TIMELESS HONOR: REVIEWING CURRENT OPERATIONS OF OUR NATIONAL CEMETERIES

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

OF THE

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TIMELESS HONOR: REVIEWING CURRENT OPERATIONS OF OUR NATIONAL CEMETERIES

Tuesday, December 9, 2014

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS,
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:00 p.m., in Room 334, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Jon Runyan [chairman of the subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Runyan, Lamborn, Bilirakis, Titus, and O'Rourke.

Also present: Representative Stivers.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN JON RUNYAN

Mr. RUNYAN. Good afternoon everyone. This oversight hearing of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs will now come to order.

We are here today to examine the issues facing our military veterans cemeteries. Our goal in this hearing is to learn more about the operations of the National Cemetery Administration, Arlington National Cemetery and the American Battle Monuments Commission over the past year. As well as seek the organization commentary on several focused issues that I will be highlighting momentarily.

I would also like to welcome Mr. Walters as he has stepped up to perform duties as Acting Under Secretary of Memorial Affairs after the retirement of Under Secretary Muro and we look forward to hearing about his vision for overseeing the honorable mission at NCA.

Mr. Hallinan, Secretary Cleland, it is also nice to have you here as well.

The endeavors of these entities are among the most honorable in government and the people with these organizations work day in and day out to honor veterans and servicemembers with dignified burials, and to assist families and loved ones who must deal with a loss and tremendous grief.

As I said before, our Nation's solemn obligation to honor those who have served does not cease at the end of their service, or retirement, or ultimately upon their death, and it is the responsibility of these organizations to see this commitment through.

I would like to take a moment to note that today will be my last hearing as subcommittee chair and that I am extremely pleased

that today's focus is upon the tremendous work of these organizations. Your commitment to the timeless honor of our Nation's veterans and the compassionate missions of NCA, Arlington National Cemetery and ABMC.

I have been proud to work with all of you over the recent years, and I trust that you will continue to go above and beyond the care for our Nation and our national and our international shrines.

With that said, today the committee is interested in hearing from the National Cemetery Administration on several focused areas, including continued efforts to provide burial access initiatives for rural veterans, those planned for urban areas in other future outlets for burial options.

We will also hear about new regulation which was aimed to address an issue which was discussed at a previous hearing regarding requests for headstones and markers made by those other than next of kin.

I also look forward to hearing updates on Arlington National Cemetery and I note for the record Mr. Hallinan has done a tremendous job at ANC and we certainly want to make sure that the standards he and his predecessor Ms. Condon that put into place are carried forward. And I thank you Mr. Hallinan for your truly tireless commitment and your evident passion for the mission that you serve.

Additionally, I understand that 2014 is a significant commemorative year for the Nation for the American Battle Monuments Commission. We will be hearing updates on the far reaching operations of ABMC which operates in 16 foreign countries and many other locations.

Secretary Cleland, thank you for your service, for your continued service, and for being here today. ABMC is a remarkable organization and we appreciate hearing from you.

Now, I formally welcome our witness. As noted, these panelists play significant roles in ensuring that we as a Nation fulfill our responsibilities to honor those who have served all of us. We hope that through discussion and questions such as what will occur today we work collectively not only to meet the challenges, but always to exceed the standard.

First, Mr. Ronald Walters, Acting Secretary for Memorial Affairs is here on behalf of National Cemetery Administration which oversees 131 cemeteries nationwide. Mr. Walters is accompanied by Mr. Glenn Powers Deputy Under Secretary for field programs.

Next, we will have Mr. Patrick Hallinan, Executive Director of Army National Military Centers will also testified on panel 1. In his role Mr. Hallinan is charged of overseeing Arlington National Cemetery.

And finally, Secretary Max Cleland, the American Battle Monument Commission is with us today. Secretary Cleland will offer an update on ABMC's mission plan and recent commemorations.

