairman TESTER. Without objection.

[The information referred to by Senator Manchin appears on page 95 of the Appendix.]

Senator MANCHIN. Let me see if I have any more questions. I do not think I do. I think you are doing a great job, and I appreciate it.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Moran.

Senator MORAN. Mr. Quinn, thank you for your testimony. I am sorry I stepped out while you were answering my colleague's questions. We are trying to get six appropriation bills, including VA HUD, on the Senate floor, which seems like we are going to do before March 8th. Six of them apparently are complete and six more to go by March 22nd.

I just wanted to make sure that there was something, that if I would have missed you saying or something that you want to make sure that I hear, I would welcome the opportunity to hear from you.

Mr. QUINN. Senator, I appreciate it. All of the points I raised were good ones, and hopefully they are in for the record.

You know, we talked about, so last week we did a ceremony at Fort Sam Houston where we honored 17 African Americans who, through the largest court martial ever held by the U.S. Army, they were hung after the 1917 Houston riots. And we were able, based upon the upgrades to their discharges from dishonorable to honorable, by the U.S. Army, and Secretary Wormuth, I applaud her for taking that step, we were able to—previously the markers for those African American gentlemen who were hung and interred at Fort Sam Houston only had their name and a date of death. That is all that was allowed at the time on markers during that time period. Now that they are honorable we are able to add name, State that they came from, their rank, their unit, and the specific date of death, December of 1917.

It was just an incredible honor to attend that. Senator Tester asked, you know, where else do we need to be doing that. I think the Veterans Legacy Grant Program is one where we continue to look at how to properly recognize veterans who have served this Nation, what is the best way to do it. We continue to look at underserved communities, to include rural veterans and African American veterans.

And then we will continue to look at private cemeteries. State cemeteries, grant-funded cemeteries are maintained at the same standard as our national cemeteries as well. But private cemeteries, if you visit a private cemetery you will see grave markers for veterans that are in disrepair, broken, maybe lying flat on the ground, so dirty you cannot even see them.

So we have been reaching out to communities to say, hey, let us help you look through those cemeteries, find the veterans' graves who are not maintained the way they should, the markers, and we will work with that organization either to clean them up or to order new markers for those who have served. Every grave, every resting place of a veteran ought to be a national shrine, not just if they are in a national cemetery, but every place they are laid to rest. So we will continue in that effort.

Senator MORAN. Are those State cemeteries that may have markers that are in disrepair, are they active still in interring individuals, or are these cemeteries that are generally no longer used?

Mr. QUINN. When I mentioned that, those are in the private cemeteries, so not at the grant-funded cemeteries.

Senator MORAN. No, I understand that. But are those private cemeteries, are they old and historic and not in current use?

Mr. QUINN. I would say old and historic. Some are in current use, but still not maintained. We had a cemetery in southern Virginia where the markers were just laid in a pile, not even placed on the grave. And so that is one that we continue to work with as well.

Senator MORAN. I was pleased to hear your story about Fort Sam Houston, and if there are any other circumstances like that we certainly want to be supportive of making the changes so that everyone who deserves recognition is recognized.

Mr. QUINN. Senator, I appreciate that, and we will alert the Committee.

Senator MORAN. Okay.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Cramer, if you are ready, you are up.

**HON. KEVIN CRAMER,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM NORTH DAKOTA**

Senator CRAMER. Okay. General, good to see you. Thank you. We talk about you a lot back home. Most of it is true.

Mr. QUINN. I am surprised I am not an honorary citizen of North Dakota, as much time as I have spent there, Senator.

Senator CRAMER. You should be. Well, first of all, I mean, I need to say thank you, obviously, for coming through. Once we came through with the legislation you came through big with the help at Mandan, with the State cemetery and the columbarium. It has made a world of difference, and it is a spectacular place, as you know.

I guess I am as interested in anything just in your thoughts going forward. You are familiar with the situation in Fargo with the national cemetery. Another spectacular facility. But as you know there are a lot of people that would love to partner up. Sometimes they have the money. Sometimes they have the will. Sometimes the bureaucracy gets in the way.

Maybe if you could just share a little bit, first of all, with me, while we are in front of all these people, about the Fargo situation, how you see that partnership playing out, and how can I—and I know Senator Hoeven, it would be helpful—so that we get the outcome that we want, I think that you want, that your administration wants, and keep everybody happy with the outcomes?

Mr. QUINN. Yes, Senator, we have worked hard on Fargo, as you know, and land is an issue at our rural cemeteries. We initially bought 5 acres at Fargo for our national cemetery. The landowner said, “Hey, I may sell all of this. This may be subdivided,” and so we jumped at the chance to acquire another 29 acres there, adjoining and around Fargo National Cemetery. So that will keep that cemetery in operation for years and years to come. That was a good move.

Currently we are working, not unlike Senator Manchin’s point, about committal shelters, we did add some walls around the committal shelter at Fargo, the committal shelter, the outdoor one we had built. But we continue to work with Senator Hoeven on the community interest of donating funds for potentially a Mandan-like facility. That is kind of where we are going.

What would it take? So we are working that through our Legal Department and we are working it through our Cemetery Oper-

ations Department to see how can the community donate either the funds or a building, what it would take to build out that additional 30 acres. So we need to go through some planning on that.

But certainly the community interest in Fargo is incredible. The support of that cemetery is incredible. And that's really what makes the cemetery shine is when you have community support like we have in the Fargo community.

Senator CRAMER. Well, and I appreciate that, and, you know, regardless of what these two guys say, it is colder in Fargo than either Kansas or Montana. And Angus, you have never seen Fargo. He thinks Minot is flat, just so you know. He has no idea how flat it is.

Senator KING. If your dog runs away you can still see him for 3 days.

[Laughter.]

Mr. QUINN. Typically the dogs will run west to Montana, out of North Dakota.

Senator CRAMER. So the facilities do matter, and I do appreciate your patience with us. But at the same time I am glad you are having this discussion, as I was coming up, because I do think we have to be innovative. And I know that it gets hard in the bureaucracy sometimes to do that. But if there are ways that we can be helpful, whether it is policy-wise, much like we did, you know, with the Equity Act, or with people who have the enthusiasm, the interest, and resources to make improvements, you know, we want to help them to be able to do that, and we do not want the bureaucracy to get in the way, and I appreciate anything that we can do to help.

Mr. QUINN. I think, you know, Fargo has pushed us, actually, in terms of rural cemeteries and what should a rural cemetery look like. And when the Rural Cemetery Program was initially started it was going to be a very small plot, not very many burials or not very many interments. We will have a committal shelter, and a flagpole—really, that is it.

Senator CRAMER. Right.

Mr. QUINN. And so Fargo pushed us to—we knew we needed a maintenance or a storage facility. Fargo pushed us to put in a toilet. There were no toilets there, and I think there was a Port-a-Pot for a while, so we built a toilet. It actually froze this winter, in North Dakota, with the North Dakota winter.

But we are going to continue to look at what is a rural cemetery. We are building one in Elko, Nevada, and we are going to be building one in Cedar City, Utah. We have to continue to do that. And I would credit Fargo and the community there to say, hey, Quinn, we think a rural cemetery should be a little bit more than what you have there, and we will continue to work through that.

Senator CRAMER. I appreciate it. Thank you. That is all I have, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Chairman TESTER. If you are ready, Senator Sullivan.

Senator SULLIVAN. Yes, sir, Mr. Chairman, I am ready.

Chairman TESTER. Go ahead.

**HON. DAN SULLIVAN,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM ALASKA**

Senator SULLIVAN. Okay. Thank you. Mr. Under Secretary, thank you, sir, for being here, and I want to begin by thanking you and your team. We got that cemetery on Metlakatla. It is a very unique place in Alaska, as you know. It is our only reservation. We only have one Indian reservation in Alaska. It is on an island in southeast Alaska called Metlakatla. And as you know, sir, the Alaska Native community serves at higher rates in the military than any other ethnic group in the country. So this was a huge deal. You guys did a fantastic job. I was there for the opening ceremony, which was so beautiful. It was an unbelievable blue sky, not cloudless sky day. So that is where you guys have done a great job.

Now I am going to ask you to help me on a couple of other things that are important. My State has more vets per capita than any State in the country, so these are really important issues to my constituents.

The first one—and you might be aware of it, and I would just like to get your commitment—we have a national cemetery on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, but that is on the military side of the base. And it is a really, really difficult process to have families go visit their loved ones who are buried there. As a matter of fact, not to be too morbid here, but that is where I intend to be buried, and I want my kids to be able to go see me. And it is a really challenging situation. It should not be. We have talked to you guys before, the military folks. There is a way to do it. There is a road that could access this. It would not create security issues.

I even have draft legislation if you need it to be able to fix this. It is a very simple request. But right now so many of the people, the families of the people buried in this very beautiful cemetery, they cannot get there. You know, they have to call ahead and wait in line, and when it is Memorial Day weekend stuff it just becomes a complete, utter nightmare.

So are you familiar with this one, and can I get your commitment to work with me and my team and the Department of Veterans Affairs in Alaska? We have a whole bunch of good solutions. We think they are very logical, common sense, and if we can get your commitment to work with us on that, it should not be so hard for families to visit their heroic loved ones in this cemetery.

Mr. QUINN. Senator, after our ferry ride out to Metlakatla, when we did that, we did stop at Fort Richardson and visit it, and actually drove the ground. And from the cemetery director I heard the same concerns. Families are having to wait 7 days or notify the base.

I am certainly happy to take a look at the bill when you have it, and I certainly commit to working with you on it.

We drove the grounds. I think there is maybe a solution. Anything dealing with the base we would have to work with DoD—

Senator SULLIVAN. No, I get it.

Mr. QUINN. But I think there might be a solution there at Fort Richardson, and that is what the cemetery director had mentioned to me. You certainly have my commitment.

Senator SULLIVAN. Great. Thank you. And again, thanks for the Metlakatla visit. It was very memorable. I forgot about our great ferry ride out there.

Second is we are one of the only States, I think very few States, that do not have a state-run and statewide VA cemetery. The Metlakatla one, we love that one, but, you know, that was a VA grant-awarded community, but as you know that is on a reservation, hard to get to.

So the majority of the State, again, a State with more veterans per capita than any other State, we actually do not have a veteran cemetery. It is just the Metlakatla one and then there is one in Sitka and there is one in JBER, but these are not State veterans cemeteries.

So the State of Alaska has purchased land in Fairbanks. It is beautiful property. And we have applied to receive a VA cemetery grant. However, we keep getting—like we always miss the cutoff. I think we were 28th this last time around. You guys went down to 20. So, we are kind of scratching our heads on how you grant awardees. We think we have a pretty strong application. We have already bought the land, as a State. And we do not have one, right. Again, I mean, we are very happy about Metlakatla, but that one does not really count as a statewide one.

So, again, will you commit to work with me, this Committee, and the Alaska VA to get our first-ever statewide cemetery, hopefully helped by the VA? Again, we have already purchased the land. It is a beautiful site in Fairbanks, right in the middle of the State, as you know. Can I get your commitment to work with us on that?

Mr. QUINN. Sir, you have got my commitment, and I can just talk briefly—I know, time. But we prioritize the expansions of existing—We do not want a grant-funded cemetery to close, and so that ends up being the priority. But we certainly will look at the establishment criteria. And I know [unclear] Alaska is sitting out there asking about it. In fact, I was hit up about it at—

Senator SULLIVAN. I know you were. They are watching right now.

Mr. QUINN. You have my commitment to help Alaska.

Senator SULLIVAN. Okay. Well, I mean, just to make that point, I understand you want to help maintain the ones you have. That makes total sense. But it also makes total sense to help out the States that do not have anything yet, and we are one of those States. So keep that in mind in your grant-making criteria, but I look forward to working with you and our VA and the people in Fairbanks who have already selected this land to make more progress, the way we did in Metlakatla.

I will end, Mr. Chairman, just by thanking the Under Secretary again. You guys did a great job on that cemetery. It is beautiful. It is beyond everybody's expectations. And it was a real honor that you came out. It is not easy to get there, as you know, and it was a real honor that you came out for that opening ceremony. Thank you again.

Mr. QUINN. Thank you, Senator, I appreciate it, and you have got my commitment.

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you.



Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Sullivan. Before we let the Secretary go does anybody have a question that just needs to be asked?

[No response.]

Chairman TESTER. All right. You are excused, I would say, Secretary Quinn. I just want to express my appreciation for your good work, and thank you for your straightforward answers today.

Now we will welcome our second panel up. First is going to be Kelly Ackerman, who is Administrator for the Montana Division of Veterans Affairs. Kelly, it is great to have you in front of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. Welcome.

Then we have General William Turner, Director of the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs. Good to have you here, General Turner.

And finally we are going to have Michael Figlioli, who is Director of the National Veterans Service at the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Michael, thank you for being here.

Did you have anything special you wanted to say about General Turner, Senator Moran?

Senator MORAN. I spoke highly of General Turner in your absence, but in your presence I would speak highly of General Turner once again, and I thank him for his leadership and the tremendous efforts that he and his team in Kansas make to care for those who served our Nation.

Chairman TESTER. And the reason I asked you to do that is then now I can say nice things about Kelly Ackerman, who is just a marvelous asset for the great State of Montana and for veterans all around this country. So thank you for being here, Kelly. You have the floor.

Correct me if I am wrong, staff. They each have 5 minutes, and know that your entire statement will be a part of the record.

You may proceed, Kelly.

## **PANEL II**

### **STATEMENT OF KELLY ACKERMAN, ADMINISTRATOR, MONTANA VETERANS AFFAIRS DIVISION**

Ms. ACKERMAN. Thank you, Chairman Tester and Ranking Member Moran, and Committee members. I appreciate the opportunity to share information about Montana's State Veterans Affairs Cemetery Program.

We currently have three State veterans cemeteries, all established using the National Cemetery Administration Veterans Cemetery Grant Program, and we have been approved by State legislature and National Cemetery Administration for one additional State veterans cemetery. We have nine FTE that staff the three current cemeteries.

Our Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery in Miles City was constructed in 2002, and recently finalized a National Cemetery Administration expansion grant. It is our easternmost State veterans cemetery, allowing veterans in rural eastern Montana a State burial option. They have 851 interments filled, and they have 2,946 available.

Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery in Missoula was established in 2009. This cemetery is scheduled to receive a National Cemetery Administration expansion grant in Federal fiscal year 2025. They have 2,345 currently interred, and 1,052 available plots.

Established in 1988, Montana State Veterans Cemetery at Fort Harrison is the State's oldest veteran cemetery and is the largest of the three existing State veterans cemeteries. We just began the design phase of a \$2 million expansion grant, which will add 1,680 plots. They have 5,470 veterans and family members currently interred, with 446 plots available.

Because Montana is a predominately rural State, we understand that not all veterans and their family members will choose to be buried, or be able to be buried, in a veteran 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 headstones, and potential burial benefits to help with the cost of funeral expenses. Our staff help servicemembers and veterans preregister for burial in one of our State veterans cemeteries or help order VA headstones for private cemeteries. These are just a few of the benefits available to veterans during the burial process.

As was discussed, 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. Because this is considered an "unfunded" bill, many of my counterparts across the country have chosen not to participate in this program, which is understandable. However, in Montana, even though we required additional funding from Montana legislature, we are participating as of July 1, 2023. We use State funding to cover the cost of the veteran's burial since there is no VA plot allowance provided, but we are not able to help the spouses for their funding.

The operations and maintenance at each of our cemeteries runs a little differently depending on the number of acres or plots, and the number of FTE assigned. We were successful in getting an additional FTE for each of our three cemeteries during our last legislative session. We anticipate requesting more FTE for our two larger cemeteries through our Veteran Cemetery Grant Program. National Cemetery Administration staff have made themselves available for questions, concerns, or walked our new staff through processes. This is true for our budget staff and our department A&E staff. There are ongoing 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.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Ackerman appears on page 46 of the Appendix.]

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Kelly.

Next up we have General Turner. General, you have the floor.

**STATEMENT OF BRIGADIER GENERAL (RET.) WILLIAM TURNER, DIRECTOR, KANSAS COMMISSION ON VETERANS AFFAIRS OFFICE**

Mr. TURNER. Good afternoon, Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and distinguished Members of the Committee. On behalf of the Kelly administration, the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs, and nearly 190,000 veterans that reside and call Kansas home, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on our most sacred mission, honoring America's veterans and their families at our State veterans cemeteries. I am truly honored to be present before you today.

Our agency remains committed in honoring our veterans by being their advocates and assisting them, along with their families, in gaining access to Federal and State benefits that they have earned. In addition, our services also include skilled nursing care and interment options at our four State veterans cemeteries.

With Kansas' legislative approval and thanks to the support of the National Cemetery Administration's State Cemetery Grants Program, the Kansas Veterans Cemetery at Fort Dodge was our first veteran cemetery and was dedicated on November 1, 2002. Since that time, we have gone on to proceed in the same manner to construct three additional State veterans cemeteries in WaKeeney and Winfield in 2004, and finally in Fort Riley, Manhattan, in 2009. Our commitment and our obligation is provide a dignified final resting place for our veterans, spouses, and dependents that is maintained in a manner that reflects proper respect.

Since 2002, the Kansas Veteran Cemetery Program has provided beautiful and honorable final resting places for 5,996 veterans, spouses, and eligible dependents. Including our national cemeteries, we are geographically positioned to serve eligible veterans, including those who reside in our more rural areas, who desire to be interred close to home in these sacred shrines. This not only enables the nearby families and friends to continue paying their respects, but it also allows the local citizens to honor their services and express their gratitude as they do so each year on Memorial Day and during Wreaths Across America, so that their service will never be forgotten.

We appreciate not only our active duty component organizations but also the Kansas National Guard and Reserve units who steadfastly support our services. In addition, we receive outstanding support from the many Veterans Service Organizations within our State who faithfully provide honor guards, parking, support, speakers, and much more, that always make our services professional, dignified, and respectful. In recent years, we have witnessed an increase in interments at our cemeteries, and their support is vital to our success.

