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NATIONAL
HEADQUARTERS
4647 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland
20706-4380
TELEPHONE: 301-459-9600
FAX: 301-459-7924
E-MAIL: amvets@amvets.org

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF

**DIANE M. ZUMATTO
AMVETS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR**

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. SENATE

*ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION*

CONCERNING

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS BUDGET REQUEST FOR
FISCAL YEAR 2015**

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr and distinguished members of the committee, as an author of *The Independent Budget (IB)*, I appreciate this opportunity to share with you the IB's recommendations in what we believe to be the most fiscally responsible way of ensuring the quality and integrity of the care and benefits earned by Americans veterans.

The venerable and honorable history of our national cemeteries spans roughly 150 years when the earliest military graveyards were, not surprisingly, situated at battle sites, near field or general hospitals and at former prisoner-of-war sites. With the passage of the National Cemeteries Act of 1973 (PL 93-43), the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) became responsible for the majority of our national cemeteries. The single most important obligation of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is to honor the memory of America's brave men and women who have selflessly served in this nation's armed forces. As of late 2010, there were more than 20,021 acres of cemetery landscape, funerary monuments, grave markers, as well as, other architectural features and memorial tributes, much of it historically significant, included within established installations in the NCA which are therefore representative of the very foundations of these United States.

The signing of the Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998 (PL 105-368) officially re-designated the National Cemetery System (NCS) to the now familiar National Cemetery Administration (NCA). The NCA currently maintains stewardship of 133 of the nation's 147 national cemeteries, as well as 33 soldiers' lots, including two new national cemeteries scheduled to open in 2015. Since 1862 when President Abraham Lincoln signed the first legislation establishing the national cemetery concept, more than 3.5 million burials have taken place in national cemeteries currently located in 39 states and Puerto Rico, with approximately 128,100 interments expected in 2015.

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

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

NCA Accounts

While NCA's operating budget has remained fairly stagnant at around \$250 million for 4 out of the last 5 years, their workload has been anything but static and this trend is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. The IBVSO's are appreciative of the roughly \$8 million increase in NCA's overall FY 2015 budget, however, that increase comes with a simultaneous \$8.4 million reduction in the National Shrine account.

Between FY 2014 and FY 2015, the number of gravesites needing maintenance will increase by approximately 2.4%, while interments will increase by roughly 1.9%.

The NCA was also able to award 44 of its 48 minor construction projects and had four unobligated projects that will be moved to FY 2012. Unfortunately, due to continuing resolutions and the current budget situation, the NCA was not able to award the remaining four projects.

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

The NCA has worked tirelessly to improve the appearance of our national cemeteries, investing an estimated \$39 million into the National Shrine Initiative in FY 2011. According to NCA surveys, as of October 2011 the NCA has continued to make progress in reaching its performance measures. Since 2006, the NCA has improved headstone and marker height and alignment in national cemeteries from 67 percent to 70 percent and has improved cleanliness of tombstones, markers and niches from 77 percent to 91 percent. Although the NCA is nearing its strategic goal of 90 percent and 95 percent, respectively, for height and alignment and cleanliness, more funding is needed to continue this delicate and labor-intensive work. Therefore, the IBVSOs recommend the NCA's Operations and Maintenance budget to be increased by \$20 million per year until the operational standards and measures goals are reached.

The IBVSOs recommend a minimum Operational and Maintenance budget of \$260 million for the National Cemetery Administration for FY 2015, so it can meet the demands for interment, gravesite maintenance and related essential elements of cemetery operations. This request includes \$34.5 million for the National Shrine Initiative to ensure that our national cemeteries meet or exceed the highest standards of appearance required by their status as national shrines.

The national shrine funds would be used, among other things, to maintain:

- occupied graves;
- developed acreage;
- historic structures; and
- cemetery infrastructure

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

State Cemetery Grant Programs

The State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP) complements the National Cemetery Administration's mission to establish gravesites for veterans in areas where it cannot fully respond to the burial needs of veterans. Several incentives are in place to assist states in this effort. For example, the NCA can provide up to 100 percent of the development cost for an approved cemetery project, including establishing a new cemetery and expanding or improving an established state or tribal organization veterans' cemetery. New equipment, such as mowers and backhoes, can be provided for new cemeteries. In addition, the Department of Veterans' Affairs may also provide operating grants to help cemeteries achieve national shrine standards.