We will also be hearing from a second panel including Ms. Ami Neiberger-Miller who is the Director of Outreach and Education for Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. And Ms. Diane Zumatto, the National Legislative Director for AMVETS.

With those introductions complete, I also thank the member who is not on this committee, but who has expressed an interest in this

hearing topic. I would like to ask unanimous consent that Representative Stivers, who is not here yet, be allowed to participate in this hearing.

Hearing no objection, so ordered.

Thank you all for being with us today and I now yield to the ranking member for her opening statements.

[The prepared statement of Jon Runyan appears in the Appendix]

OPENING STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER DINA TITUS

Ms. TITUS. Well, thank you Mr. Chairman and thank you for holding this hearing.

I guess this is our grand finale, I suspect this will be the last time that our subcommittee meets during this session. And I want to thank you for your leadership and tell you what a pleasure it has been to work with you and your staff on this committee. I think veterans have been well served by your bipartisan, fair and compassionate approach to these issues. So, yes——

Mr. RUNYAN. I want to thank you for that also because it is a two-way street. Thank you for your commitment and your passion.

Ms. TITUS. Well, thank you. I also want to thank the witnesses for being here. It is a special treat to see Secretary Cleland, a long time friend from Georgia, so welcome to all of you. I know that you share our feelings that a proper burial for our Nation's veterans and their families is a solemn obligation that we need to uphold.

The National Cemetery Administration has grown dramatically since its creation in 1862 and only 14 cemeteries were created to serve as resting places for our veterans after the war between the States.

The administration has also expanded its geographic diversity to better serve veterans across the country. I know recent legislation added to your ability to do that.

There are now 131 national cemeteries New York has seven, three other states have six and Puerto Rico has two. So your access has grown considerably, but that brings me to my point, there is still a problem where some of our veterans do not have the ability to be buried in national cemeteries that are close to home and accessible for their families.

This is especially true in the west. And the state with the largest veterans population that is not served by a national cemetery continues to be Nevada, which is the home to over 230,000 veterans, 153,000 of whom live in the Las Vegas area.

So in total, there are 11 States with the combined veteran population of 1.8 million who do not have an active national cemetery. And because most of those states are in the west, that is a lot of square miles that is covered that doesn't have that access.

Many of largest cities in the west like Las Vegas exceed the NCA's eligibility requirements of 80,000 veterans, they don't have a national cemetery. Now, you have responded by proposing placement of national columbaria in cities that are already served by a national cemetery to give access to urban areas. These urban initiatives are great, but you propose them for Los Angeles, which already has two national cemeteries, and New York that is served by three.

This is good, but it is really a matter of convenience, not a matter of necessity. Those cities may not have perfect access, but they are certainly in a lot better shape than a veteran in Las Vegas who has got to travel four hours to California in Bakersfield to get to a national cemetery. In Salt Lake City, you have to travel eight hours for a burial and the closest national cemetery in Denver. So before you place more of these facilities of convenience, I would like for us to look a little closer at cities that exceed the 80,000 member requirement and see if we might not want to put some facilities there.

So I look forward to hearing your plans for how to address that issue because as long as I am here, I am not going to let it go. I am going to keep bringing it up and appreciate working with you on it.

A couple of other specific issues I hope that we can address. One is that last March I sent a letter to then-Secretary Shinseki commending him for allowing same-sex burials of couples in national cemeteries. We need a policy on that. Right now it is rather capricious, it is case by case. And even if it works for a national cemetery, the state cemeteries have different policies and that doesn't seem to be fair to me to our veterans and their families.

And finally something that has just recently come to my attention, is that veterans who serve in the Armed Services are at a disadvantage in another way. If you are the spouse of a veteran and you pass away, you can be buried in a veteran cemetery even if the veteran is still alive so that family members will be able to stay together.