We perform our mission with a dedicated staff of 17 individuals, including our program director, and together they do outstanding work. But illness, vacations, and retirements can create challenges for such a small staff. Teamwork between the four cemeteries has helped mitigate many of these situations. Inclusive, the NCA also offers great training opportunities to our staff. However, it is impossible to anticipate services, and we do encounter challenges sending individuals to attend NCA training due to the limited staff

depth. Alternatively, we have coordinated with our NCA parts in the national cemeteries located within our State to collectively train and remain proficient in all of our duties.

Equally important is maintaining our equipment, our grave markers, and making necessary capital improvements to improve each of our cemeteries. We continuously seek to enhance our quality of service for those whom we serve. In so doing, as Senator Moran had mentioned earlier, we did receive two grants in 2021 and 2023, that provided enhanced services for our columbarium walls at Fort Dodge and at Winfield.

To better serve veterans and help predict future needs, we encourage veterans and their dependents to pre-certify, which assists in mitigating stress on families and also possible delays in scheduling at the greatest time of need. We presently have 8,701 pre-certifications at one of our Kansas Veteran Cemeteries. Clearly the trend for growth will continue at all four State veterans cemeteries.

Finally, the Kansas Veteran Cemetery Program has been honored to be recognized for its excellence in performance and service by the National Community Administration. Recently both Fort Dodge and WaKeeney State Veterans Cemeteries respectively received the Stewardship and Operational Excellence Awards for superior performance. We continue to strive for the highest standards in honoring veterans and their dependents at a lasting memorial to their service.

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, we would like to extend our gratitude for the loyal support of both this Committee and the National Cemetery Administration. This concludes my testimony, and we welcome your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Turner appears on page 48 of the Appendix.]

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, General.

It is always good to have the VFW in front of the Committee. Michael, you have the floor.

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL FIGLIOLI, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE, VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES**

Mr. FIGLIOLI. Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and Members of the Committee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony with regard to burial benefits and ongoing efforts for veterans and their families.

I am honored to have been asked to be a witness for this hearing regarding an agency of the Department of Veterans Affairs that I feel is often overlooked yet delivers the highest customer service and quality. It is not often that we are afforded the chance during a congressional hearing to focus more on the positives of VA rather than solely on what needs to be corrected.

The National Cemetery Administration has consistently rated in the high 90 percentile in every American Customer Satisfaction Index survey since 2015. It most recently achieved a 97 percent rating in 2022, which was the highest score ever achieved in any

organization rated by ACSI. This is a remarkable achievement and envious in any industry.

I had the honor to serve two terms as a member of the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials. This allowed me to see firsthand their dedication and professionalism in serving those who seek to be memorialized in our Nation's shrines for their service.

The NCA, for half a century, has had the mission of providing a fitting final resting place for those who served in our Nation's military conflicts. More than five million souls have been entrusted to its expert care. This includes decedents from the Revolutionary War to our most recent conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places around the globe. NCA was also entrusted with the solemn responsibility of reintering Air Force pilot, First Lieutenant Michael Blassie, from the Vietnam War, who was thought to be the last unknown from any conflict.

NCA has long been a forward-thinking agency, despite its mission to look backward. By that I mean remembering the lives and careers of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and now Guardians are properly memorialized not only in acres of beautifully landscaped grounds but in cyberspace as well.

Beyond physical memorials, the agency has embraced digital innovation through projects like the Veterans Legacy Memorial Project. As a subcommittee chairman for this project, I witnessed firsthand its success in creating a public-facing digital archive where family members, friends, and fellow servicemembers can share memories about our veterans. Balancing privacy and free speech concerns, the NCA implemented a review system ensuring appropriateness and accuracy in the shared content. The Veterans Legacy Program, initiated in 2016, further engages students and teachers across the Nation in discovering the historical richness within VA national cemeteries. This program has funded 35 initiatives in colleges and universities, involving nearly 15,000 students, and producing valuable resources such as veteran biographies, documentary videos, and lesson plans.

While these initiatives showcase the NCA's commitment to honoring veterans, it is crucial to raise awareness about the agency itself. Often overshadowed by Arlington National Cemetery, the NCA administers 155 national cemeteries, each uniquely reflecting the communities they serve. The Veterans Legacy Program has played a vital role in telling the history of those cemeteries and the individuals interred with them.

Addressing challenges faced by NCA I want to highlight a case that exemplifies effective cooperation and problem solving. In 2018, concerns were raised about accessing the National Cemetery Scheduling Office. Through collaboration with the advisory committee, issues were identified, solutions were implemented, demonstrating the NCA's dedication to maintaining a high level of service.

As advocates for veterans, the VFW addresses concerns raised by its members. In 2018, we responded to concerns about inscriptions on headstones in the Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery. The issues centered around inscriptions like "Vietnam," potentially misleading observers about veterans' actual service. While

emphasizing the importance of accuracy, the VFW called for a review of the policy to ensure accurate recognition of veterans' service.

Funding is critical to sustaining the NCA's operations and meeting the rising costs associated with inflation. Adequate funding ensures proper grounds upkeep, materials for new cemeteries, and seamless burial processes for the increasing number of veterans each year. The VFW recognizes the need for continued support from authorizing and appropriating committees to maintain the high standards set by NCA.

VFW advocates for improved data-sharing among VA entities, including the NCA. Efficient communication on veteran deaths is essential for timely and accurate processing of claims for survivors. Investments in technology upgrades or a single IT platform are necessary for streamlining this process and ensuring the effectiveness of benefits programs.

In conclusion, I am proud to have been a part of the NCA team and witness its dedication to honoring veterans. The agency, though often viewed as a third wheel on the benefits landscape, plays a crucial role in closing the loop in every veteran's story of service. The men and women of NCA make a positive difference in people's lives during the worst of times with care and professionalism.

This concludes my testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Figlioli appears on page 56 of the Appendix.]

Chairman TESTER. Thank you for your testimony, Michael, and there will be questions.

I will yield my position to Senator King.

Senator KING. Mr. Chairman, I really do not have any questions except this has been an extraordinary hearing where it has really been so positive, particularly, and I think Mr. Quinn should feel very positive about the response that he has gotten today. Your testimony was extraordinary about customer service. And I just think this is one of the most successful programs we are engaged in and we need to maintain our support and continue our oversight. But I think in this case it is support more than oversight.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you for that observation. I think it just proves what happens when you put a Montanan at the head of a program. Senator Moran.

Senator MORAN. Let me complain about this Committee to you. [Laughter.]

Senator MORAN. Mr. Chairman, thank you. It has been a good—I agree with the Senator from New Hampshire—it has been a—from Maine—I appreciate what we have heard today.

Let me just ask a couple of things, perhaps of General Turner. You heard the testimony or the request of the Senator from West Virginia. Is there something missing in our cemeteries as far as shelter during the committal ceremony?

Mr. TURNER. Yes, sir. Right now at two of our veteran cemeteries we have them encased with side doors, side panels if you will, that help protect against the weather elements, the severe winds that

we see in Kansas and the like, so when it is cold out. Two of the cemeteries have that, sir, and they are able to provide that kind of care and comfort for those and the families that are there to attend those ceremonies, the committal shelter. The other two do not have that, but that has been built into our capital improvements program this year, and we received the funding from our State and our State general funds, and we are being able to go about doing that. So we are going to be initiating, you know, the going out for bid and then completing those projects here in the next probably 12 to 15 months, sir.

Senator MORAN. I have been to all four of our State cemeteries. It seems to me, as I recollect, there is a shelter for burial in really all four locations, but I must be missing something?

Mr. TURNER. I apologize, sir, if I miscommunicated. We do have the committal shelter with the roofs or with the structure there, but two of the—

Senator MORAN. Just the sides?

General TURNER [continuing]. Two of the sides, yes, sir, the side doors, the side panels. And so two of them did not have that, and now we are in the process of correcting that.

Senator MORAN. The design engineers must have not recognized that the weather does not always come from above.

Mr. TURNER. Yes, sir. Exactly.

Senator MORAN. I wanted to make sure that I am not missing something on any tribal issues in Kansas. We would share with Montana and other States significant tribal population. Are there any issues in regard to cemeteries and tribes in our State?

Mr. TURNER. No, sir. We do not have any issues at this time. We do not have any dedicated tribal cemeteries that we oversee or supervise from the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs, but we work closely with those groups, sort of provide an equal support for them as well.

Senator MORAN. Very good. And finally, is there anything, General Turner, that if I knew I would be disturbed by? Is anything going on in Kansas in regard to the topic of today's hearing that I should be made aware of?

Mr. TURNER. Sir, I do not think there is anything that kind of rises to that threshold that should cause you great concern. There are certainly issues that we deal with all the time in terms of making sure that we are following the right procedures and making sure that we follow through with attention to detail, whether it be with ordering and establishing the grave markers for each of these individuals, if it is the meticulous nature in which we go about maintaining the grave markers at the cemeteries, maintaining the grounds. I think the staff does a tremendous job of doing that, sir. But it does not come without its challenges, obviously. There is a 17-person staff out there that does that work, and they do great work, sir.

Senator MORAN. I was not, of course, General, suggesting that there was anything but wanted to make sure that you had the opportunity to inform me if there was something that you thought would be helpful for me to know, to be of help in solving a problem.

And just generally, the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs, are staffing levels, are positions filled and adequately staffed in Kansas, beyond just cemeteries?

Mr. TURNER. Yes, sir, they are. We have received a tremendous influx of folks that have been seeking employment with us. We owe a lot of that to administration, the Kelly administration, and the legislature out there with a 24/7 pay plan with various considerations for salaries and wages that has helped increase our staffing at each of our veterans homes. And likewise, that is also applicable to our programs with veteran services as well.

Senator MORAN. And General, finally, again, unrelated to the topic of the hearing today, my understanding is that our team, including my staff here, are working with you and your team as we try to find a path forward on a veterans home, an additional veterans home in Kansas. Anything to report to update me there?

Mr. TURNER. Sir, we have the State dollars that represent the 35 percent commitment of \$17.2 million. It has been appropriated to us in a line account in our budget. And we have submitted an application with the Federal VA Construction Grant Program to seek the other 65 percent. We are currently in one of the priority groups, and there is a subsequent list that will come out here in the future that will also assess where we will fall in the future.

But, sir, we have continued with our schematic design, our design development, so when the time comes when funds are available we are absolutely intending to be ready to break ground and proceed.

Senator MORAN. I will work with you in hopes that we can find an innovative way to get us to a position in which that decision and the funding is available more rapidly than it otherwise might be. Thank you. Thank you for your service.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Blumenthal.

**HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT**

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank all the witnesses. General, thank you for your service and Ms. Ackerman, for yours as well in the Air Force, and your son, Denton, who is in the Montana National Guard, thank you. I want to, in particular, thank Veterans of Foreign Wars that play such an important part in advocacy, but also in helping at the State level. I have seen it myself in Connecticut, along with other VSOs, in keeping awareness elevated about the need to honor our veterans, not just in words but in action, health care and all the other ways that you do, and at our places of burial, our cemeteries.

I want to focus just really quickly on the program that benefit State-funded cemeteries. In Connecticut we have two. A lot of the time families really want their loved ones to be buried close to home. Arlington is a majestic, beautiful place but so is our State cemetery in Connecticut, in Middletown. And the Veterans Cemetery Grant Program enables grants to be used to establish, expand, or improve veteran cemeteries that are owned and operated by the States.



I have looked at the list of 69 conforming requests. By the way, one of them is from Helena, Montana, for \$2 million. I assume that is going to be funded promptly.

[Laughter.]

Chairman TESTER. Don't make any assumptions.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. None from Kansas, so far as I know.

Senator MORAN. I assume that is going to be funded quickly too.

[Laughter.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. But very, very seriously, these cemeteries are really so important. Maintaining them, expanding them, maybe each of you could comment briefly on that program. Ms. Ackerman?

Ms. ACKERMAN. Yes, sir. I mean, it is the greatest honor that we can provide our veterans and their family members, and that \$2 million expansion grant has already been awarded. It had been submitted back in 2016, so it has been sitting on the docket. It took us quite a few years for it to wait until it had been actually awarded. So we have been waiting a long time but we are going through the architect and engineer phase right now.

The process is long. It can be frustrating for all of the staff. There are a lot of different pieces and parts and moving parts that have to go through. But when it is all said and done, the National Cemetery Administration staff and the grant program staff are absolutely fantastic to work with. And I remember when I was new in my position I had no idea what I was doing, and I would just pick up the phone and call the NCA grant program staff and they were fantastic. But when you are running out of plots in your cemetery and you need to expand, or you just need an improvement, like we were talking about, when you need more walls for your committal shelters, we have, in our committal shelters in Montana, we have those walls. And if you did not have them in Montana, you are hurting because our winters are brutal.

And so these improvements, these grant and expansion improvements are absolutely phenomenal. If you have ever been through Miles City, Montana, it is flat. It is eastern Montana, and it gets really windy and really cold. And if we did not have that beautiful committal shelter with walls so that the family could nestle in together in those walls it would be very uncomfortable. Well, they would not get out of their cars is what would happen, or they would wait until the summer and bury them in the summer. So yes, it is a very, very, very important program.

Thank you for asking that question, Senator.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Thanks for those comments. Very important. General?

Mr. TURNER. So I have to echo Ms. Ackerman's comments. We feel the same way, sir, and it is so vital I think to the communities and to the families and the friends to be able to continue to pay respects and honor. When we have these ceremonies out in these local communities they are highly attended. There may be 300 or 400 folks that come out to a local community cemetery out there to pay respects and honor their citizens who have served our Nation, take great pride in that. At all hours of the day and night, we know that we have visitors that come in solitude, and sometimes out there in the day will come out and spend time and visit with their loved ones.

So I think it is a very critical need to have these in the local communities where these folks lived and were raised and then left to go serve their country and then returned home to, rather than having to travel great distances to do that. So it has been really a great thing for us.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Sir?

Mr. FIGLIOLI. Yes, thank you, Senator. Yes, VFW definitely supports the State Cemetery Grant Program. Because of geographic areas—I am originally from Massachusetts so near your home State—you know, Cape Cod Bourne is one of the largest national cemeteries, but then the next closest cemetery, that is the only one. The next one is out in the middle of the State, the State cemetery in Worcester. So it provides that option because they are just as highly maintained as national cemeteries, but it also gives you that option. If there is no room at Bourne, or it is too far to travel, then you have the State cemetery option because it is just as close—same standards, same training as VA. And VFW is happy to continue to advocate for support for that program, and as a grassroots organization would be happy to partner with you at the State level as well and encourage our Department-level staff and members to work with your office as well and try to get that line moving and that funding, besides Kansas and Montana.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you very much. Thank you all for your service.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal. And I want to echo Senator Blumenthal's remarks about the VFW. You guys have a class organization, and we appreciate you being in front of the Committee today.

My first question has to do with Kelly Ackerman. Administer Ackerman, recently we heard about an issue with the First Special Service Force medallions at the cemetery in Fort Harrison. What I need you to do is explain the issue and then tell me how it was resolved.

Ms. ACKERMAN. Thank you, Senator. The issue was it was noticed that the First Special Service Force medallions, there were actually 11 of them at the time, they were noticed that they were on the headstones of the First Special Service Force headstones at Fort Harrison, Montana.

Chairman TESTER. Yep.

Ms. ACKERMAN. When they were noticed it was pointed out to us that it was against regulations to have medallions on headstones. These medallions have been on these headstones since the '80s, because Fort Harrison in Montana is the birthplace of the First Special Service Force. We hesitated on taking these medallions off because it was the birthplace, but we were directed to do this, and so we took them off. The families were not happy, but, you know, as I was directed to do that I directed my staff to take the medallions off.

I visited with National Cemetery Administration staff and I requested for a special exception to be made to be able to keep these medallions on because of the special situation, and I was granted that exception. So now there is a memorandum of agreement in place, going through legal review, and so these medallions will be able to be reinstalled, replaced on these headstones. Some of the

headstones will need to be replaced because of them did damage by taking them off, removing them off of the headstones.

Chairman TESTER. Well, thank you for your work on this issue.

I want to talk about the grant funding, and I want to talk about the standards that are associated with the grant funding. And this is for you and the general, Kelly. What are some of the challenges that States have in meeting the National Shrine standards, or are there challenges?

Ms. ACKERMAN. Yes, sir, there are challenges. One of the challenges with the—there is an inspectable item on the National Shrine standard is setting headstones in the wintertime. You would not think that would be an issue for most States because it is not, but in the wintertime we cannot set—well, we can set a headstone in the wintertime but then we have to reset them all again in the spring. And with our staffing, you know—

Chairman TESTER. It makes a difference.

Ms. ACKERMAN [continuing]. The General does not have any more staffing than we do. It makes it very challenging. So we do not set headstones in the winter, so that is a challenge.

But the other challenges that we have are just with our staffing shortages. That is about the only challenge that we have with National Shrine standards. With the general upkeep of the grounds themselves, we do not have any challenges.

Chairman TESTER. Okay. General, would you like to respond to that?

Mr. TURNER. Yes, sir. Thank you. Probably the greatest challenge is similar to what Ms. Ackerman had stated in terms of the staffing and being able to meet all the requirements. I will tell you that our staff take great pride in doing that, and we recognize the challenge, and the folks that are appreciated. They go about that by really teaming collaboratively. They will move between cemeteries as needed, and they will surge in different areas where needed, to work together to be able to meet the requirements, to work on setting the grave markers, to making sure that it is all being done to standard.

The training issue I addressed, I think, in the opening comments, are again, with such a staff that does not have much depth it makes it very difficult sometimes to send somebody away. You cannot always anticipate when there is going to be a funeral service, when you are going to provide honors of this nature. So to let somebody go and to do that when you only have two equipment operators at a location, and many of these operations require two and three people to do, then so what we have done alternatively is to seek opportunities where we can come together, and we partner with the NCA and those national cemeteries within our State to be able to achieve that.

Chairman TESTER. This is a question for you, Mr. Figlioli. NCA offers a number of burial benefits. Most importantly they allow burial in a veteran cemetery with a promise to maintain that final resting place into perpetuity. Mr. Figlioli, how do your members feel NCA is doing with maintaining veteran cemeteries?

