

**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) 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.