Unfortunately, current law prohibits the VA from burying a family member of an active duty serviceman who passes away while in the service. So I think that is something that we also need to look at and work on legislation to correct, because some of these things only make it fair for veterans and their families,—all veterans and their families. And dealing with them one way in national cemeteries, another in state, and on a case-by-case basis. Let's work together to create a policy.

So I look forward to hearing all of your testimony and especially also from the Battle Monuments Commission to how certain cut backs and resources will effect the service that you provide.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MS. TITUS APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. I thank the gentlelady.

I advise the witnesses that your complete and written statements will be entered into the hearing record.

And we are going to move on to our first witness. From the NCAA—NCA football on the mind for some reason.

Mr. Walters, you are now recognized for 5 minutes for your testimony.

STATEMENTS OF RONALD E. WALTERS, ACTING UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, ACCOMPANIED BY GLEN POWERS, DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR FIELD PROGRAMS, NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF RONALD E. WALTERS

Mr. WALTERS. Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus and distinguished members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide a review the National Cemetery Administration's operations and our plans for continuing to meet the needs of veterans and their families.

I am accompanied today by Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs. I would also like to acknowledge our partners from the Army National Military Cemeteries and the American Battle Monuments Commission. Our shared commitment to honor and memorialize our Nation's veterans is strengthened through our continued partnership.

Mr. Chairman, under Secretary McDonald's leadership, the department recently launched MyVA, an ambitious effort to organize the department into one that is centered around our customer, the veteran. It is this is focus that has defined and will continue to define NCA into the future.

Consistent with the MyVA effort, NCA measures success against the ultimate outcome for the veteran. Direct feedback from our customers lets us know if we are achieving those outcomes 2014. As reported in 2014 for the fifth consecutive time, NCA achieved the highest score ever recorded for a public or private organization on the American customer satisfaction index.

Thanks to our employees, NCA's score of 96 was 28 points above the 68 point average for Federal Government agencies. Our employees are NCA's best assets and we value their feedback.

This year I am pleased to report that NCA increased its participation rate in VA's all employee survey by 10 percent. NCA employee engagement, along with other VA employees is invaluable to the successful design of MyVA. This is especially true of NCA's workforce, 74 percent of which are veterans, the highest percentage in the Federal Government.

Our employees are also more than willing to reach out to those in need of a second chance. I am pleased to report that we continue our efforts to end veteran homelessness.

Two years ago, NCA established a cemetery caretaker apprenticeship program, designed to help homeless veterans. Our second class of apprentices just completed their training on December 5th. Since the program's inception, 32 formerly homeless veterans are now employed full time at NCA. Our third class of apprentices will convene this spring. Thanks to the dedication of our entire workforce, NCA successfully met increasing workload requirements in 2014.

Through our operation and maintenance program we maintained over 3.4 million grave sites, performed over 125,000 interments, issued over 600,000 presidential memorial certificates, provided

over 360,000 headstones, markers and medallions, and awarded $28.8 million to repair grave sites.

In addition, due to our careful planning and management of construction, and grant funds, no interruptions in burial services occurred at any national or state veteran cemetery. We continue to make progress on implementing new burial access policies previously approved by Congress.

NCA plans to eventually open 18 new cemeteries, which will provide new or enhanced access to burial options for over 2 million veterans. The new facilities include five new national cemeteries, two in Florida, which will open this year, and one each in Colorado, Nebraska and New York, as well as a national cemetery presence in eight highly rural and five urban locations.

We strive to better serve veterans and their families in the future. NCA recently received the results of an independent study on emerging burial practices that addresses green burials and additional ways to memorialize veterans. We will be happy to brief the committee on the study in greater detail after we have completed our review.

NCA is planning to expand the use of GIS GPS technology at our national cemeteries to enhance overall grave site accountability. This technology will provide state of the art mapping, grave site and headstone information and will serve as the basis for our ongoing grave site accountability efforts.

Finally, we intend to explore how to best share the rich history of our national cemeteries and the stories of our Nation's heroes with the public through a variety of approaches.