Mr. FIGLIOLI. Thank you. I think overall they are satisfied as they seek out through pre-need and other methods to secure that benefit to be buried in the national cemetery. I do not think we

have gotten very many complaints at the Washington, DC, headquarters about that particular benefit. I think a lot of our members are aware that it is a benefit. I think they take advantage of it. And as I said, if the NCA portion is not necessarily available then I think, yes, they are also inclined to look at a State cemetery as well.

And we are happy to continue to push that word out about access to those burial benefits, whether that is through pre-need, through our social media, through talking to each other. You know, we heard earlier that it is kind of an underused benefit in such a way. I think we are aware because we work in that space. But we are definitely happy to continue to talk about the good things NCA does and the benefits of seeking to be memorialized in a national cemetery.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you. Do you have anything? Okay.

A couple of things here. I would ask unanimous consent that my opening statement be a part of the record.

Senator MORAN. No objection.

Chairman TESTER. If no objection we can get them as a part of the record. Thank you for that.

[The opening statement of Chairman Tester appears on page 33 of the Appendix.]

Chairman TESTER. I want to thank our witnesses for their participation in today's hearing.

On a personal note, I just want to say that when I was a teenager I was asked to play Taps by the VFW for funerals that were held in my hometown. That may be the highest honor I have ever had in my life. I truly got to play Taps for some incredible people over my life, Danny Inouye being one, and a guy by the name of Lindy Ray being another, who I played for last August, who was the guy that asked me to be the bugler for the VFW.

I just want to say that the work that NCA does, the work that these small communities do, the work that the VFW chapters do, providing honor guide and buglers, is something that we ought to continue to support and encourage and make sure that it continues to happen.

With that I would just say we will keep the record open for a week, and we are adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 5 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

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**A P P E N D I X**

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## **Opening Statement**

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Opening Statement of Chairman Jon Tester  
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee  
"Sacred Mission: Honoring America's Veterans and their Families at VA Cemeteries"  
February 28, 2024

- Welcome to today's hearing, where we'll take a look at how the National Cemetery Administration is honoring the memories of those who served our nation in uniform.
- Making sure all veterans have a final resting place that honors their service and sacrifice is a critically important part of preserving their legacy....and NCA does great work to ensure that happens.
- Since 1973, annual interments at national cemeteries have increased more than 400 percent.
- In addition to overseeing 155 national cemeteries, NCA is responsible for the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program that helps states and tribal organizations establish veterans' cemeteries.
- Montana is home to four of these cemeteries – three state cemeteries and one tribal cemetery.
- Montana also opened up one of the first national cemeteries under the NCA's Rural Initiative in 2014, the Yellowstone National Cemetery in Laurel, Montana.

- I was proud to work with Montana veterans, local officials, NCA, and two VA Secretaries to get this done and expand national cemeteries to more rural states.
- Over the last several years, Congress has advanced critical legislation, including the *Veterans Cemetery Grants Improvement Act of 2020* and the *National Cemeteries Preservation and Protection Act of 2022*.
- These laws help bolster NCA's capacity through increasing state and tribal grant program awards. They also allow for land transfers by the Bureau of Land Management for the expansion and establishment of new national cemeteries.
- For the first time ever, National Cemeteries are authorized to provide green burials for veterans thanks to these laws.
- We also made it so tribal cemeteries could receive plot allowances.
- And just last week, NCA replaced the markers of 17 black Army veterans wrongly convicted of murder and mutiny during the Houston race riots that took place more than a hundred years ago.

- I applaud the Army for finally overturning these unjust convictions. And I congratulate NCA for replacing their headstones and installing a new educational plaque at the cemetery to tell their story.
- But there is always more work we can do.
- That's why we are having this hearing. We need to hear from you on what we can do to help improve how we honor our veterans.
- Lastly, I would like to highlight our ongoing work to ensure we are properly memorializing some of our most deserving veterans.
- This past October, I joined Senators Braun and Brown to introduce the bipartisan *Mark Our Place Act*.
- This legislation allows NCA to furnish new headstones and markers for Medal of Honor recipients who served prior to 1917.
- Back home in Montana, this would mean Captain John E. Moran, who is interred at the Highlands cemetery in Great Falls, would be eligible for a replacement marker.

- Captain Moran served in the US Army and earned his Medal of Honor on September 17, 1900, by fearlessly leading a small group of troops under severe fire through waist deep water in a successful attack on the enemy near Luzon in the Philippine Islands.
- We need to remember the sacrifices and service of those who risked their lives defending our country, and I'm looking for how we can best continue their legacy.
- Ranking Member Moran, over to you.

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## **Prepared Statements**

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**STATEMENT OF MR. MATTHEW QUINN  
UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**"SACRED MISSION: HONORING AMERICA'S VETERANS AND  
THEIR FAMILIES AT VA CEMETERIES"**

**February 28, 2024**

Good afternoon, Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the current status of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) National Cemetery Administration (NCA), including our recent activities and challenges, and our goals. I am proud to have been leading this incredible organization at the time of the 50th anniversary of its creation. Since the enactment of the National Cemeteries Act in 1973, the dedicated staff of NCA has continued to put forth every effort to provide Veterans and their families with the benefits that they are due and world-class service.

In these 50 years, NCA has become a model of exceptional customer service. In 2022, NCA matched our previous score of 97 out of a possible 100, the highest score ever measured by the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), and the seventh consecutive time NCA has been ranked first in customer satisfaction among the Nation's top companies and Federal agencies. NCA's own customer satisfaction survey, sent to nearly 40,000 next-of-kin and 12,500 funeral directors in FY 2023, supports the ACSI numbers, with 99% of respondents agreeing that cemetery appearance was excellent; 97% agreeing the service was excellent; and 99% indicating they would recommend national cemeteries to Veteran families at their time of need.

It is clear that when Veterans and their families choose NCA, they are very satisfied with the service they receive. I believe we have opportunities to build on our strengths through four focus areas this year: access, awareness, modernization, and memorialization. Access focuses on providing Veterans with robust burial and memorial options. Awareness ensures that all Veterans know that choosing VA is a great option for burial at no additional cost. Modernization improves our technical processes to reduce wait times for application decisions, and memorialization uses innovative ways to create lasting legacies of the Veterans we serve.

Over the past half century, NCA has increased cemetery access for Veterans by growing from 103 national cemeteries in 1973 to 155 national cemeteries today. Nearly 5.4 million people—including 4.1 million Veterans from the Revolutionary War to the present—are buried in VA national cemeteries. We annually welcome more than 1.5 million visitors to our national cemeteries.

For the last decade, NCA's over-arching goal has been to increase burial access for Veterans and eligible family members by embarking on the largest expansion of the national cemetery system since the Civil War. In the last 10 years, we have opened 13 national cemeteries, including urban and rural cemeteries, all planned under our fiscal year (FY) 2011 and 2013 establishment policies. NCA has plans to open one urban cemetery in FY 2024 and two rural national cemeteries in FY 2025 and is in the final stages of land acquisition for another urban cemetery in FY 2024 with a projected completion in FY 2026. An additional urban cemetery is on hold pending an environmental analysis of the land. When all 18 planned national cemeteries are opened, over 3.8 million Veterans and their families will be provided new or enhanced access.

Consistent with NCA's commitment to continuous improvement, we have learned a few valuable lessons as we implemented these expansions, particularly when it comes to those in rural locations. We have received several inquiries from members of Congress, on behalf of their constituents, regarding the lack of protection from the elements at committal shelters and the absence of bathroom facilities connected to public utilities at some rural cemeteries. Our original plans for the rural cemeteries envisioned limited infrastructure due to the limited acreage, lower projected utilization, and minimal staffing at these sites. However, our vision has continued to evolve with each new rural cemetery, and we have incorporated additional infrastructure, including restroom facilities and windbreaks, into the design for the cemeteries we have not yet opened. We are also happy to report that remediation to include similar infrastructure at established rural cemeteries is mostly completed, with changes finalized by FY 2025.

We also continue to expand our existing cemeteries where needed and possible, by purchasing adjacent or nearby land to extend their service life. Currently, NCA and VA's Office of Construction and Facilities Management are working together on 18 land acquisitions. When we are faced with the realization that additional land is not available, or that merely expanding an existing cemetery is not the best option, we may close a cemetery to new burials, or cease to provide a particular burial option, such as in-ground burials for cremated remains in some locations. We will do our best to ensure that other burial locations accessible to families remain available, and we remind everyone that a family may choose to bury an eligible Veteran in any VA national cemetery or VA grant-funded cemetery.

The VA national cemetery system is complemented by our strong partnership and collaboration with states, territories, and tribal organizations. In 1978, VA started providing grants to states and territories for the establishment, expansion, and improvement of Veterans cemeteries through our Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP). This program was later expanded in 2006 to allow for grants to tribal authorities. Since the first grant was provided to the State of Maryland for the Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery, VA has provided grants to support 122 cemeteries in 47 states and three territories (Guam, Saipan, and Puerto Rico). Grant awards from VCGP made in 2023 put the program over the \$1 billion mark.



To ensure this funding is used most effectively, we encourage states and tribal authorities to develop and place VA grant-funded cemeteries in locations where Veterans otherwise do not have reasonable access to a burial option. These cemeteries are also subject to the same NCA Operational Standards and Measures as the national cemeteries and their performance is assessed by a review team led by NCA.

This partnership with states, territories, and tribes continues to help VA advance toward the goal of providing reasonable access to a burial option within 75 miles for at least 95% of Veterans. Today we stand on the threshold of that goal, providing 94% of Veterans with reasonable access. In addition to our VCGP partners, NCA continues to work closely with those groups that have a similar mission, including strong partnerships with the American Battle Monuments Commission, the Office of Army Cemeteries, and the National Park Service. Together we provide a network of cemeteries that honor the service and sacrifice of the Nation's heroes.

Access to NCA benefits goes beyond burial in the national cemeteries, as we provide memorial benefits—headstones and markers, niche covers for columbaria, medallions, and Presidential Memorial Certificates—for eligible Veterans and family members whether they are buried in a national cemetery or a private cemetery. In the last 50 years, NCA has furnished more than 15 million headstones and markers worldwide to national, state, tribal, and private cemeteries and delivered 16 million Presidential Memorial Certificates to the loved ones of deceased Veterans.

Access also requires our focus not only on what we provide, but also to whom. While VA's burial and memorialization benefits were originally available only to Veterans and active duty Service members, eligibility has been expanded to include spouses and certain other family members, including some parents. We want families to understand that these benefits are not only for the Veteran. The availability of burial and memorialization for spouses and certain other family members can save families money and stress. Knowing that a Veteran and their spouse can be buried together in a national cemetery can bring a great deal of comfort to families. Other categories of individuals have been made eligible for burial as well over the years, including, most recently, in 2018, VA began interring Hmong irregular forces who supported the U.S. Armed Forces during the Vietnam War.

VA believes that every eligible Veteran deserves a dignified burial and memorialization to commemorate their service and sacrifice to the Nation. In FY 2023, VA interred more unclaimed Veterans than ever before, with more than 2,100 unclaimed Veterans reported interred in VA national cemeteries and VA grant-funded Veterans cemeteries. In response to a VA Inspector General report, VA established an Integrated Project Team to improve enterprise management and oversight of benefits and services for unclaimed Veterans' remains. The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) will lead the enterprise-wide program, and NCA is working closely with them to ensure these Veterans receive the burial and memorialization benefits due to them. NCA's efforts include improvements to the Casket and Urn Reimbursement Program that will simplify

the claims process and increase funeral home program participation. We have also increased our outreach efforts to potential custodians of unclaimed remains, increasing time-of-need eligibility determinations.

Outreach regarding unclaimed remains is just one of our efforts to increase awareness of the burial and memorialization benefits that NCA administers. In fact, several VA components have partnered to develop integrated communications around a Veteran's journey at the end of their life. Talking about end-of-life planning is never easy, but it is essential. Through this internal partnership, VA developed an end-of-life public service announcement; created a new landing page website ([www.va.gov/plan-ahead](http://www.va.gov/plan-ahead)) with links to all of our related benefits, which has garnered 46,681 unique views since it launched in September 2023; and advanced an integrated overview briefing for survivors and external stakeholder like those involved in hospice and palliative care. NCA continues to emphasize that it is never too early to plan ahead.

Since 2016, Veterans and families have been able to get a pre-need determination of eligibility for burial in a national cemetery. The pre-need service helps family members and Veterans with end-of-life planning, helps Veterans understand their burial benefits, and is consistent with private sector practices. More than 330,000 pre-need determinations have been completed to date.

As Under Secretary, I have undertaken a concerted effort to reach out to our tribal partners as well, to increase awareness and utilization of the VA grant-funded cemeteries on tribal lands. I have engaged directly with 6 of the 14 tribes that have established Veterans cemeteries to address challenges and potential solutions regarding utilization of their grant-funded cemeteries. These discussions have been enlightening and productive, including the exchange of information on tribal customs, traditions, and cultures. I am planning similar sessions by the end of FY 2024 with leaders from the remaining eight tribes with grant-funded Veterans cemeteries.

NCA is also preparing our cemeteries to meet the changing needs and preferences of our Veterans and their families in the 21st Century. For example, NCA will soon begin piloting green burials at our Pikes Peak National Cemetery in Colorado Springs, Colorado; Sacramento Valley National Cemetery in Dixon, California; and Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell, Florida. Green burial is an environmentally-sensitive burial alternative in which bodies are buried in biodegradable containers, such as a shroud or wicker casket without use of embalming chemicals.

NCA will apply certain conditions to interments in the green burial sections and may alter these conditions to address emerging needs identified during the pilot. For example, NCA will accept for interment both cremated remains and non-embalmed casketed remains in biodegradable receptacles.

Consistent with green burial practices, NCA will maintain the appearance of a green burial section in a manner that differs from other sections within our national cemeteries. Most notably, the green burial sections will have a natural appearance,

utilizing native plants and grass throughout the section, and the gravesites within those sections will have a unique marker that is complementary to the natural environment within the section. Our green burial pilots will allow NCA to gather critical information to inform customer expectations and communications and define operational procedures for further implementation of green burial sections elsewhere in the system.

The establishment of green burials is just one example of how NCA continues looking to the future for ways to improve the accountability of our internal processes and the services delivered to our customers. NCA routinely uses geographic information system (GIS) and global positioning satellite (GPS) integration, which provides a verification and review process for all burial, marker, and associated recordkeeping activities. This greatly improves NCA's ability to permanently and perpetually account for all interred remains. NCA's GIS/GPS program supports several key priorities, including modernizing systems, focusing internal resources more efficiently and maintaining the trust of Veterans and stakeholders. GIS/GPS technology enables cemeteries to capture the location and images of all new burial and headstone/marker setting activities and supports NCA's memorialization efforts by making grave marker photos available for public viewing through another of our innovations, the on-line Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) website.

Launched in 2019, the VLM website is the Nation's premier digital platform dedicated entirely to the memory of Veterans. The site is fully interactive, and users can submit Tributes (comments), images, biographies, word clouds, milestones, and historical documents. User engagement with VLM is increasing, with over 74,000 items posted to Veteran pages to date. All submissions are reviewed by NCA moderators to ensure content appropriately honors Veterans.

In 2023, VLM was expanded to include over 5 million records from Veterans interred in private cemeteries and 26 Department of Defense-managed cemeteries, including Arlington National Cemetery and 16 Army post cemeteries, 5 Navy cemeteries, and 4 Air Force cemeteries. In total, VLM includes almost 10 million pages for Veterans.

We continue to explore options for improving the VLM user experience and are seeking additional opportunities to search for Veterans and making the content submission process easier. In the future, we plan to further expand VLM to include pages for living Veterans who are found eligible for burial and memorial benefits through the pre-need determination process. These Veterans will be able to upload content for their own pages in advance of their time of need.

In addition to individual Veteran memorial pages, the Veterans Legacy Grants Program (VLGP) provides funding to conduct cemetery research and produce educational tools that encourage students and teachers—and members of the public—to immerse themselves in the rich historical resources of Veterans cemeteries and secure the legacy of Veterans interred there. We proudly note that many of the students conducting research using the VLGP grant funds, and the Veterans they researched,

came from underrepresented communities, including Hispanic, Native American, African American, and Asian American communities, as well as rural communities and women in the military.

Finally, in our increasingly digital age, NCA has begun exploring the potential for automation, by focusing on pre-need applications. While we are cognizant of the limitations—most notably, the possibility that someone can commit a crime up until the moment of their death that would bar them from interment or memorialization under 38 U.S.C. § 2411—we believe that certain decisions, such as the pre-need determination, can be made and communicated to Veterans and families prior to the time of death. Over the past 6 months we have partnered with VBA to leverage existing technology to review and approve complete pre-need applications within hours of receipt for Veterans with certain previously established VA benefits that qualify them for burial in a national cemetery. This automation, along with previous staffing and process improvements, allows NCA to adjudicate even manually reviewed applications in a matter of days, compared to several weeks just a few years ago. We continue to look at improving this process and will be exporting this solution to other NCA benefits, such as Presidential Memorial Certificates and applications for headstones, markers, and medallions later this year.

Hundreds of thousands of Veterans and their families choose VA and NCA burial and memorialization benefits every year. In FY 2021, during the COVID pandemic, the estimated percentage of Veterans and their families choosing NCA for interment in a national or VA grant-funded state cemetery or for a government-furnished headstone, marker, or medallion dropped from 40% to 36%, but has rebounded to 43%. I believe that all Veterans should, and more Veterans will, choose NCA for their end-of-life needs and am committed to sharing our message to increase this utilization.

### **Conclusion**

VA appreciates the support of Congress and especially the members of this Committee to ensure that NCA can continue providing world-class service to Veterans, Service members, and their survivors in a caring and compassionate manner that honors their service. I want to express my personal appreciation for your continued support of Veterans and their families and survivors. I also want to acknowledge our Veterans Service Organization partners, who do so much to advocate on behalf of Veterans and survivors, as well as other stakeholders, such as funeral directors and state departments of Veterans affairs, who work with us to execute our noble mission. Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, this concludes my testimony. I am happy to respond to any questions you or the Committee may have.



