



**STATEMENT OF  
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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.

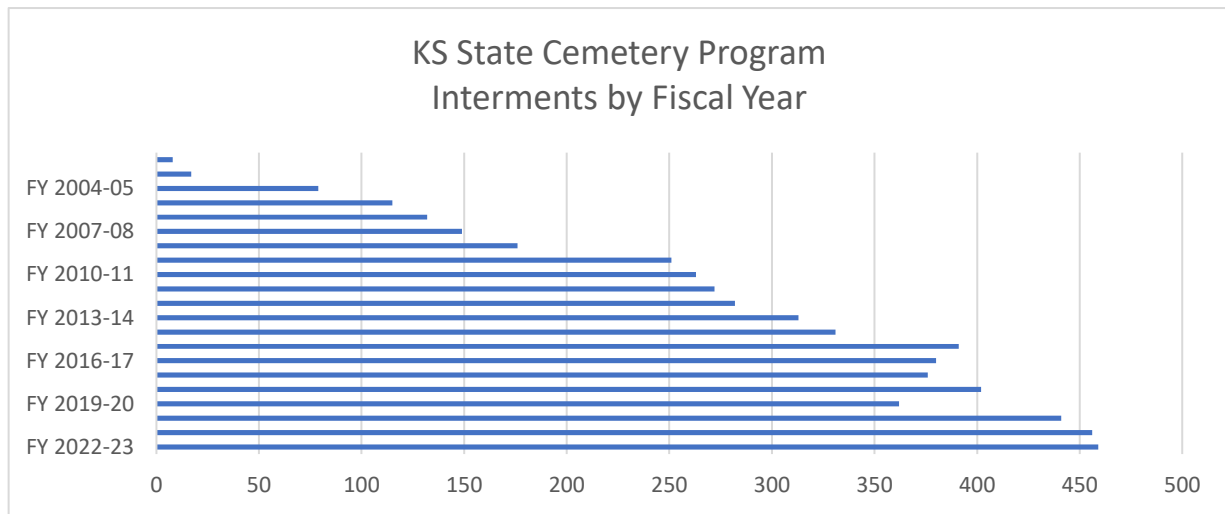
Since 2002, the Kansas Veterans' Cemetery Program has provided beautiful, dignified final resting places for Veterans', their spouses, and their eligible dependents. The Kansas Veteran Cemeteries conveys appreciation to its Veterans' and their Families for answering the call of duty and honorably serving 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	Fort Dodge	WaKeeney	Winfield	Fort Riley/Manhattan
<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.