Mr. Chairman, we look forward to our continued work with this committee to care for those who shall have borne the battle, and we are greatly appreciative of your leadership and all of you have done four our Nation's veterans.

Thank you again for this opportunity to be here today, and I would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MR. RONALD WALTERS APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. Walters.

And with that we will now hear from Mr. Hallinan for his testimony. So, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF PATRICK K. HALLINAN

Mr. HALLINAN. Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on operations at Arlington National Cemetery. Since my testimony to this subcommittee a year ago, we continue to build upon our tremendous progress. We are setting industry standards for best practices becoming a center of excellence while working closely with our partner organizations that I am honored to testify with today.

I am proud to say that Arlington has one of the most stringent accountability processes of any national cemetery. We have leverage, cutting edge technology to develop an integrated solution that uses digital record of interment system with read, write, Web site capabilities to provide real time mapping updates and a common operational picture of activities at the cemetery.

Our interment service system performs systematic backups, redundant identification and burial location checks, it provides access to all digitized burial records, it stores photographs of the caskets and the urns, and each electronic interment record. It has a headstone design in ordering functionality. And most of all, it enforces the strictest chain of custody of any Federal cemetery.

The ANC mapping system tracks grave site availability, field operational status, deconflicts funeral procession routes, while also containing grave site and headstone GPS locations, which are accurate to within three centimeters.

These systems in concert ensure accountability, and efficiency, and operations at Arlington Cemetery. To keep up with the ever-increasing pace of requests for burial at Arlington, we have hired additional schedulers to reduce wait times. And we continue to make every effort to ensure our employees are trained to the highest standards when dealing with families, and the public, treating each with respect and sensitivity.

As we look to improve the appearance and operations within the cemetery, we are working on several projects. In October, we began the renovation of our welcome center restrooms to improve our visitors' experience. We are currently renovating the basement of the welcome center to provide work spaces for our staff.

Another one of our goals for fiscal year 2015 is to redesign and improve the manner in which we gather and escort funeral processions. We are designing a new funeral procession queuing area for family vehicles which will make our funeral lineup much more intuitive and easier to negotiate.

I am also pleased to inform the subcommittee of planning and design efforts that are well underway with the establishment of an ossuary, called the Tomb of Remembrance. This project will allow us to provide the Nation with a dignified place to provide final disposition of cremated remains which may be commingled or unidentified.

In May 2014, we refurbished the display room of the Memorial Amphitheater with new exhibits which included museum-quality cases to properly protect items gifted to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

We have recently completed an Americans with Disability Act accessibility study that will help us program and execute projects to ensure that our national shrine is as accessible as possible for all those who wish to visit.

We are actively designing projects which will improve ADA access throughout the cemetery. The cemetery staff also continued to make progress repairing, replacing much of our dated utility infrastructure. In 2011, we identified approximately $74 million in deferred maintenance. To date we have spent $40 million for improvements to the water lines, the roads, the building and the HVAC systems.

We are committed to maintaining Arlington as an active cemetery for as long as possible for our Nation's military heroes. The Millennium Project is currently within budget and on schedule, to be completed in summer of 2016. This will provide the cemetery with an additional 27,282 burial spaces for both caskets and interments.

Arlington has begun the planning and design of southern expansion project. Once completed, both projects are expected to extend Arlington's operational longevity through the 2050s.

Mr. Chairman, as this is your last year on the subcommittee, I personally thank you for your leadership and dedicated support of Arlington during your tenure. I commit that through diligent efforts, established procedures, repeatable processes and better technologies and institutionalized standards, Arlington will sustain and maintain the trust it has reclaimed.

We can ensure the Nation of this, every burial service at Arlington National Cemetery will continue to be conducted with the honor and dignity our serving members have earned, and their families will be treated with compassion and respect.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MR. PATRICK HALLINAN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. Hallinan.

With that, I recognize Secretary Cleland for his testimony.