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
National Cemetery Administration

**MATTHEW T. QUINN  
UNDER SECRETARY  
FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS  
NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION  
WASHINGTON, DC**



The Honorable Matthew T. Quinn was nominated by President Biden, and confirmed by the Senate on June 17, 2021, to serve as the 7th Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. He leads 155 VA national cemeteries and 122 VA grant funded state and tribal Veteran cemeteries in providing a dignified burial in national shrines for Veterans and eligible family members.

His responsibilities include maintaining the cemeteries as national shrines; design and construction activities related to the establishment of new national cemeteries; overseeing memorial programs to honor the service of Veterans, including the provision of headstones, markers, medallions and Presidential Memorial Certificates; and administering federal grants to help states, territories and tribal governments establish Veterans cemeteries.

Additional responsibilities include NCA's evolving programs to modernize memorialization of Veterans through its Veterans Legacy Memorial and Veterans Legacy Program initiatives. These programs utilize modern technology and collaboration with educational professionals and students to tell the stories of the nearly 4 million Veterans interred in VA cemeteries.

He is a retired Major General having served nearly 37 years in the Army and Army National Guard, culminating in his selection as the 27th Adjutant General for the State of Montana. As commander of the Montana National Guard and Director of the Department of Military Affairs, he was responsible for state disaster and emergency management, homeland security, and Veterans affairs. Between June 2019 and January 2021, he was president of the Adjutants General Association of the United States.

Prior to selection as Adjutant General, he was president of ELM Locating and Utility Services, while serving in the Montana National Guard as a traditional (drill status) Guardsman.

Quinn served as commander of A Company, 34th Signal Battalion in Operation Desert Storm, 1991 and commander of the 495th Transportation Battalion in Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003-2004. He is the recipient of numerous military awards, including the Distinguished Service Medal, the Bronze Star (with one bronze oak leaf cluster), and the Meritorious Service Medal (with three bronze oak leaf clusters).

Quinn earned a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from Montana State University, a Master of Business Administration from the University of Montana, and a Master of Strategic Studies from the US Army War College.

August 2023

**STATEMENT OF KELLY ACKERMAN, ADMINISTRATOR  
MONTANA VETERANS AFFAIRS DIVISION  
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.

Commission on Veterans Affairs Office  
700 S.W. Jackson St., Suite 1004  
Topeka, KS 66603-3758



Commission on Veterans Affairs Office

Phone: (785) 296-3976  
Fax: (785) 296-1462  
Website: Kcva.ks.gov

BG(R) William Turner, Director

Laura Kelly, Governor

**STATEMENT OF  
BG(R) WILLIAM TURNER, DIRECTOR, KANSAS COMMISSION ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS OFFICE  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**February 28, 2024**

**Sacred Mission: Honoring America's Veterans and their Families at VA Cemeteries**

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran and distinguished members of the Committee, on behalf of the Kelly Administration, our entire Team at the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs Office (KCVAO) and the nearly 190,000 Veterans that call Kansas home, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on our most sacred mission that is honoring America's Veterans and their Families at our State Veterans Cemeteries. I am truly honored to be before you today and we greatly appreciate the work this Committee has done both supporting our Nation's Veterans and holding us accountable in our responsibilities to do the same.

KCVAO remains committed to honoring our Veterans by being their advocates, assisting them and their Families with navigating the network of state and federal Veteran benefits and ensuring they receive the benefits to which they have earned. My testimony shares a little about our activities and successes this past year in improving the quality of life of our Kansas Veterans and their Families and focuses on our supplemental and enhancement requests as well as other recommendations included in the Governor's budget.

Mission - Honor Kansas Veterans and eligible Family members by creating and sustaining an environment in which Veterans can thrive as valued contributing members of our Kansas community.

Vision - Establish Kansas as the best place for Veterans to live, work, and raise a Family. We do this by providing outstanding service to all Veterans and eligible Family members ensuring they have access to the benefits and services to which they are entitled as a result of their military service AND informing the public and business owners about Veterans, their values, discipline, work ethic, all factors that enhance our Kansas communities.

These services include long term nursing and assisted living care, interment options and maintenance of our four State Veterans Cemeteries and coordination with partner agencies to provide financial assistance for health care and disability compensation.



To accomplish our mission, we manage three critical programs: Veterans Services, The Kansas Soldiers' Home (Fort Dodge) & The Kansas Veterans' Home (Winfield) and our State Veterans Cemeteries Program (Winfield, Fort Dodge, WaKeeney and Fort Riley/Manhattan).

Our efforts are focused along four lines of effort:

- **Maintain high quality healthcare** and professionalism in our State Veterans Homes.
- **Assist** Veterans and their Families in obtaining the benefits to which they have earned.
- **Advocate** for Veterans, military installations, Service Members and their Families.
- **Integrate and synchronize** the effects of all available Federal and State agencies as well as community and private partners to provide optimal services to our Veterans and their Families.

We continually assess the changing demographics in our Veteran population to identify its needs and determine how best to modify our advocacy and benefit assistance programs. We continue to serve an increasing number of Vietnam Veterans and are also seeking to better focus our efforts on the latest generation of the Post 9/11 Veterans from the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and other locations around the globe. The KCVAO prioritizes our partnerships with national, state and community agencies as well as those of private partners to integrate multiple organizational resources and synchronize our efforts to optimize our effects for our Veterans and Families.

#### **KANSAS VETERANS' CEMETERY PROGRAM**

*"No one is buried alone; all are buried with honor."*

Senate Bill 19 was passed in 1999 authorizing the Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs to establish, operate and maintain the first Kansas State Veterans' Cemetery, to serve Veterans, spouses, and eligible dependents of the Veterans of Kansas.

The Kansas Veterans' Cemetery at Fort Dodge became a reality thanks to the transfer of 16.54 acres of land from the Kansas Soldiers' Home at Fort Dodge to the National Cemetery Administration's State Cemetery Grants Program. On November 1, 2002, the Kansas Veterans' Cemetery at Fort Dodge was dedicated. It was the first of four state Veterans' cemeteries to become operational. The Fort Dodge Cemetery has in-ground burial spaces with pre-set double depth concrete grave-liners for 610 Veterans and eligible dependents, two columbarium walls with a total of 320 cremation niches, inground cremation interments, and a scattering garden. Currently, Fort Dodge received a pre-approval of a Columbarium Wall expansion. Construction and dedication is planned for 2024. The expansion will include a new Columbarium Wall with 160 niches.

Construction on the Kansas Veterans' Cemetery at WaKeeney began May 27, 2003. The total site takes in 24.34 acres. The WaKeeney Cemetery was dedicated September 10, 2004 and has in-ground burial spaces with pre-set double depth concrete crypts for 500 Veterans and eligible

dependents, two columbarium walls with a total of 320 cremation niches, inground cremation interments, and a scattering garden.

Construction on the Kansas Veterans' Cemetery at Winfield began in December, 2003. The total site encompasses 40.86 acres. The Winfield Cemetery was dedicated October 22, 2004 and has in-ground burial spaces with pre-set double depth concrete crypts for 1213 Veterans and eligible dependents, a columbarium wall with a total of 800 cremation niches, inground cremation interments, and a scattering garden. In 2022, eight (8) new columbarium walls with 1,280 new niches were built and dedicated with a VA State Grants Program expansion grant.

The Kansas Veterans' Cemetery at Fort Riley became a reality thanks to the transfer of 90 acres of land from Fort Riley. On April 24, 2009, the Kansas Veterans' Cemetery at Fort Riley was dedicated. It was the last of four state Veterans' cemeteries to become operational. The Fort Riley Cemetery has in-ground burial spaces with pre-set double depth concrete grave-liners for 2,000 Veterans and eligible dependents, three columbarium walls, inground cremation interments, and a scattering garden.

Each cemetery also consists of an administration building, maintenance building, committal shelter, and flag plaza.

Our goal is to provide a final resting place for our Veterans, spouses, and dependents to be maintained in a manner that reflects respect for our Veterans and their Families.

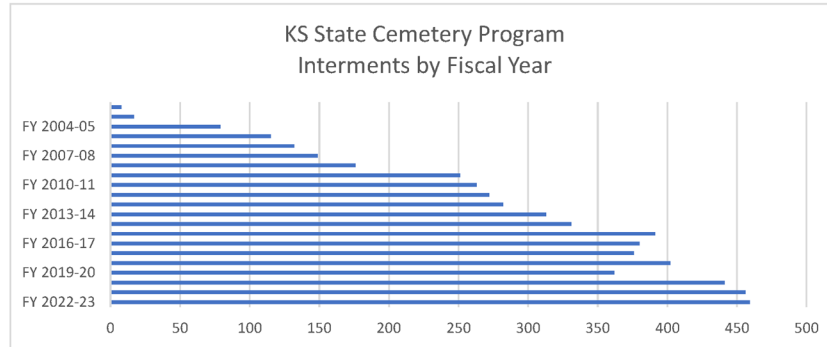
Since 2002, the Kansas Veterans' Cemetery Program has provided beautiful, dignified final resting places for Veterans', their spouses, and their eligible dependents. The Kansas Veteran Cemeteries conveys appreciation to its Veterans' and their Families for answering the call of duty and honorably serving the United States of America and the State of Kansas. They are geographically positioned to support Veterans who reside across the state including rural areas. In addition there are also National Cemeteries at Fort Leavenworth, Leavenworth and Fort Scott in the far eastern region of our state.

Our Cemeteries Program is funded at approximately \$1.5M and is comprised of State General Funds, State Institutional Building Funds, State Lottery, NCA Plot Allowance and Donations. The NCA Plot Allowance represents roughly 21% of our overall budget. In addition we are eligible to apply for NCA States Grant Program Funds for expansion projects.

### **Interments**

We have witnessed an increase in interments at our cemeteries across the state. Many of those that are currently interred at the Cemeteries, will also have a spouse and/or dependent that will be interred in the future. As of December 31, 2023, the program is on track to match or even possibly exceed the last fiscal year. Historically, 70 percent of all interments at the State Cemeteries are Veterans and 30 percent dependents. Currently, 76 percent of interments have been Veterans. Each Veteran interment is eligible for a \$948 plot allowance reimbursement to the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs Office, marking an increase of \$55 per Veteran

interment from the previous year. These funds support our daily operations, as well as purchases of new equipment.



**Staffing and Challenges**

We currently have 17 total staff who perform duties inside our Cemeteries Program including our Cemeteries Director who supervises and assists with cemetery operations across all four cemeteries: Winfield currently has 3 Equipment Operators, 1 Administrative Assistant and 1 Cemetery Manager; Fort Riley has 3 Equipment Operators, 1 Administrative Assistant and 1 Cemetery Manager; Fort Dodge and WaKeeney each have 2 Equipment Operators and 1 Cemetery Manager.

The challenge for the Kansas Veterans’ Cemetery Program is to find a balance of appropriate and available staff for a growing program. Illness, medical leaves, vacations, and retirements often add to the challenges of assuring that each Cemetery is covered and to provide the most honorable services possible for the Veterans and families served. Teamwork between the four Cemeteries has helped significantly to cover many of these situations. The NCA offers tremendous training opportunities in both leader programs and caretaker operations to professionally develop our staff; however, we do encounter challenges with sending staff to attend NCA sponsored training due to having a small staff to cover interments at the Cemeteries. As more headstones and gravesites will need to be maintained each year, these challenges will surely become even more prevalent. It will be increasingly important to continue to assess the number of staff needed to maintain the highest level of service.

Buildings and cemetery grounds and maintenance repairs are also a concern as the facilities reach over 20 years in age. Recently, we have established a capital outlay plan to better track and project anticipated requirements in the coming years. This provides better visibility and predictability to our Department of Administration and Budget Division as we plan future budgets. The Kansas Veterans’ Cemetery Program continues to grow in burials each year; we are now beginning to see a need for increased financial resources and staffing which we will be seeking in the near future.

Our primary concern is centered on providing the necessary attention to detail to ensure accurate, timely and high quality grave markers for each of our Veterans and their Family members. The number of headstones that must be reordered because of breakage, inscription error, or poor quality continues to be a challenge, especially at the busier Cemeteries. With a small staff, it can become a burden with the reordering process. This includes checking the markers for quality, reordering in Burial Operations Support System (BOSS), taking pictures and emailing them to Memorial Programs to inform of poor quality, and documenting in the Veterans' file. In rare instances we have had to reorder multiple grave markers. Our staff can execute limited repairs in some circumstances but our personnel are not fully trained and equipped to execute more complex repairs. The NCA is tracking our concern and we are in coordination with our various vendors to improve the means by which these items are delivered.

Second interments in traditional casket gardens with 3x8 plots are difficult and time-consuming without the proper equipment. Lowering devices can go down the rows, but there is not always enough room to maneuver them in order to lower the casket into the gravesite. Two headstones must be removed in order to dig the grave and they must be reset the same day as the interment for second interments. Currently, all four Cemeteries are using straps attached to the lower device as a sling to pick up the caskets and lower them into the gravesite's grave liner. This can be a tedious and time-consuming task as an equipment operator is needed to carefully guide the casket to the gravesite and into the grave liner. At Leavenworth and other National Cemeteries, they have a vault/casket handler. They are one man operated, remote control, and self-propelled, with swivel tires for easy placement of casket on the 3x8 plot. It also eliminates heavy lifting and is a safer option for equipment operators. With a cost of \$28,000 to \$36,000 each and the limited resources of State and Tribal Cemeteries, it would be recommended to make this standard equipment for new Veteran Cemeteries with 3x8 casket plots.

### **Cemetery Training**

In 2021, all four State Cemeteries and the Director visited and received training at the Fort Leavenworth National Cemetery. A partnership between the Cemeteries was created and in 2023, staff at all four State Cemeteries had the opportunity to receive a three-day training in Leavenworth. Several new techniques and equipment were demonstrated to the staff to make operations more efficient. The NCA was critical to facilitating this training and it helped mitigate our challenges attending the training at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. The Kansas Cemetery Program looks forward to more collaboration and training opportunities in the future with Leavenworth and other like cemetery programs. This training opportunity augments the internal training conducted for each of our cemetery managers and their equipment operators.

### **Capital Outlay/Improvements**

With the support and assistance of the NCA we have completed several capital improvement projects over the past several years. These projects include:

### **KS Veterans' Cemetery at Winfield Columbarium Wall Expansion**

On June 14, 2022, the dedication for the new Columbarium Wall Expansion at the Kansas Veterans Cemetery at Winfield was held. Governor Laura Kelly attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony. The original Columbarium Walls built in 2004 contained 800 niches and reached maximum capacity in July of 2022. The new columbarium wall plaza contains 1,280 niches and is expected to be sufficient to support services for approximately the next ten years. The Columbarium Wall cremation interment option remains popular at all four State Veteran Cemeteries. This expansion was made possible by a \$1.4 million dollar grant from the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) State and Tribal Grants Program.

### **KS Veterans' Cemetery at Ft. Dodge Columbarium Wall Expansion Pre-Grant Approval**

On October 1, 2022, the NCA State and Tribal Grants Program announced the Fort Dodge Cemetery was accepted for a grant to build a columbarium wall expansion. The project completed design late in the summer of 2023, with final grant approval in October 2023. Our primary challenge is attracting necessary companies headquartered in the central part of the state to bid on these projects that are relatively lesser in scope; equal challenges in acquiring needed supplies have created some delays. This project is halfway complete in construction and will add 160 niches; it is expected to meet the needs of a columbarium wall cremation option for approximately the next ten years. The project will also include landscaping, irrigation, and an installation of a Gettysburg Address plaque at the Cemetery entrance. The design will also allow for future expansion in three more phases. Completion of the project is expected in April of 2024 with dedication and a ribbon-cutting ceremony planned with the Annual Memorial Day Service.

In all cases we have been able to coordinate with NCA well in advance and none of these projects have resulted in delays or denial of services to our Veterans.

A number of other capital improvement projects were successfully executed in 2023 across all four Cemeteries. Notably, Fort Dodge had soffit and fascia wrapped on their committal shelter. Grave location kiosks and printers were upgraded at all four Cemeteries enabling visitors to locate their loved one's grave site through the National Gravesite Locator website. In addition, Winfield repaired several streets and sidewalks. Lastly, Kansas Veterans Cemetery at Winfield received significant storm damage in late 2023, resulting in the loss of 25 trees and damage to the committal shelter which we are in the process of repairing this year.

The Kansas Veterans' Cemetery Program is in the third year of our 10-year plan to replace equipment and vehicles at all four Cemeteries. To date, we have life cycled several gators and lawn mowers. Currently, the excavators at Winfield and Ft Riley have been replaced with a planned replacement at the other two Cemeteries within the next two years. Tractors have been replaced at Winfield, Fort Riley, and Fort Dodge. WaKeeney will have their tractor replaced in the next year.

Other future projects include expanding the maintenance compound at Fort Dodge with a new shop. Fort Dodge and WaKeeney will have side doors placed on the committal shelters, similar to those at Winfield and Fort Riley/Manhattan. The side doors will serve to offer protection against the extreme weather elements. Much needed bathrooms at the committal shelters for WaKeeney, Fort Dodge, and Fort Riley are also planned. Memorial walks with benches will be built at all four Cemeteries. This is being planned in conjunction with several Veterans' Service Organizations and will include the placement of memorials around the memorial walk recognizing their group and those who have served.

The Fort Dodge Cemetery is the only Kansas Veterans' Cemetery without a Scattering Wall for bronze memorial plaques for those that chose to scatter their loved one's ashes. Currently, Fort Dodge has three bronze memorial plaques that have been placed on small pillars in an area where a scattering garden wall is planned for future construction. The concrete pillars are only meant for a short-term solution until one could be built in the out years. The NCA State and Tribal Grants program does not provide grants for a scattering garden wall and we have coordinated this funding through our state. This project is planned within the next year. We continue to seek grant opportunities for placement of additional grave liners and surveying new gardens at the Cemeteries as required.

#### **Extra-Curricular/Outreach Activities**

The State Veteran Cemeteries participate in two major events each year at our cemeteries: Memorial Day and Wreaths Across America. These services draw large crowds of participants, from 300 to 800 people. We received tremendous support not only from local Veterans' Service Organizations but also from the local communities and their leaders who travel great distances to be present and honor our fallen Veterans on these special occasions. Each Cemetery also coordinates with volunteers for the placing of flags on all Veteran graves for Memorial Day and Veterans' Day as well as the wreaths in December during Wreaths Across America. A great deal of time is spent coordinating and planning these beautiful and honorable events.

