

Statement

of the

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE DIRECTORS
OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Oversight Hearing

on

The National Cemetery Administration

before the

**Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and
Memorial Affairs**

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Presented by

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President, NASDVA
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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA) I am honored to have this opportunity to testify this morning and present the views of the State Directors of all fifty states, commonwealths and territories.

I appreciate the opportunity to familiarize Congress with the role of the State Departments of Veterans Affairs (SDVAs) in complementing the efforts of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) to honor veterans with a final resting place and lasting memorial to commemorate their service. We are neither stakeholders nor Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs); we are governmental partners with the federal VA in providing memorial services to veterans.

Memorial Affairs is an area in which the states have been highly effective participants with federal VA since the inception of the State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP) in 1978. The SCGP is well managed and enormously successful, having awarded 139 grants with a cumulative expenditure of only \$215 million. This program has made possible the establishment, expansion or improvement of 62 veterans' cemeteries in 32 states and Guam. It has allowed us to provide gravesites for veterans in those areas where VA's national cemeteries are unable to fully meet veterans' burial needs.

NASDVA strongly supports an increase in funding for the State Cemetery Grant Program to address the construction application backlog.

Increased Funding for State Veterans' Cemetery Grant Program (SCGP). The SCGP has greatly expanded the SDVAs' ability to provide gravesites for veterans and their eligible family members, particularly in rural and remote areas of the country. Additionally, state veterans' cemeteries serve areas that have concentrated military/veteran/retiree populations such as Fort Campbell and Fort Knox, Kentucky, as well as areas with moderate-sized population centers like Memphis, Nashville, Little Rock, and Las Vegas. Interments in state veterans' cemeteries have grown 36% and the number of state veterans' cemeteries have increased by 38% since 1999. These increases were made possible by the SCGP. However, the FY06 \$32M proposed appropriation is insufficient to address the 40 pre-applications for establishment of new cemeteries and expansion and/or improvement of existing cemeteries, with outstanding projects totaling \$160M. Obviously, this constrains the design of cemeteries and contributes to a backlog for grant funding. Thus, we strongly recommend that the SCGP funding be increased to at least \$50M in the FY06 budget with annual increases matching projected growth for this small but vital program.

NASDVA supports H.R. 831, which recommends an increase in the plot allowance for all veterans to \$1,000 per interment.

Increase in Plot Allowance. The operational costs of state veterans' cemeteries add to the fiscal burden of many SDVAs. The average operational cost per interment in a state veterans' cemetery is approximately \$2,000. The current plot allowance of \$300 per qualified interment provides ~15% of the overall cost. NASDVA recommends the plot allowance be increased to \$1,000, as reflected in H.R. 831 introduced by Representative Waters, in order to offset operational costs. The increase should also apply to the plot allowance for veterans' interment in private cemeteries to help defray costs for family members at the time of a veteran's death.

NASDVA recommends expansion of eligibility criteria for interment in national cemeteries to include certain reservists and guard members who served in the All Volunteer Force.

Eligibility for Interment in National Cemeteries. The nation has an obligation to honor and memorialize the service of Reserve Component and National Guard members for their military service in the All Volunteer Force by providing them with a final resting place in veterans' cemeteries. Currently eligibility for interment in national cemeteries is limited to those reservists and guard members who have earned veteran status by being "federalized," are retired or those who suffer an injury or disease while performing training. This leaves a large number of reservists and guard members ineligible. Additionally, Title 38 USCS § 2408 prohibits the SCGP approving grants for the construction, expansion or improvement of state veterans' cemeteries if the state inters ineligible reservists and guard members in their veterans' cemeteries.

We believe it is time to amend Title 38 USCS § 2402, which addresses interment eligibility, to allow the interment "*of a person who originally enlisted in the Reserve Component or National Guard on or after July 1, 1973 and is currently serving or was discharged or released there from under conditions other than dishonorable*" in national cemeteries. This provision would also allow interment in state veterans cemeteries. An amendment expanding eligibility criteria as stated above would allow these deserving reservists and guard members to be interred in both national and state cemeteries without jeopardizing access to grants under the SCGP.

NASDVA recommends the addition of an Operational Grant Program under the SCGP to support state operational costs.

Establishment of a State Veterans' Cemetery Operations Grant Program. As previously covered, the SCGP provides states construction grants for veterans' cemeteries and a limited plot allowance is received to partially offset the cost of interment. VA has devoted significant resources to its "National Shrine Commitment," and state cemeteries are now required to meet national standards. Most "national shrine"-type projects are considered maintenance and repair (such as raising and re-aligning headstones) so they are the responsibility of the states and cannot be funded under grants. Increased Federal support would help ensure that standards of maintenance are more consistent from state to state. Operational costs for both state and national cemeteries continue to rise. Funding for the operation of the National Cemetery Administration has appropriately increased with each budget cycle. However, once a state establishes a state veterans' cemetery there is no further source of federal funding to defer operational costs other than plot allowance. NASDVA recommends the establishment of an operational grant under the purview of the SCGP to assist state veterans' cemeteries with operational costs.

Committal Service and Burial Honors. The committal service is a significant emotional occasion for family and friends. It is the final act of respect to the veteran for his or her service. I have attended the burial of many veterans and have witnessed first-hand the importance of the ceremony and the honors rendered. Having proper protocol is critical to the reverence of this service. It warrants DOD fully supporting interments with a memorial honors team. Retirees should receive a full seven-member team.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee, we respect the important work that you are doing to improve support to veterans who answered the call to serve our country. NASDVA remains dedicated to doing our part. We firmly believe no veteran or eligible family member should be denied a final resting place or lasting memorial to commemorate his or her service to our nation. But we urge you to be mindful of the increasing financial challenge that states face, just as you address the fiscal challenge at the federal level. I would like to emphasize again, that we are partners with VA in the delivery of memorial services to our Nation's patriots.

This concludes my statement and I am happy to respond to your questions.