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

With the enactment of the "Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 1998," the NCA has been able to strengthen its partnership with states and increase burial services to veterans, especially those living in less densely populated areas without access to a nearby national cemetery. Through FY 2010, the state grant program has established 75 state veteran's cemeteries in 40 states and U.S. territories. Furthermore, in FY 2011 VA awarded its first state cemetery grant to a tribal organization.

The Independent Budget veteran's service organizations recommend that Congress fund the State Cemetery Grants Program at \$48 million for FY 2015. The IBVSOs believe that this small increase in funding will help the National Cemetery Administration meet the needs of the State Cemetery Grant Program, as its expected demand will continue to rise through 2017. Furthermore, this funding level will allow the NCA to continue to expand in an effort of reaching its goal of serving 94 percent of the nation's veteran population by 2015.

Veteran's Burial Benefits

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

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

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

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

In order to bring the benefit back up to its original intended value, the payment for service-connected burial allowance should be increased to \$6,160, the non-service-connected burial allowance should be increased to \$1,918 and the plot allowance should be increased to \$1,150. The IBVSOs

believe Congress should divide the burial benefits into two categories: veterans within the accessibility model and veterans outside the accessibility model.

Congress should increase the plot allowance from \$700 to \$1,150 for all eligible veterans and expand the eligibility for the plot allowance for all veterans who would be eligible for burial in a national cemetery, not just those who served during wartime. Congress should increase the service-connected burial benefits from \$2,000 to \$6,160 for veterans outside the radius threshold and to \$2,793 for veterans inside the radius threshold.

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

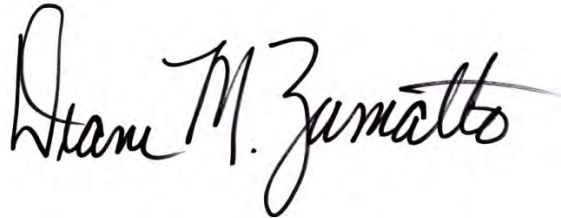
12 March 2014

The Honorable Representative Jeff Miller, Chairman
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Miller:

Neither AMVETS nor I have received any federal grants or contracts, during this year or in the last two years, from any agency or program relevant to the 12 March 2014, House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2015.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diane M. Zumatto". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "D" and a long, sweeping underline.

Diane M. Zumatto
AMVETS National Legislative Director

Biographical Sketch

Diane M. Zumatto of Spotsylvania, VA joined AMVETS as their National Legislative Director in August 2011. Ms. Zumatto, a native New Yorker and the daughter of immigrant parents decided to follow in her family's footsteps by joining the military. Ms. Zumatto is a former Women's Army Corps (WAC) member who was stationed in Germany. Zumatto was married to a CW4 aviator in the Washington Army National Guard and is the mother of four adult children. Ms. Zumatto is extremely proud that two of her children have chosen to follow her footsteps into military service.

Ms. Zumatto has more than 20 years of experience working with a variety of non-profits in increasingly more challenging positions, including: the American Museum of Natural History; the National Federation of Independent Business; the Tacoma-Pierce County Board of Realtors; the Washington State Association of Fire Chiefs; Saint Martin's College; the James Monroe Museum; the Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield and the Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States. Diane's non-profit experience is extremely well-rounded as she has variously served in both staff and volunteer positions including as a board member and consultant.

After receiving her B.A. in Historic Preservation from the University of Mary Washington in 2005, Diane decided to diversify her experience by spending some time in the 'for-profit' community. Realizing that her creativity, energy and passion were not being effectively challenged, she left the world of corporate America and returned to non-profit organization.

AMVETS National Headquarters
4647 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland 20706-4380
Business Phone: (301) 683-4016
dzumatto@amvets.org