We are extremely proud of our partnerships with not only our active-duty component organizations at Fort Riley, McConnell and Fort Leavenworth but also the Kansas National Guard and Reserve units who steadfastly support our operations and services. In addition, we receive outstanding support from the many Veterans Service Organizations within our state who faithfully provide honor guards, parking support, speakers and much more that always make our services professional, dignified and respectful.

The Cemetery Managers are also tasked with visiting funeral homes, participating in Veteran benefit events, and speaking to various civil and Veteran groups throughout the year, educating Veterans about their burial benefits within the Veteran Cemetery Program. During the Fall of 2022, the Director and all four Cemetery Managers spoke to the Kansas Funeral Home Association Quarterly meetings across the State. It was a great opportunity to update funeral directors on cemetery policies, as well as give them information, pre-certification packets and interment worksheets.

**Pre-certifications**

To better serve Veterans' and to help predict future needs, the Kansas Veterans' Cemetery Program encourages Veterans and their dependents to pre-certify. Pre-certification assists in avoiding confusion and possible delays in scheduling interments at the time of need. As of December 31, 2023, the Program had 8,701 Veterans and dependents pre-certified for interment at one of the Kansas Veteran Cemeteries. This indicates that the trend for growth will continue at all four State Veteran Cemeteries.

*Below pre-certifications are broken down by Cemetery.*

As of Dec 31, 2023	<b>Fort Dodge</b>	<b>WaKeeney</b>	<b>Winfield</b>	<b>Fort Riley/Manhattan</b>
<b>Pre-certifications</b>	1091	1469	3359	2782

**Awards**

The Kansas Veterans' Cemetery Program has been recognized for its excellence in performance and service by the National Cemetery Administration and Veterans' Cemetery Grants Program. In January 2013, all four State Cemeteries received the Excellence of Appearance Award from the Veterans' Cemetery Grants Program. The Kansas Veterans' Cemetery at Fort Riley received the Operational Excellence Award and was recognized for the highest compliance rating of a State or Tribal Veteran Cemetery in the NCA grants program in May 2018. In July 2023, the Kansas Veteran Cemetery at Fort Dodge received the Stewardship Award for its operational excellence and in the last week we have been informed that the Kansas Veterans' Cemetery at Wakeeney will be receiving the Operational Excellence Award in recognition of superior performance results verified during the Compliance Review Program (CRP) review conducted September 19, 2023. All four State Cemeteries continue to strive for the highest operational standards in honoring Veterans' and their Dependents as a beautiful lasting memorial to their service.

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, this concludes my testimony. I welcome your questions.

Statement of

Michael Figlioli, Director  
National Veterans Service  
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

Before the

United States Senate  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs

With Respect To

**“Sacred Mission: Honoring America’s Veterans and their Families at VA Cemeteries”**

Washington D.C.

February 28, 2024

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and members of the committee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony with regard to burial benefits and ongoing efforts for veterans and their families.

I am honored to have been asked to be a witness for this hearing regarding an agency of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that I feel is often overlooked yet delivers the highest customer service and quality. It is not often that we are afforded the chance during a congressional hearing to focus more on the positives of VA rather than what needs to be corrected. The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) has consistently rated in the high 90 percentile in every American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) survey since 2015. It most recently achieved a 97 percent rating in 2022, which was the highest score ever achieved by any organization rated by ACSI. This is a remarkable and envious achievement in any industry. Aside from being on this panel, I had the honor to serve two terms as a member of the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials (ACCM) appointed first by Secretary McDonald then again by Secretary Wilkie. This allowed me the opportunity to see firsthand their dedication and professionalism in serving those who seek to be memorialized in our nation’s shrines to their service.

As successor to the United States Army Office of the Quartermasters Cemeterial Branch established during the Civil War, the NCA for half a century has had the mission of providing a fitting final resting place for those who served in our nation’s military forces and conflicts. More than five million souls have been entrusted to its expert care. This includes decedents from the Revolutionary War to our most recent conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places around the globe. As some may recall, NCA was also entrusted with the solemn responsibility of interring an Air Force pilot from the Vietnam War, First Lieutenant Michael Blassie, who was thought to be the last Unknown from any conflict. It was handled expertly and with great reverence.



NCA has been a forward-thinking agency given its mission is actually to look backward. By that I mean in remembrance as the lives and careers of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and now Guardians are memorialized not only in acres of beautifully landscaped grounds across the country but in cyberspace as well.

#### **Veterans Legacy Memorial Project**

One of the most innovative projects ever established by a federal agency was the Veterans Legacy Memorial Project of which I had the honor to be a subcommittee chairman. Our task was to analyze the best way to memorialize a veteran's service and record that data in a public-facing digital archive. Immediate family members, loved ones, friends, and former service members among others could post memories, pictures, or other media to the profile and thereby complete the story for others to memorialize. One of the greater hurdles was how to handle privacy and interestingly "free speech." Concerns were raised by survivors about the administration of the program. Could estranged family members be allowed to write whatever they want and tarnish honorable service based on their specific points of view? What about a failed marriages and the ire of jilted spouses? NCA leaders and historians had to be sensitive to their duty to preserve any information entered into a profile, no matter how unflattering, inaccurate, or inflammatory, and properly honor veterans whose families chose to participate. Under the direction of Dr. Bryce Carpenter, and after many hours of deliberation, it was decided that much like Facebook or other social media platforms, all commentary would be reviewed for appropriateness and a family member or agent of the veteran would be able to review items that may have been flagged as inappropriate before posting.

The scope of this undertaking was massive as this was a brand-new concept that had been tried in various private settings but was nothing more than a typical locator tool. There was nothing that established an electronic memorial for loved ones who had served our great nation. Through the efforts of the committee, NCA professional staff, and other agencies, today the Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) is the industry standard. Today, there are thousands of veteran stories available online for genealogical purposes, military history research, or just casual searches for those interested in similar subjects.

#### **Veterans Legacy Program**

Although this platform is a breakthrough, it is probable that most members of the public do not have a full understanding of what NCA is or what it does. The subject is not often thought about and the services the agency provides are not always easy to discuss. The reality is that death comes for all of us in the end. It is the great equalizer. More often than not, if you ask the average citizen about national cemeteries the first answer that comes to mind is Arlington National Cemetery, which is about as sacred a ground as there is in this country. Many do not know it is administered by the Department of the Army and not NCA. Does this make any of the 155 national cemeteries under NCA purview any less a place of honor or those interred any less deserving of the commemoration of their service? No, it does not. It is incumbent on NCA to help tell these stories, and on us to help in that endeavor. One of the captivating things about cemeteries administered by NCA is that each uniquely reflects the community in which it is located.

NCA stood up the Veterans Legacy Program (VLP) in 2016 as a way to commemorate our nation's veterans and service members, not only by sharing their stories but also by showcasing the care and devotion of those who staff these shrines. This program encourages students and teachers around the country at the university and K-12 levels to discover the rich historical resources found within VA national cemeteries and VA grant-funded cemeteries, and to help tell the story of the good work they do every day while keeping the memory of our loved ones clearly in mind. While on a site visit during meetings of the ACCM in Colorado, members of the committee and the VLP team visited the University of Denver.

Denver was one of the very first universities to receive grant funding from NCA to tell the story not only of the cemetery but of those interred or inurned there. What was clear was the enthusiasm with which the students engaged their subject matter and the involvement that NCA had in making this initial effort a success. It was evident that the participants took pride and ownership not only in their work but also in the veterans whom they had been assigned to research. The library was full of medals, pictures, uniforms, personal accounts of service and the lives lived by these veterans. One student described it as being one of the most fulfilling courses ever experienced, while others spoke of "adopting" the families of those they represented, "their" veterans, and feeling a sense of closeness and accomplishment in what they had achieved.

To date, VLP has funded 35 programs in multiple colleges and universities. These programs have engaged nearly 15,000 students of all levels and produced over 2,500 veteran biographies, 50 documentary videos, and over 100 lesson plans. The VFW commends this effort and is encouraged by its continued expansion.

#### **NCA Scheduling Office**

NCA takes its high customer satisfaction rating and the commitment to excellence very seriously. In 2018, I was contacted by one of our employees whose veteran brother had recently passed away in the Pacific Northwest. Her concern was that she could not reach the scheduling office in St. Louis despite considerable effort. She had made numerous calls, only to be placed on hold for lengthy periods of time, eventually having to disconnect due to the requirements of her daily duties. Knowing that I was on the ACCM, and in her heightened emotional state, she asked if there was anything I could do. I contacted the ACCM chairman to alert him to the situation, and he in turn spoke to the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. After gathering some additional facts and an in-person site visit by the ACCM chairman, it was evident that the issue was systemic but not insurmountable. The committee learned that there were a number of new staff members to include the National Cemetery Scheduling Office director, a backlog of pre-need cases, renovation of the facility, and (like any other VA agency) IT modernization in progress, all while trying to maintain the same level of service. Like any effective organization, recommendations were made, adopted, and implemented to bring the level of service back to what was expected of NCA.

I mention this because it is a fine example of cooperation, collaboration, and teamwork. The advisory committee fulfilled its obligation to the under secretary and VA by recognizing a problem and bringing solutions forward. NCA did its part by listening and acting to correct critical issues that impacted not only meeting the public's needs, but also by considering the

morale and productivity of a team extremely proud of what it was accomplishing every day to honor the memory and service of those seeking to be placed in a national cemetery.

#### **Veterans Headstones/Markers**

As advocates for veterans benefits across all agencies, the VFW hears from many of its members and will, if necessary, address certain concerns with the appropriate agency. NCA is no different. While we generally do not receive many negative comments about its products and services, it is not immune from criticism or recommendations.

In 2018, a VFW Past National Commander from the state of Wisconsin asked us to address concerns about inscriptions on government-provided headstones in the Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery. The local VFW funeral honors team provided final honors on a regular basis at this cemetery. As the community of veterans is in actuality very small, they saw headstones on graves of friends and comrades they knew personally or with whom they had served. Many were upset with some inscriptions since they knew empirically that these veterans had not served directly in a combat theater, yet these headstones seemed to suggest they had. In this example, the headstones were inscribed with "Vietnam." To the casual observer this would suggest that they had been in country.

These particular veterans had not been deployed to Vietnam but served during that time frame. In no way was anyone belittling anyone's service. We all served. We all went obediently to where we were told to fulfill whatever duties we had been assigned. The issue is about accuracy, not self-importance. There is a vast and clear distinction between being involved in actual combat versus serving in a time of conflict at a location in support of those operations. We can all agree that those who served in Southeast Asia certainly had very different experiences from those who did not.

History and these veterans themselves informed us that following the conclusion of their service, they did not receive the warmest of homecomings. NCA has invested much in the accurate telling of the service of our nation's heroes. This policy has been in effect since 2003. Does it not need review and change? There is no dishonor in adding letters for the purpose of accuracy. In my own case, I served in Korea with the U.S. Army from 1994-1995 at Camp Casey. My late father was a Navy veteran who drove a landing craft at the Inchon Landing in 1950. Technically, he and I are veterans of the same war separated by 45 years. Am I authorized to show my service as "Korea" by current policy? The answer is yes. However, my conscience intervenes because my service was completely different from that of my father. When my final chapter is written, I would be fully at ease should my inscription read "Korean Era," which is a more accurate portrayal.

All of these great services provided by NCA are incumbent upon proper funding to the department and continued support by the authorizing and appropriating committees to ensure success of this critical mission. Although VA does a great job in making the burial process seamless for family members, the truth is that inflation has played a major role in funding. Impacted by this reality is the grounds upkeep at the 155 national cemeteries as well as 34 soldiers' lots and monument sites. Materials needed for design and construction of new national

cemeteries is another area where inflation has impacted the cost of burials. While most of the attention is focused on the veteran and family members, these behind-the-scenes expenses are crucial in keeping the process seamless. As inflation rises and makes current burial allowances inadequate, the funding to increase allowances is hard to find as NCA must compensate for the increased costs in other areas of its operations.

Other costs include turf renovations to raise the level of presentation to sustain a standard of excellence for visitors and interment experiences. The increase in funding received for inflation did not cover the actual cost increases. Cemeteries are unlike telemedicine where the cost-of-living difference can be fixed with the implementation of remote solutions. Bids are extremely high for construction, landscaping, fertilizer, grants, and janitorial services. There is very little room to move money around with major expenses such as salary and maintenance, which are among the basic payouts that will always win out over projects. There are roughly 90,000 additional gravesites a year and each one will raise costs for NCA by requiring headstones, markers, more acreage, payroll, and full-time employees. Proper funding to facilitate benefits management for eligible veterans is a crucial step in making sure that veterans and their families who are eligible can rest in peace and pride for their faithful service to this country.

The VFW has and will continue to highlight the need for the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to share data. This should also include NCA data. When VA is informed that a veteran has died, this should trigger communications from VA to the spouse and dependents identified in the VA records. Much of the required information to effectively reach and communicate with survivors already exists in one of VA's many IT systems, though some survivors are still missed. Upgrades required to facilitate information sharing across existing platforms are long overdue. Investments in these critical technology upgrades or moving to a single IT system will take dedicated staff, planning, and funding. These improvements are critical to ensure the efficiency and accuracy of claims processing for veterans and their survivors.

In closing Mr. Chairman, I am proud to have been part of the NCA team as a former member of the advisory committee. It was an honor to work with true professionals such as Ron Waters, Glenn Powers, Dr. Eric Powell, Christine Hamilton, Larry Provost, Les Beavers, Jack Kelly, and far too many others to name who care deeply about their mission every day. NCA may be the "third wheel" in the landscape of benefits, but it is a necessary one. It closes the loop on every veteran's story of service. It seeks to memorialize that service through the products and services it provides. The men and women of NCA are proud of what they do every day as they guide the public through the worst of times, and know that they made a positive difference in someone's life.

This concludes my testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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**Questions for the Record**

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**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)  
Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Mr. Matthew T. Quinn,  
Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, from the  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States Senate**

**“Sacred Mission: Honoring America's Veterans and their Families at VA  
Cemeteries”**

**February 28, 2024**

Questions for the Record from Senator Jerry Moran

**1. Undersecretary Quinn, as NCA enters its 51st year, I am confident that its workforce will continue to put customer service at the heart of everything it does—from those answering calls in the National Cemetery Scheduling Office to the equipment operators opening and closing gravesites, and everyone in between.**

**a. In your testimony you mention four focus areas for this coming year. Could you please provide an overview of those and how NCA intends to work toward excelling in each?**

**VA Response:** My main goal is to make sure that we provide more care and more benefits to more Veterans, caregivers, and survivors. With that in mind, my four main focus areas for this year are: Access, Awareness, Memorialization, and Modernization.

**Access**

We want Veterans and their families to have access to our benefits and services close to where they live. Currently, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) provides reasonable access to a burial option for nearly 94% of the nation's Veterans within 75 miles of where they live. Our coverage estimate is based on detailed demographic and population studies. We soon plan to open new cemeteries in New York, Nevada, and Utah. Without our Veterans Cemetery Grant Program (VCGP) partners, VA national cemeteries cover 76.4% of the nation's Veterans population. Our VCGP grant-funded cemeteries cover an additional 17.3%, so together we cover nearly 94%. We know we cannot reach our strategic goal of 95% without our close partnerships with the states, territories and tribes that participate in VCGP.

**Awareness**

Veterans and their families deserve to know what benefits and services they earned. Even with our excellent coverage, just 16% of Veterans use our national cemeteries and that number increases to 22% if we include grant-funded cemeteries. We want to increase awareness of NCA to make sure all Veterans know about the benefits we offer,

including a no-additional-cost burial option by VA. We are leveraging our systems to gather better information so we can improve our strategic outreach. We also expanded our partnership with the Veterans Benefits Administration and the Veterans Health Administration to comprehensively educate Veterans, their families, and stakeholders on services each Administration delivers to Veterans and their families toward the end of a Veteran's life.

#### **Memorialization**

Memorialization is a prime responsibility of NCA. While interment in a VA or grant-funded cemetery can save survivors thousands of dollars, choices related to burial are very personal, so individuals might prefer interment in a private cemetery. For those Veterans we can still honor their service by providing VA headstones, markers, and medallions for their resting places, along with Presidential Memorial Certificates for their survivors. We have additional ways to honor their service, such as our online Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM). We continually explore ways to improve the VLM user experience, including the possibility of enabling Veterans to upload their own digital mementos, thus allowing their memories to remain and their legacies to live on in perpetuity.

#### **Modernization**

Since I joined NCA, I have stressed the need to improve our ability to process claims to determine eligibility for NCA benefits. It used to take 60 to 90 days to get an answer, but we have reduced the average time to just two to three days by improving our technical triage process. This year, we will continue making our IT systems more efficient and we will replicate these results across our applications for Presidential Memorial Certificates, and headstones, markers, and medallions. Such technological improvements make the application process much more satisfying for Veterans and allow them to get their information into NCA's systems, assuring them we will provide burial benefits when necessary.

**2. Undersecretary Quinn, the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCPG) helps reach veterans with burial options through awarding grants to state and tribal partners to establish and operate veterans' cemeteries. Last year, the \$1 billion threshold was crossed for the amount of grant funding NCA has awarded to state and tribal partners.**

**a. Can you speak to the importance of these grant-recipient partners and the working relationship NCA has with them?**

**VA Response:** Since its inception 45 years ago, VCPG has provided 490 grants worth over \$1 billion to 122 state, territorial, and tribal Veterans cemeteries. Grants are used for expansions and improvement of existing cemeteries, establishment of new cemeteries, and operations and maintenance projects that assist in maintaining NCA's operational standards and measures for appearance. More than 800,000 Veterans and family members have been interred in VA grant-funded cemeteries in that time.



The VCGP is vital for NCA to achieve its strategic goal of providing reasonable access to a burial option for 95% of all Veterans living in the U.S. Today, nearly 94% of Veterans live within 75 miles of a national, state, territorial, or tribal Veterans cemetery. If only national cemeteries were considered that number would drop to just 77%.

The working relationship between the VCGP and the state, tribal, and territorial governments is exceptional. Once VA provides a grant opportunity, VCGP's project managers invest many hours working directly with the proposed grantee's project team and design professionals on design reviews, budget preparations, and procurement processes so that a grantee's construction bid is accepted, and the final VA grant is awarded. After completion of a grant award, VCGP coordinates site visits to monitor construction to ensure progress.

VA awarding the first grant to a grantee marks the beginning of a long-term relationship, even if there are no follow-on requests for additional grants. VCGP hosts a quarterly conference call for attendees from all 122 VA grant-funded Veterans cemeteries and their state and tribal Department of Veterans Services/Affairs leaders. Employees from VA grant-funded Veterans cemeteries have also attended training at the NCA National Training Center (NTC) in St. Louis, Missouri, to learn and build upon the skills needed to meet the operational standards and measures, order headstones and markers, and increase proficiency in the safe operation of equipment used when performing burials. Also, 24 VA grant-funded Veterans cemetery leaders have confirmed their attendance at NCA's Leadership Conference in April 2024.

**b. What are some challenges you're hearing from grant-recipient partners and how can NCA be helpful and responsive to their needs?**

**VA Response:** NCA's 2024 priority list of state and tribal government construction grant pre-applications included 69 conforming pre-applications for a total of \$295 million. Eighteen projects were selected for grant-funding opportunities to states for expansions of existing state Veterans cemeteries for a total FY 2024 planned amount of \$57 million.

Currently, the VA grant-funded Veterans cemeteries receive a burial plot allowance (\$948.00 this year) for each eligible Veteran they inter. VA's FY 2025 budget submission includes a legislative proposal to provide states and tribes the same plot allowance payment when they bury eligible spouses and dependents. The additional funds provided would assist grant-funded cemeteries in meeting operational needs and maintenance.

VA has to be responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars while also balancing the needs of states for these grants. We do hear from grant-recipient partners that funding is sometimes not sufficient for their requirements, but VA has an established process that gives the highest priority to expanding and improving existing cemeteries that would otherwise face disruptions in burial service (i.e., closure of the cemetery) within four years of the date of the preapplication. In FY 2023, NCA was able to award two grants to establish new state Veterans cemeteries in Lubbock, Texas, and Grand Island,

Nebraska. Funding for these projects was made available when several planned expansion projects were deferred by the states.

States, tribes, and territories are responsible for the operation, maintenance, and personnel of their VA grant-funded cemeteries. States factor this into their planning efforts to ensure that they can meet and sustain NCA operational standards.

**3. Undersecretary Quinn, as NCA works to finish the largest expansion of its system since the Civil War, how are you planning to manage the growing portfolio sustainably in a way that is fiscally responsible while also maintaining shrine standards and excellent customer service?**

**VA Response:** NCA workload is not static, and we must maintain the increasing number of gravesites and the expansion of cemeteries in a manner befitting their status as national shrines. The budget process incorporates analysis of the historical data on interments, gravesites, and acres as well as workload projections for the budget year. In addition to the workload data used to project staffing requirements, NCA analyzes non-payroll data provided by its cemeteries on an annual basis to estimate budget requirements for equipment, utilities, supplies, and contracts, including the cost of non-recurring maintenance projects. While NCA's workload will continue to increase, NCA must also consider inflationary and other cost increases for both payroll and its non-payroll requirements. NCA will continue to use the budget process to request Operations and Maintenance funds sufficient to provide for the activation of new cemeteries, meet increasing workload requirements, and perform maintenance at its cemeteries.

NCA also utilizes several cost-avoidance practices that allow for more efficient operations while maintaining a high standard of customer service. For example, we implement water-wise landscaping in certain locations that reduces water consumption and utility and maintenance costs. We use pre-placed crypts for full-casket burials, the placement of which reduces the amount of acreage we need to develop and maintain for interments. It also makes it easier and more efficient to open and close a gravesite. These practices help to promote fiscal responsibility and maintain our high standards in a time of system expansion.

**a. Among the new cemeteries in this expansion—which kicked off over a decade ago—are 8 Rural Initiative cemeteries and 5 Urban Initiative columbaria-only cemeteries. Can you tell us more about these two initiatives and the challenges in executing both of them?**

**VA Response:** NCA launched the Rural Initiative in 2013 to improve burial access for rural Veterans by establishing new national cemeteries in states without an open or cremation-only national cemetery in a location with less than 25,000 Veterans that do not have access to a national cemetery or an in-state VA-funded state cemetery within a 75-mile service radius of that location. Of these states, those where all Veterans are

served by an existing VA-funded state Veterans cemetery within the state or national cemeteries in adjacent states are excluded.

Eight states (Idaho, Maine, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Utah, Wisconsin, and Wyoming) were identified as meeting the criteria. In 2014, VA established the first Rural Initiative national cemetery, Yellowstone National Cemetery in Montana. In 2019, VA opened Fargo National Cemetery in North Dakota. VA opened four additional Rural Initiative national cemeteries in 2020: Northwoods National Cemetery in Wisconsin; Acadia National Cemetery in Maine; Snake River Canyon National Cemetery in Idaho; and Cheyenne National Cemetery in Wyoming. Additionally, VA plans to open a national cemetery in Elko, Nevada, and a cemetery in Cedar City, Utah, in calendar year 2025. NCA is working to install additional infrastructure at these cemeteries based on community and customer feedback.

NCA launched the Urban Initiative in 2011 to improve burial access for Veterans living in or near urban cores by establishing new columbaria-only national cemeteries to enhance service of existing national cemeteries in urban areas where distance and travel time from the center of the city (urban core) to the existing national cemetery present barriers to visitation and contribute to lower usage rates than typical at national cemeteries serving other large, urban areas.

Locations for the Urban Initiative must serve cities that are one of the 50 most populous, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The existing national cemetery must have a documented Veteran utilization rate of 20% or less for at least two of the last three years and recorded that next of kin cite travel time and/or distance as an access barrier at least five percent above the national average for at least two of the last three annual *Surveys of Satisfaction with National Cemeteries*.

Five cities (Alameda, California (serving the San Francisco Bay area); Chicago, Illinois; Indianapolis, Indiana; Los Angeles, California; and New York, New York) were identified as meeting the criteria. In 2019, VA established the first Urban Initiative national cemetery, the columbarium annex at Los Angeles National Cemetery. In 2022, VA opened the columbarium annex at Crown Hill National Cemetery in Indianapolis. VA plans to open St. Albans National Cemetery in Queens, New York, in calendar year 2024, and to open a cemetery in the Chicago area in calendar year 2026. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is conducting an environmental impact study of the Alameda site following the identification of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances at that location.

NCA's primary challenge in executing the Urban Initiative has been land acquisition. In some cases, it has been difficult to find land suitable for cemetery development near an urban center. Other challenges have stemmed from neighbor opposition to the development of a cemetery in their community.

**4. Undersecretary Quinn, it is important that grant-funded veterans cemeteries are held to the same shrine standards as NCA cemeteries, and grant-recipients**

**work hard to make certain that veterans and their families can expect, and rely on, immaculately maintained places of eternal rest.**

**a. Can you speak to the compliance reviews NCA conducts on grant-recipient cemeteries and how remediation efforts and training opportunities can help partners remain in compliance, or get back on track?**

**VA Response:** NCA uses the Compliance Review Program (CRP) to conduct on-site assessments of VA grant-funded state, territory, and tribal Veterans cemeteries for compliance with NCA operational standards and measures. NCA conducts these periodic reviews, on average, once every four years. After the compliance review, NCA rates a cemetery as Compliant, Minimally Compliant, or Non-Compliant based on CRP assessment results and requires the cemetery to develop and implement a corrective action plan (CAP) to remediate deficiencies. NCA will regularly contact the cemetery to request updates on open corrective action items and evidence of completed action items.

NCA recently developed an Assistance Package for grant-funded cemeteries which includes best practice templates, standard operating procedures, directives, and a frequently asked questions document. NCA holds quarterly conference calls with grantees to provide training, communicate changes, and answer questions. NCA encourages grantee cemeteries to use the CRP Scorecard to conduct Annual Self-Assessments, which can help them identify and remediate deficiencies in a timely manner and in advance of any upcoming VA site visit assessments. NCA offers VA grant-funded cemeteries training opportunities at the St. Louis NTC to learn and build upon the skills needed to meet NCA operational standards and measures. Lastly, NCA encourages VA grant-funded cemeteries to establish long-term partnerships with neighboring VA national cemeteries. These relationships help to provide opportunities to observe and share best practices and gain critical knowledge.

**b. What challenges are you hearing from partners in meeting these requirements?**

**VA Response:** Some of the challenges NCA hears from state and tribal Veterans cemeteries (STVC) that may impact their ability to comply with grant requirements would likely be remedied by additional training in the following areas:

- Initial training at the start of operations for a new grant-funded Veterans cemetery on how to operate a cemetery,
- Training on NCA Standards and Measures, and
- Training on how to use the NCA Burial Operations Support System.

While NCA offers free training opportunities at our National Training Center in St. Louis, some STVCs note that they do not have enough manpower to be able to send an employee to a class or they do not have money for employee travel and lodging costs. To address this, the President's 2025 Budget includes a proposal from VA that would ensure VA can provide training to employees of grant funded Veterans' cemeteries in locations that are more easily accessible, including at a VA national cemetery or at a

VA-grant funded cemetery. The training may be on any subject necessary to ensure that such cemeteries are maintained to standards established by VA.

Another challenge some STVCs experience is maintaining consistent contact with NCA. While NCA offers quarterly conference calls for STVCs, NCA sometimes has difficulty reaching all grantee points of contact due to frequent staff turnover at cemeteries.

Other challenges:

- Difficulty in obtaining and maintaining access to NCA's Burial Operations Support System.
- Not being able to obtain the proper resources and funding from the state, territory, or tribal government and/or leadership needed to operate successfully. This includes inadequate full time equivalent employees, staff turnover, and money to buy and maintain equipment.
- Northern states experience difficulties with interments and headstone setting during the winter season.

**c. Almost a year ago, you stated that “the federal government is not going to be able to fund it all alone,” with regard to burial options for veterans, can you speak to the proper balance between NCA's grants and local partners ensuring systems and revenue streams are in place to adequately manage and run these cemeteries?**

**VA Response:** Increasing and maintaining the availability of state, territory, and tribal Veterans cemeteries helps increase burial access for Veterans nationwide and provides a more convenient burial option to those Veterans who may not currently have reasonable access to a national cemetery, particularly in rural locations, or to those Veterans who prefer to be interred on tribal lands. A VA grant can help states establish a new Veterans cemetery or expand or improve existing cemeteries, but the states must do their part to operate and manage the cemeteries in a manner befitting the service and sacrifice of those who rest there. As a condition to receive grant funding, VA grant-funded cemeteries must certify they will be operated and maintained in accordance with NCA operational standards. NCA has systems and programs in place, such as the Compliance Review Program, to conduct reviews of the VA grant-funded cemeteries to ensure they conform to the standards and guidelines required by 38 U.S.C. § 2408(d) and implementing regulations in 38 C.F.R. Part 39. To address any concerns, or before any concerns arise, NCA offers instruction at its National Training Center to personnel at grant-funded cemeteries on NCA's best practices for maintaining and operating a cemetery.

**5. Undersecretary Quinn, NCA's Veterans Legacy Program, or VLP, memorial initiative works with academic entities, K-12 and collegiate, through grant-funded research projects where teachers and professors engage their students and teach them the skills to do deep research on the veterans interred at local National Cemeteries.**

**a. How can NCA best boost this public engagement with educators and students through grants?**

**VA Response:** Working with the Veterans Legacy Grant Program (VLGP) grantees, NCA shares their subsequent work by amplifying these efforts on our larger and permanent platforms so their research can be preserved in the VLM. NCA also assists grantees with specialized knowledge and research methods and resources relevant to Veterans, military history, and national cemeteries.

In FY 2024, VA limited funding per grant to \$400,000 per annum (\$500,000 maximum in FY 2022 and FY 2023) to maximize the number of potential grantees. This may be the best way to provide more than six grants annually and provide adequate oversight while increasing the reach of VLGP.

There is immense value in the engagement VLGP promotes between the student and the Veterans studied. School-aged children are learning about Veterans and in a real sense, playing an active role in preserving their history. Those students in turn tell their families and friends, making the program a force multiplier. In conclusion, within these programs are face-to-face engagements between students and Veterans that are truly remarkable experiences for all involved. This engagement is incalculable and enduring.

**6. Undersecretary Quinn, as NCA nears its strategic goal of reaching 95% of all veterans with burial options within 75 miles of where they live, new cemeteries, grant-funded state and tribal cemeteries, and expansions at existing cemeteries will all be key in reaching veterans and preserving levels of access.**

**a. Can you detail how each of those efforts fit together in reaching your stated access goal?**

**VA Response:** NCA's first priority is to keep existing national and grant-funded cemeteries open. This will maintain existing burial access and ensure no slippage in the percentage of the Veteran population served within 75 miles of their homes.

NCA also seeks to establish new cemeteries. The VCGP is vital for NCA to achieve its strategic goal of providing reasonable access to burial benefits for 95% of all Veterans living in the U.S. Increasing and maintaining the availability of state, territory, and tribal Veterans cemeteries helps increase existing burial access for Veterans nationwide and provides a more convenient burial option to those Veterans who may not currently have reasonable access to a national cemetery, particularly in rural locations, or to those Veterans who prefer to be interred on tribal lands.

NCA works closely with states, territories, and tribes to provide grants and help establish new grant-funded cemeteries in areas where there are large concentrations of Veterans without reasonable burial access. In 2023, NCA awarded grants to help establish two new state Veterans cemeteries (one in Texas and one in Nebraska) that

are planned to open in 2027. Funding for these projects was made available when several planned expansion projects were deferred by the states.

**7. Undersecretary Quinn, in addition to five remaining Rural and Urban Initiative cemeteries yet to come online, NCA currently has 11 national cemeteries around the country with major construction projects planned or underway for gravesite expansions.**

**a. Can you speak to the differing areas of focus for NCA - including constructing new cemeteries versus expanding existing cemeteries - and how NCA manages these different efforts in a coordinated way?**

**VA Response:** VA is committed to investing in NCA's infrastructure, particularly to keep existing national cemeteries open and to construct new cemeteries consistent with existing burial policies. NCA's highest priority is to maintain burial services at existing national cemeteries with both major and minor construction projects. Projects to keep existing national cemeteries open by developing additional gravesites and columbaria, or by acquiring additional land, prevent the loss of a burial option for Veterans that are currently served by a national cemetery within a reasonable distance of their residence.

NCA manages prioritization of construction projects throughout the budget formulation cycle in a defined process. At the beginning of each cycle, NCA forecasts gravesite depletion for each cemetery and certifies year-end inventories at each cemetery location. During an annual planning conference, NCA reviews burial option data and projections, identifies risks/needs, and develops major and minor construction projects for cemeteries facing future depletion of a burial option. Projects are then presented to the NCA Construction Management Board for approval and then programmed through VA's Strategic Capital Investment Planning process.

Regarding the construction of new national cemeteries, NCA's cemetery establishment policies, implemented in 2011 and 2013, defined criteria for the establishment of new cemeteries, leading to the construction of 18 new VA national cemeteries across the country, including urban and rural locations. Thirteen of these cemeteries have opened and another three are under construction.

NCA has plans to open one urban cemetery in 2024 (St. Albans, New York), two rural cemeteries in 2025 (Elko, Nevada, and Cedar City, Utah), and is in the final stages of land acquisition for another urban cemetery in 2024 (Chicago, Illinois) with a projected completion in 2026. An additional urban cemetery (Alameda Point, California) is on hold pending an environmental analysis of the land.

**8. Undersecretary Quinn, modernization and memorialization are two of the focus areas you stated in your remarks. Could you tell us more about NCA's Veterans Legacy Memorial and what it provides to veterans and the loved ones they leave behind?**

**VA Response:** NCA's Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) is the nation's premier digital platform dedicated entirely to the memory of nearly 10 million Veterans interred in VA's national cemeteries; VA-funded state, tribal, and territory Veterans cemeteries; Department of Defense-managed cemeteries; National Park Service cemeteries; and private cemeteries within and outside the United States. Currently, VLM includes Veterans laid to rest in private cemeteries since 1996 who received a VA-provided headstone, flat marker, niche cover, or medallion.

Individual Veteran profile pages are populated with military service and cemetery information. Publicly available information gathered from VA records includes service branch and seal, dates of birth and death, rank, war period, decorations, emblem of belief, and cemetery information.

Interactive features allow family, friends, and the public to submit tributes (comments), images, biographical information, and historical documents; create their Veteran's military service and personal achievements timeline; and generate a Word Cloud that describes their Veteran. The site also allows visitors to share Veteran profile pages by email and post them to social media, and users can "Follow a Veteran" to receive email alerts when new content is added to that Veteran's page.

**9. Undersecretary Quinn, in your written testimony, you cite lessons learned throughout the process of the Rural and Urban Initiatives, particularly with regard to the needs encountered at the rural cemeteries. Could you elaborate on those lessons learned and associated efforts today?**

**VA Response:** Considering the smaller anticipated workloads in rural cemeteries than cemeteries in more populous areas, NCA intentionally designed Rural Initiative national cemeteries to be constructed on 5 to 15-acre sites with more limited features and infrastructure. For example, original design plans did not include committal shelters, restrooms, or on-site storage, usually because the sites lacked existing infrastructure to support these features. This allowed NCA to use minor construction account funds to create the Rural Initiative national cemeteries and introduce effective and efficient staffing concepts. While cemeteries with less infrastructure already existed within the national cemetery system, in 2019 NCA analyzed the operational requirements at each of the planned Rural Initiative cemeteries and determined that additional infrastructure was needed to improve service. Accordingly, NCA is adding restrooms, storage areas, and wind walls to the Rural Initiative national cemeteries already constructed and incorporating these infrastructure elements into the designs of those still in the planning stage.

**a. Could you please provide us with an update on the remaining Rural and Urban Initiative sites yet to open and your projections for completion?**

**VA Response:** NCA planned eight rural cemeteries: six have been opened and two are under construction. The two under construction in Cedar City, Utah, and Elko, Nevada; both are planned to be completed and open in 2025. NCA planned five urban



cemeteries: two have opened, one is under construction and scheduled to open in calendar year 2024 in New York City, one is in the planning stages as we finalize property acquisition in the Chicago area, and one is on hold pending a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers evaluation of environmental issues at a former Naval Air Station in Alameda, CA.

**10. Undersecretary Quinn, tragically, sometimes veterans pass away with no family to claim them or ensure a proper burial. In these cases, it is incumbent upon funeral industry partners, local governments, NCA, and civic organizations to come together to make certain unclaimed veterans' remains are given a dignified and honored burial.**

**a. Can you speak to NCA's recent collaborative efforts to increase the location and honorable interment of unclaimed veterans' remains?**

**VA Response:** VA believes that every eligible Veteran deserves a dignified burial and memorialization to commemorate their service and sacrifice to our Nation, and we appreciate the continued interest and support of Congress on the issue of unclaimed Veteran remains.

In December 2021, the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) released a report titled, "[Improvements Needed to Ensure Final Disposition of Unclaimed Veterans' Remains](#),"<sup>1</sup> with 11 recommendations. VA immediately established an Integrated Project Team, co- led by the Veterans Experience Office and the Office of Enterprise Integration, and with enterprise-wide participation across VA. The Team's goal was to improve VA's management and oversight of benefits and services on behalf of unclaimed Veterans. Ten of the 11 OIG recommendations have been resolved, including conducting a comprehensive program evaluation of all VA benefits and services for deceased Veterans whose remains are unclaimed. Through this evaluation, VA developed evidence-based recommendations necessary to identify an accountable office to oversee the full scope of benefits and services provided on behalf of unclaimed Veterans and named the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Pension and Fiduciary Service as the accountable office leading VA's efforts in this area.

The final recommendation, which is nearing resolution, involves the creation of data sharing agreements, and VA is collaborating with the Department of Justice to share information in their National Missing and Unidentified Persons System to identify Veterans who would be eligible for burial in VA national cemeteries and VA grant-funded state and tribal Veterans cemeteries whose remains are in the possession of coroner's and medical examiner's offices, funeral homes, and law enforcement agencies across the country.

In addition, VBA has established the position of Indigent and Unclaimed Veterans Remains Coordinator (IVURC) at every VA Regional Office across the country and has conducted training which includes collaboration with NCA and the Veterans Health

<sup>1</sup> (<https://www.vaog.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2021-12/VAOIG-19-09592-262.pdf>)

Administration (VHA). VHA's Office of Patient Care recently established a Survivors Assistance and Memorial Support (SAMS) program to ensure Veterans who pass under VHA-authorized care receive dignified burials at national or VA grant-funded cemeteries.

Through these efforts, in FY 2023, VA interred more unclaimed Veterans than ever before, with more than 2,300 unclaimed Veterans interred in VA national cemeteries and VA grant-funded state and tribal Veterans cemeteries.

Questions for the Record from Senator Tommy Tuberville

**1. Veteran cemeteries are a shared responsibility between the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) and the individual states. The states have been encouraged by NCA to build more state-owned-and operated veteran cemeteries, and the states are more than willing to do so. However, even those state veteran cemeteries' construction costs are provided by the NCA. Moreover, the states must use those federal construction dollars to remain eligible to receive NCA plot allowances for future burials. But the NCA state cemetery construction funds have been limited lately, largely allowing only approximately one new state cemetery nationwide each year. Expansion projects at some existing state veteran cemeteries have been approved, but the NCA construction dollars have not been able to keep up with the need and requests by the state for construction of additional cemetery spaces.**

**Is there any plan to increase the cemetery construction funds for states to add additional veteran cemetery spaces to overcome this issue, or any alternative plans that would address this issue?**

**VA Response:** NCA remains committed to providing VA grant funding to expand existing VA grant-funded Veterans cemeteries to avoid burial disruption at these cemeteries and to establishing new cemeteries that support burial access goals.

The FY 2024 enacted budget provides \$60 million for Veterans Cemetery Grant Program (VCGP). The FY 2024 budget is an increase of \$10 million from the FY 2023 enacted budget of \$50 million. The FY 2025 budget submission sustains this increase level of \$60 million for the VCGP. Future budget requests will be considered along with other department-wide priorities during the budget formulation process.

NCA has worked diligently to communicate with states and tribes concerning the fiscal realities that prevent funding their requests to establish new cemeteries. In accordance with our regulations, among projects for the establishment of new Veterans cemeteries, VA gives priority to proposed locations that would provide burial access to the greatest number of Veterans who are not currently served by a national or state Veterans cemetery. We also communicate with state and tribes on the competitiveness of their proposed location against other locations that have requested establishment grants. Because of these communications, we are seeing interest from several states and one tribe in building new cemeteries without VA grant funding. We support these initiatives.

**It is my understanding that if the states pay for construction, then they receive no future plot allowance funds for individual burials. Doesn't this rule hinder the state's abilities to expand cemetery capacity if funding is made available to do so?**

**VA Response:** State cemeteries are not required to be VA grant-funded to be eligible to receive the burial plot allowance for each Veteran they bury. Such a restriction on VA

burial plot allowance payments to states would certainly be a disincentive to a state contemplating self-funding the construction of a new state Veterans cemetery. However, VBA will pay the plot or interment allowance to any state that buries a Veteran without charge for the plot or interment, provided that the Veteran is buried in a state cemetery, or a section of a state cemetery, that is used solely for interment of those eligible for burial in a national cemetery, members and former members of reserve components of the Armed Forces, or individuals listed in 38 U.S.C. § 2408(i)(2)(A)-(E).<sup>2</sup>

NCA understands that communications between the VCGP program and the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs for Alabama may not have clearly addressed this concern. We have subsequently clarified this point with Commissioner W. Kent Davis.

**2. Undersecretary Quinn, I appreciate the NCA's strategic goal of 95% of veterans having burial options within a 75-mile radius of where they live. In Alabama, we have national veteran cemeteries in Montevallo, Mobile, and Ft. Mitchell, and a state veterans cemetery in Spanish Fort. None of those options are within 75 miles of Huntsville, Alabama, where we have seen a population boom, both for civilians and military.**

**How can I help prioritize planning for a cemetery in North Alabama?**

**VA Response:** VA establishes new national cemeteries in locations where there are at least 80,000 Veterans without access to a burial option in a national or grant-funded cemetery within 75 miles of their homes. Our Veteran population analysis indicates that there are not enough Veterans in northern Alabama without such access; consequently, the area does not currently qualify for a new VA national cemetery and would be a lower priority for establishment of a grant-funded state Veterans cemetery.

Within the regulations that govern establishment of new grant-funded Veterans cemeteries, VA gives the highest priority to projects in geographical areas with the highest number of Veterans who will benefit from the project. In making that determination, VA looks at the number of Veterans who are currently not served by a VA national cemetery or a grant-funded state Veterans cemetery. For example, the VA national cemetery in Chattanooga, Tennessee, currently serves several counties in northeastern Alabama. We would encourage Alabama to submit a pre-application for the establishment of a cemetery that would serve the unserved Veterans in north Alabama so it can be ranked with other establishment grant requests.

**3. Can you speak to NCA's efforts to ensure VA medical centers and clinics, as well as community groups in rural areas, are tracking any situations where a veteran should be interred with a proper burial but may not have family to manage the logistics?**

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<sup>2</sup> 38 U.S.C. § 2303(b)(1); 38 C.F.R. § 3.1707(b).

**VA Response:** VBA's Pension and Fiduciary Service is the accountable office leading VA's efforts in this area. VBA is developing communications on VA benefits and services available to those who assist in preparing and delivering the unclaimed remains of Veterans to VA national cemeteries and VA grant-funded state and tribal Veterans cemeteries for dignified interment. Once completed, these communications will be released via email to over 100,000 email addresses belonging to funeral homes and coroner's and medical examiner's offices in every part of the country.

VHA actively participates in the internal working group on Unclaimed Veteran Remains, and the Office of Patient Care SAMS program is working to ensure Veterans who pass under VHA-authorized care anywhere in the country receive dignified burials at national or VA grant-funded cemeteries.

Questions for the Record from Senator Kevin Cramer

**1. Mr. Quinn, thank you for the time and effort you've put forth over the past several years to assist North Dakota's Cemeteries. Our State Veterans Cemetery in Mandan and National Cemetery in Fargo are sacred places for North Dakota's veterans and their families, and I appreciate the National Cemetery Administration's efforts to support these facilities. Specific to the Fargo National Cemetery (FNC), there are ongoing conversations between NCA and community stakeholders regarding plans for building upgrades at the cemetery. As these discussions continue, do you and your office commit to providing me and my office regular updates on any progress and providing notice prior to any announcements of a final plan?**

**VA Response:** Yes, NCA will provide updates to your office as progress occurs.

**2. Regarding the future building plans for the FNC:**

**a. In the hearing, you stated you were working things through your legal department and cemetery operations department to see what is possible in this situation. What is the current status of any plans between the NCA and community stakeholders to expand facility infrastructure at the FNC?**

**VA Response:** While NCA has not received a formal proffer from the community, we are aware of their interest in building a facility similar to the administrative building at the North Dakota State Veterans Cemetery in Mandan. NCA's donation process provides potential options for achieving the community's intent.

Generally, NCA is authorized to accept gifts and donations that are beneficial to a national cemetery or are made for the purpose of beautifying national cemeteries. Such gifts may include monetary donations, in-kind goods and services, and personal or real property. Monetary donations may be restricted, meaning they must be donated for a specific purpose/particular use. Non-standardized commemorative works are another category of donation, which includes statues, sculptures, plaques, structures, landscape features, or monuments that are substantial in nature.

Once the community has agreed upon a donation approach, they will need to prepare and submit a proffer to NCA. At that time NCA will coordinate a technical and legal review of the donation offer. If accepted, NCA will provide the community donor with an acceptance letter and conceptual approval (in the case of a structure).

**Are there any additional clearance points required before any plans could move forward?**

**VA Response:** NCA acquired 29.06 acres of land adjacent to Fargo National Cemetery in December 2023 to allow for cemetery expansion. Prior to any development occurring on that newly acquired land, NCA must develop a master plan for the entire cemetery,

to include the original 4.82 acres. Master planning has not yet been initiated for the larger cemetery. However, given the size of the cemetery, the master planning effort could be accomplished in less than a year.

As mentioned in response to Senator Cramer's question 2a, NCA stands ready to review and assess a proffer of a donation from the community.

**b. What role do you expect the NCA to play in this endeavor?**

**VA Response:** NCA's role may vary depending on the donation type pursued by the community. If a restricted monetary donation is made, NCA's role will be to manage the execution of the design and construction project. Alternatively, if the community pursues the donation of a structure, NCA will provide extensive engineering and project oversight from concept design through final design, planning, and execution. Upon acceptance, the building will become the property of the federal government and will be operated and maintained by NCA.

**c. Will NCA commit to working with and providing local stakeholders a seat at the table throughout the planning, design, and construction process?**

**VA Response:** The level of involvement throughout the process will depend on the donation method pursued by the community. However, regardless of the method selected, NCA will require that any facility be designed and constructed in accordance with established VA/NCA design and construction guidelines and be compliant with all VA/federal government requirements and standards.

**d. As plans move forward, what steps will NCA take to adequately solicit community input and incorporate these components?**

**VA Response:** NCA will utilize existing community engagement efforts to keep the community apprised of any changes and developments at the cemetery and to receive comments and feedback.

**e. Has NCA ever previously utilized a gift fund to fund the construction of facility upgrades in this manner and/or accepted the donation of a furnished building?**

**VA Response:** No, NCA has not utilized a gift fund for the construction or upgrade of a facility. The construction, maintenance, and improvement of buildings and other infrastructure at the national cemeteries are funded through VA's appropriation.

NCA did accept the donation of a chapel building at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery (St. Louis, Missouri) in 1978 and a pavilion at Sarasota National Cemetery in 2014. Upon acceptance, the chapel building and pavilion became the property of the federal government and are operated and maintained by NCA to this day.

**f. How will the VA operate the gift fund, and what accountability measures will be in place to ensure any money donated to this venture will be used appropriately?**

**VA Response:** NCA's Directive 3160 (Gifts and Donations to VA National Cemeteries) and Handbook 3160.01 (Donations of Monetary or In-Kind Gifts or Items of Personal Property) provide accounting procedures for monetary donations. For restricted monetary donations, NCA will fulfill the donor's specified purpose or instructions to the extent they are practicable and do not violate VA or NCA policies. At the time of donation acceptance, NCA will inform donors that if NCA is unable to fulfill the donor's specified purpose or instructions for the donation, NCA may ask the donor to allow the funds to be used for another purpose or as an unrestricted monetary donation. In these instances, if the donor does not agree to a general or unrestricted monetary donation, NCA will return the donated funds.

**g. Will there be increased construction and management costs related to the future facilities if they are owned and operated solely by NCA subject to federal regulation?**

**VA Response:** Any gifts or donations received by NCA become the property of the federal government. As such, additional operations and maintenance funds will be needed in support of these structures. Periodically, construction funds will also be required to make needed repairs and improvements.

**Department of Veterans Affairs  
April 2024**



**Senator Moran**  
**Questions for the Record**  
**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**  
**"Sacred Mission: Honoring America's Veterans and their Families at VA Cemeteries"**  
**February 29, 2024**

**Questions for Administrator Kelly Ackerman, Montana Veteran's Division**

1. Administrator Ackerman, both Kansas and Montana are highly rural states with small towns and communities spread across the state and often far from each other.
  - a. Could you share with us some of the challenges you've encountered in your role and how you and your team have met them in Montana?
  
2. Administrator Ackerman, in addition to interment in a national or grant-funded cemetery, NCA offers headstones and grave markers to veterans buried in private cemeteries, or veteran medallions to affix to private headstones, along with other potential burial benefits to help with the cost of funeral expenses.
  - a. Can you speak to the interest in these benefits from veterans and families in your state who may wish to be buried closer to home in a private cemetery?

**Response:**

1. We have approximately 45 counties that our Veteran Service Officers visit during outreach services monthly due to their rural status. The rural nature of numerous counties is one challenge, but the lack of technology such as Wi-Fi is another. Our staff use laptops with Wi-Fi capabilities to file VA claims for the veterans and their families during that visit. We believe that in Montana, we are continuing to meet the needs of our veteran population and find new ways to spread the news of our agency.
  
2. We see a tremendous interest in veterans' desire to be buried in a family plot near their home. My own father passed away last year and chose to be buried in our family plot only 200 miles away from a state veteran cemetery. Our agency has worked with all the funeral homes across the state to ensure that they understand the importance of referring the family to someone from our agency or the VA or submitting the Burial Benefits form on behalf of the family.

**Senator Moran**  
**Questions for the Record**  
**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**  
**"Sacred Mission: Honoring America's Veterans and their Families at VA Cemeteries"**  
**February 29, 2024**

**Questions for Director William Turner, Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs**

1. Director Turner, Kansas has been managing Veterans' cemeteries since the first one in Fort Dodge was dedicated in 2002.

a. Can you speak to the coverage and access that these four cemeteries offer to rural veterans in central and western Kansas in addition to NCA's national cemeteries?  
The State of Kansas is an excellent example of the National Cemetery Administration and Veteran Affairs commitment that every Veteran to live within 75 to 90 miles of a State or Federal Veteran Cemetery. This accessibility allows Veterans and their families to utilize this Memorial benefit close to home. The WaKeeney Cemetery covers Northwest Kansas. Fort Dodge covers Southwest Kansas, Winfield covers Southeast and Ft Riley/Manhattan covers the Northeast Counties. Ft Scott and Leavenworth cover the high population areas in Eastern Kansas, including Kansas City.

b. You mention in your testimony the outreach events that your cemetery managers attend around the state to inform veterans of the full suite of burial benefit options offered by VA. Could you please speak to those efforts and the response from veterans and their families?  
Every five years the cemetery managers and cemetery director speak at the Kansas Funeral Director Association Spring or Fall Regional meetings throughout the State about the Kansas Veterans' Cemetery Program. We last participated in these sessions in Aug-Sep 2022; we will be participating in like sessions in coordination with the VA Regional Office later this Spring and Summer. There are five regional meetings that are covered in the State. During these meetings, we present a power point brief offering information about cemetery regulations, eligibility, pre-certification and the interment worksheet and scheduling process. Folders are distributed to each participant that contain contact information and forms needed for pre-certification and interment scheduling.

Continual outreach to Veterans and their families is a priority for the Kansas Veterans' Cemetery Program. The managers and director offer tours of the cemeteries by request. Managers also attend Veteran outreach events and speaking

engagements at Veterans' groups meetings throughout the year. Managers are required to meet with their area funeral home directors on a rotating basis to check in and distribute cemetery forms, as needed. Each manager has a goal of visiting 6 funeral homes and to participate 3 to 4 outreach events each fiscal year. Additionally, KCVAO leadership and Veterans Service Representatives provide information and updates on our cemetery operations at Veterans Resource Fairs and Townhall sessions as well as during one-on-one consultations with Veterans.

2. As mentioned today the responsibility of NCA will never get smaller, and that holds true for the State and Tribal partners who inter veterans. That growing responsibility will have perpetual budgetary impacts.

- a. Director Turner, you shared that NCA Plot Allowances account for 21% of the Commission's Cemeteries Program. Those are one-time reimbursements can you speak to the local funding efforts in Kansas that make certain this sacred commitment is faithfully funded and executed?

The State of Kansas continues to fulfill its commitment to the Kansas Veteran Cemetery Program. State funding sources include State General Funds and Veteran Lottery Funds. These funds are used to pay a large majority of staff salaries, commodities, and contractual requirements.

The State also funds capital improvement projects each year at the cemeteries. These projects include building and road repairs at our cemeteries, beautification projects, and executing such improvements as a scattering garden at the Ft Dodge Cemetery. Future projects include placing doors on the side of the shelters at Ft Dodge and WaKeeney for protection against the elements at funerals, building a new maintenance building at Ft Dodge, bathrooms placed at the shelter for three of the cemeteries, and creating memorial walkways at each cemetery to honor Veteran groups. In the past few years, a capital outlay has been added to the budget to address building and facility repairs.

In 2017, the WaKeeney Cemetery received substantial storm damage from high winds and grapefruit sized hail. The Kansas Legislature approved funding to make the repairs to four building roofs, siding, guttering, trim, soffit, and fascia, along with several window replacements. Trees were replaced, and general overall landscape was repaired.

- b. Additionally, how will this growing portfolio of responsibility impact the cemeteries' staff?

As we continue to experience increases in number of interments, particularly at our two larger cemeteries at Winfield and Ft Riley, we will expect to increase our

requirement for skilled equipment operators to perform necessary tasks. As more headstones are placed, more time is needed to maintain, and re-set markers to remain in NCA compliance. Equipment operators are skilled employees who must be well trained in NCA standards and procedures, operate heavy equipment, provide turf & tree maintenance, vehicle maintenance, facility maintenance, complete interments, set and maintain markers, and assist Veterans and their families as needed.

Likewise, our small office staff of one to two people at each cemetery remain busy juggling many tasks in busy offices, while assisting Veterans, their families, and funeral homes. They are well trained in NCA standards and procedures. It can often be challenging, and time intensive helping families locate documents for eligibility while also assisting in coordinating Honors Teams and other details associated with each interment. They are required to make sure that all forms, reports, and documentation is complete according to NCA standards. They order markers from the BOSS system and follow through with the process from ordering, possible re-orders, to documenting when marker is set. As mentioned above, outreach is also an important part of their job. Managers are supervisors and have the duties of employee management. Budgeting, ordering supplies, monthly and annual reports are also a part of their tasks.

Lastly, competitive wages with an array of specific skills needed will remain a challenge. It is critical that we clearly articulate the unique skill sets and training necessary to ensure we continue to provide a dignified and respectful settings for Veterans to be laid to rest.

3. Director Turner, the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs' Cemeteries Program has much to be proud of. I was pleased to see the cemetery at Fort Dodge honored with the Stewardship Award for its operational excellence last summer, and to learn that the cemetery in WaKeeney will be receiving the Operational Excellence Award in recognition of superior performance results verified during the most recent compliance review. Congratulations to your teams for their achievements and thank you for your work in this most sacred obligation to those who served.
  - a. How can NCA and Congress better support well-run cemetery programs like yours in Kansas and across the country?

Thank you for the acknowledgement of the outstanding work our Team has performed. We are proud of the work that are Cemetery Staff of 17 individuals do to operate all four cemeteries at the high standards in which they operate.

The NCA State Grants Program has been essential in communicating policy and standard changes through emails and quarterly meetings. The grants that allow for future growth were awarded to our program for the columbarium wall expansions at both Winfield and Ft Dodge Cemeteries. The assigned VA project manager for each project is extremely helpful in navigating the process and when applying for new grants.

Consideration of providing a plot allowance to not just the Veteran, but also the dependents that we inter, would be beneficial. Just over 70 percent of the people we inter are Veterans; however, the approximately 30 percent of dependents we inter (spouses and children) still require the same staff, equipment, and resources. Plot allowance is often used to purchase updated equipment, as old equipment needs to be retired. In some cases, State cemeteries cannot afford the more updated equipment that Federal cemeteries use due to budget restraints. An example of this is a vault/casket handler with a trailer that is operated by remote control and is needed for second interments. The remote-control vault/casket handler can be operated by one person and can turn the casket with ease to be lowered into the concrete grave liner. Currently, we are using a sling to lift the casket to the gravesite. This can be dangerous and cumbersome. With a small staff, it can be time consuming as well. With the rising cost of commodities, tools and equipment, the additional plot allowance would be beneficial.

4. Director Turner, a challenge you mentioned in your testimony was the difficulty in finding companies to bid for construction projects at the state veterans cemeteries. Can you speak to this challenge and ways that the Commission has sought to meet it?

The area that we have had the greatest difficulty getting bids for construction projects is in Southwest Kansas where our Ft Dodge Cemetery is located. With only one company bidding a project, it often raises the costs of the project. There is commercial growth happening in that area of Kansas with few tradesmen and commercial construction companies available in a lower population area. There have been expansions in some industries, like meat packing and a dairy plant. New companies that have built a cheese factory and a new cold storage have higher competitive wages than what we are able to offer as well. Consequently, we have lost employees to these facilities. New homes built in the area have also kept local construction companies busy. We have also had difficulty getting tradesman to work on the facilities, including electricians and plumbers. Where possible we leverage the maintenance teams at our nearby Veterans Homes to assist with some requirements. In regard to construction projects, we must sometimes value engineer our projects to manage costs while also meeting the cemetery needs over a ten-year period. In addition, we also attempt to take advantage of opportunities to group like projects to leverage use of contractors for multiple projects where possible.

1. Director Turner, NCA offers training and training opportunities to grant recipient partners. Could you please speak to how these partnerships have played out in Kansas?

- a. What has been the experience of your workforce as a result of collaborative training efforts with NCA?

We have had two training opportunities at the Leavenworth Cemetery in the past three years. They have been beneficial in sharing NCA policies, information on equipment, teaching maintenance staff better techniques for work processes. It is a constant resource for our program, and we frequently connect with Leavenworth. The staff at Leavenworth has made a tremendous difference providing assistance to our program.

- b. What are some challenges in accessing these opportunities?

NCA is very good about alerting us to training opportunities in St Louis at the NCA training center. While the training there is excellent, it is difficult to travel that distance for an extended period of time with small staff at each cemetery. Vacations, illness, family deaths, and other factors can further the strain, especially at our two bigger cemeteries.

A couple of the maintenance staff (a supervisor and another staff member) were willing to come to WaKeeney to observe our operations and offer us their professional opinions regarding garden management to assure accurate gravesites. However, after trying for several days, the Leavenworth Team contacted us and stated that they were not able to travel to WaKeeney, even if we reimbursed travel, because of the rules that are in place. Paying for travel was the issue. It would be beneficial to have experienced staff from Leavenworth, visit our facilities and make suggestions or look at areas that our staff may be having concerns. While compliance visits are a great measure of our overall performance at each cemetery, it does not provide a discussion of concerns or questions that employees may have in their daily tasks. I am attending the NCA National Conference in April and will coordinate with NCA on potential solutions to facilitate these engagements in the future.

2. Director Turner, you cite the support and positive relationships the Commission has with NCA and efforts to work together to best execute this mission and make certain veterans and their families are provided world-class service.



- a. With regard to occasional need to reorder a headstone or grave marker due to damage, you shared that the Commission and NCA are working together to coordinate with vendors to improve how these replacement items are delivered. Could you elaborate on those efforts for us please?

Memorial Programs has been great to work with when we have concerns about reorders because of poor quality or incorrect inscriptions. Recently, Winfield had a higher than usual number of reorders because of the mentioned issues. Once Memorial programs supervisor, Kirk Elliott, learned of this, he called a meeting with our staff and his Team at Memorial Programs to determine a plan of action. They allowed our staff to share our concerns and frustrations with specific marker reorder data. MP immediately researched the issue further and discussed with the contractor. Together, we put a plan in place to ensure Winfield would be able to stay in compliance with the number of reorders they were allowed to do. All four cemeteries were told to send all reorders to MP and to the Cemetery Director so that both were tracking them. If there is more than one reorder, MP will immediately look into the situation. Kirk Elliott put together a reorder form for MP to collect the data they need to look into each situation. They are also providing a virtual training session with all four of our managers in April involving marker ordering and reorders. This is a great example of the quick action and collaborative approach that the NCA and State Grants Program have with our cemeteries.

3. You shared in your written testimony, Director Turner, that the Kansas Veterans Cemetery at Winfield received significant storm damage late last year. Could you share how your team has responded to the need for repair and any challenges that process has posed?

We had a storm that went through Winfield in August 2023. We worked with the local government to apply for FEMA funding. However, over a period of time, that funding was turned down for the cemetery. Twenty (20) trees had to be removed from the Cemetery, which was completed within a week of the storm with the hard work of our staff and volunteer Veterans in the area. We have used state funds to make the repairs on the shelter doors, along with a few other smaller projects. The final project is to fix the separated limestone on one of the posts on the shelter. Since funeral services take place under the shelter, the cemetery program hired an engineer to assure the safety of the shelter. We were assured that it was safe to use, but we have taped off the one post until the work is completed. We have executed the bid process and are moving forward with the repairs; we expect to repair the post in the next 60-75 days pending vendor availability, and that will complete the work caused by the storm.

4. Director Turner, when I travel in Kansas I always enjoy hearing about times when communities come together in the spirit of service and civic pride. During annual events

surrounding Memorial Day and the winter holidays, communities come together to show that we honor and remember our veterans, and that we recognize and are grateful for the sacrifices they made on our behalf.

- a. Can you opine on these major events and how the Commission prepares for and executes these honorific occasions in Winfield, WaKeeney, Fort Dodge, and Fort Riley?

The four cemeteries hold Memorial Day and Wreaths Across America, held in December, services each year. The cemetery staff execute extensive planning and coordination with local community leaders and agencies, as well as multiple non-profit organizations and Veterans Service Organizations, to make the services honorable tributes to those who served and to those who paid the ultimate sacrifice. Neither service would be what they are without the dedication of countless volunteers from Veterans, community members, service organizations, and other KCVAO staff.

For Memorial Day and Veterans Day, staff and volunteers place gravesite flags on each gravesite. On Memorial Day, Flag Day, Fourth of July, Veterans' Day and Wreaths Across America staff and volunteers put up the avenue of flags at each cemetery. For Wreaths Across America, families, businesses, and community members contribute donations to purchase wreaths from Worcester Wreath Company each year. Since its inception in the Kansas Veterans' Cemetery Program in 2006, we have received enough donation that every gravesite has received a wreath each December. Many volunteers place the wreaths on graves where their families were not able to attend the service. Each wreath placed is a reminder of the dedication of service of those that are interred there. The wreaths are left on the gravesites through mid to late January.

Memorial Day is our largest, most well attended service of the year. Each year, roll call is read of the Veterans who was placed at the cemetery during the previous year. We also use carnations to honor all those who lost their lives in Iraq or Afghanistan. A wreath is placed for those who were killed and/or are still missing in action from each service. Another wreath is placed for those in the tombs of the unknown. Finally, a salute and recognition of those who are interred at each cemetery is given. Cemetery staff work diligently to assure that the services are befitting of those who sacrificed for our Nation.

These services not only enable the nearby families and friends to continue paying their respects, but they also allow the local citizens to honor their services and express their gratitude so that their service will never be forgotten. In this way these services also offer opportunities to inform and educate younger generations about the actions of those who have gone before them, serving our Nation and defending our Constitution.





**MICHAEL S. FIGLIOLI**  
*Washington, DC*

The Honorable Jerry Moran  
 United States Senator (KS)  
 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
 Room 521  
 Washington, DC 20510

April 11, 2024

Dear Ranking Member Moran,

Please find the following responses to your Questions for the Record dated February 29, 2024. In reading your request based on my previous testimony, I submit my responses as a private citizen and former member of the ACCM and not in my official capacity as the Director, VFW National Veterans Service. My responses are my own and not based on my organization's position on NCA affairs or potential legislative initiatives.

In response to question one regarding the role and work of the advisory committee overseeing national cemeteries, I submit that my time was very much a learning experience in the beginning. Much like being a new member of Congress, one needs to observe and learn from those who have more experience as members. This allows you to absorb the scope and intent of the ACCM in putting forth worthwhile recommendations and helping to craft policies that are in line with the mission of the NCA while keeping in mind the high expectations of the public and veteran community that deserve our best work.

The role of the committee is to advise the Secretary of the VA and the Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs in administration of the VAs national Cemeteries, lots, site selection, erection of appropriate memorials and adequate burial benefits. Members, with assistance from NCA leadership and the Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO) develop recommendations for consideration of future policy. These recommendations are reviewed by the Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs (USMA) and appropriate staff then briefed to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Some are adopted, some are ruled outside the scope of the committee. The committee is a dynamic one with a great deal of diversity. Some appointees are VSOs, some are Gold Star family members, some are state cemetery directors, others represent woman veterans and underserved populations all working together to make the NCA, the services they offer and their policies reflective of those who served their country.

Question 1a. What are some lessons learned from my time on the committee. The thing that is most apparent is the pride that every NCA employee has not only in their work but in the overall mission. From caretakers, to maintenance, from the call center to office administrators to Directors, right up the USMAs Office, every single employee understands it is about respect and memorialization. I am most proud of the work we did on the Veterans Legacy Program (VLP) as

a subcommittee chair. However, I am also pleased with new policies aimed at recognizing the service of tribal nation veterans, woman veterans, LGBTQIA+ veterans and others who may have been overlooked by previous policies and now have their service recognized.

As for effectiveness and overseeing national cemeteries it was my observation that the committee should be more involved in recommendations for things like site selections, policy development and advise more on operations and memorialization standards. The work that has been accomplished is important but some of it seemed more cosmetic than it should be. For example, veterans are entitled to a headstone, or medallion. These are important services to provide but one recommendation from our group was to develop a Medal of Honor medallion. We accomplished that but we got no real buy in from the Congressional Medal of Honor Society (CMOHS) who I think viewed it as duplicative. While the end result is beautifully crafted and fully representative of a recipient's service it was not as successful as we had hoped.

Another area where the ACCM should be involved is the development or advising of new memorials to be placed in national cemeteries. Creating and funding a new memorial is a very involved process. It can be fraught with obstacles because of the many standards it must meet first to be considered, than be allowed for placement. There is a great deal of bureaucracy involved as well as collaboration with the Department of Defense (DOD) for use of logos and symbols. All it takes is a simple objection and the whole process can be stopped or have to be scrapped. The policies for use of symbols, whether public domain or proprietary can be extremely confusing and subject to interpretation at a number of levels. These committees should be the liaison between the NCA and DOD and have a more involved part in the review and approval process.

Question 2. Veterans Legacy Program (VLP). I had the privilege to visit with students from the University of Denver who took part in the program as part of the curriculum. What I was amazed at was the level of involvement from every student taking part in the program and the personal pride they had in crafting "their" veterans' story. I think we often discount young people as lacking involvement in the community or even label some as unpatriotic at times. But these characterizations often prove false. Every one of them was fully immersed in the process of researching the life and service of their assigned veteran. It was almost to the point that they regarded them as additional family members. In asking some of them why they chose to participate, some took the course because they had family members, usually grandparents who served in WWII, Korea, or Vietnam. Others had family members of more recent conflicts. They wanted to make sure that for the average person who causally regards service as a personal choice, that their veterans service was seen as a sacrifice of time away from family and loved ones, that they served out of a sense of duty and for those that fell, it was understood that they gave up two lives. The one they lived and the one they would have had they returned safely home. For the handful that thought it was likely an easy credit, I think they were the most impacted as they now had a more personal stake in telling these stories. The sense of pride and accomplishment was amazing. The value in this program is that it teaches young people and those that did not serve what it requires to make that choice. It tells the personal history of those who are now interred in a national cemetery, and it inspires others to consider a life of service. In the end, it is a way to tell a very personal story but also a vibrant and fitting way to memorialize

the service and sacrifice of our nation's veterans respectfully and properly, family members and survivors.

Mr. Ranking Member Moran, this concludes my responses, and I am happy to respond to any additional questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael S.P. Figlioli". The signature is written in a cursive style with some loops and flourishes.

MICHAEL S.P. FIGLIOLI



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**Submission for the Record**

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118TH CONGRESS  
2D SESSION

**S.**

To require a pilot program for the construction and renovation of committal shelters at State-owned veterans' cemeteries, and for other purposes.

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IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

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Mr. MANCHIN introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on \_\_\_\_\_

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## **A BILL**

To require a pilot program for the construction and renovation of committal shelters at State-owned veterans' cemeteries, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*  
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Hershel ‘Woody’ Wil-

5 liams State Committal Shelter Pilot Program Act of

6 2024”.

7 **SEC. 2. PILOT PROGRAM FOR COMMITTAL STRUCTURES AT**  
8 **STATE-OWNED VETERANS’ CEMETERIES.**

9 (a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
10 shall carry out a pilot program for the construction or ren-

1 ovation of committal shelters at State-owned veterans'  
2 cemeteries to ensure attendees of burial services at such  
3 cemeteries are protected from inclement weather.

4 (b) CEMETERY SELECTION.—The Secretary of Vet-  
5 erans Affairs shall carry out the pilot program at three  
6 State-owned veterans' cemeteries selected by the Secretary  
7 as follows:

8 (1) Each cemetery selected by the Secretary  
9 shall be located in an area with drastic variation in  
10 annual temperature and weather patterns.

11 (2) One cemetery selected by the Secretary  
12 shall be located in a State in which each county of  
13 that State is served by the Appalachian Regional  
14 Commission.

15 (c) COMMITTAL SHELTERS.—At each cemetery se-  
16 lected under subsection (b), the Secretary of Veterans Af-  
17 fairs shall construct one or more new committal shelters,  
18 or renovate one or more existing committal shelters, so  
19 that each such shelter—

20 (1) is fully enclosed; and

21 (2) has heating, ventilation, air conditioning,  
22 and restroom services necessary for hosting not  
23 more than 50 individuals.

24 (d) COST SHARE REQUIREMENT.—



3

1 (1) IN GENERAL.—The share of the cost of the  
2 construction or renovation of a committal shelter  
3 under the pilot program shall be as follows:

- 4 (A) 50 percent Federal funds.
- 5 (B) 50 percent funds provided by State or  
6 local governments, nonprofit organizations, or  
7 private entities.

8 (2) FEDERAL MAXIMUM.—The Federal share of  
9 the cost of a construction or renovation described in  
10 paragraph (1) shall not exceed \$2,000,000.

11 (e) TIMELINE.—

12 (1) CEMETERY SELECTION; OBLIGATION OF  
13 AMOUNTS.—Not later than September 30, 2024, the  
14 Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall—

- 15 (A) select the cemeteries under subsection
- 16 (b) at which the pilot program will be carried  
17 out; and

18 (B) obligate such amounts as are nec-  
19 essary to carry out the pilot program.

20 (2) TERMINATION.—The pilot program shall  
21 terminate not later than September 30, 2025.