STATEMENT OF HON. MAX CLELAND

Mr. CLELAND. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

May I say it is an honor to be with you again, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.

We will miss you, Mr. Chairman. We will miss talking football, we will miss talking our mission and we will miss as Ms. Titus said, your fair evenhandled approach to these issues in a bipartisan way. That is rare in this town and I for one really appreciate it. We will miss you.

Secondly, I wanted to be here with the people at this table, over the last few years I have really gotten to know them, and I can tell you Patrick Hallinan has been doing a great job out here. Now he is the tip of the spear. He is the guy leading the pack out there. I was asked by the Secretary of the Army about 4 years ago to head up an advisory committee on the Arlington National Cemetery. They have come light years in 4 years, I can tell you that.

Four years ago, they were operating off of 3 by 5 cards, now they have got good technology that could launch a satellite. I mean, it is quite amazing the transformation that they have put together out there.

The Veterans Administration, Mr. Chairman, I used to head and—many many years ago—and we are working very, very closely with the VA. I met with Secretary McDonald and we are in agreement, particularly on some sensitive issues regarding the Punchbowl Cemetery in Hawaii and visitor center experience there and we are working closely with all of the people at the table.

I might say, in terms of Arlington that the American Battle Monuments Commission has put no charge to Arlington, a charge to us, the American Battle Monuments Commission, a liaison officer there on site and he is doing a great job. He has been 17 years in western Europe and he is an added benefit I think for Arlington.

One of our staff members, Tom Sole, is on the advisory council for cemeteries that works at the VA, that meets at the VA, his name is Tom Sole.

I have with me today people who have labored in the vineyard of the American Battle Monuments Commission a long time. Chris Philpot, our chief financial officer and Mike Conley, our administrative officer, we are just honored to be with him today.

I would say, Mr. Chairman, basically that last night I saw the movie based on the Laura Hillenbrand book Unbroken. And it was a powerful testimony of one man's incredible endurance in World War II, Louis Zamperini, unbelievable, an unbelievable story. But the amazing thing about it is when you think he was one of the 16 million men and women caught up in World War II that occurred on what six of the seven continents, it was worldwide, worldwide conflagration. That expanded the work of the American Battle Monuments Commission.

We now have 125,000 servicemembers buried in at least 14 different Nations. We have 95,000 names of the missing from World War I and World War II on our Tablets of the Missing. You see a movie like Unbroken and you just realize wow, why you are in this business, General Pershing said and we like to quote at the American Battle Monuments Commission, "the time will not dim the glory of their deeds."

Mr. Chairman, I will be glad to answer any questions. The one issue that the Congress gave the American Battle Monuments Commission was Clark Cemetery. En route to Vietnam in 1967, I went by the old Clark Air Base en route to Vietnam, it is now closed. The Philippine Government asked the American military to leave a number of years ago. That left Clark air field base cemetery, which had been around almost 100 years with about 8,000 interments, men, women, children dependents, unattended.

And so, the Congress gave that mission to the American Battle Monuments Commission. We have taken that mission seriously, we are in it with both feet. We are doing an assessment of what it will take to bring that cemetery up to respectable standards. It is not going to be the Arlington of the Pacific. It is not going to be one of our topnotch cemeteries, but we will maintain it with dignity, but that is going to cost some money. So we will be coming back to you in a couple of years for that. Now we are on that case and burials have begun again.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. MAX CLELAND APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. I know that was one of the issues that was in the forefront when I first took this position.

With that we will start a round of questioning and this question is really for the whole panel, the collective expertise at the NCA, Army National Cemeteries, and ABMC is unique and frankly I want to say impressive. And each organization must meet strict standards to properly honor those who served the Nation.

Mr. Hallinan touched on the topic of information sharing and best practices and the secretary also touched on that. And I would like to think that is tremendously valuable and should be encouraged.

How do each of your organizations share the information and innovation? And how did that relationship of collaboration begin?

Start with Mr. Walters.

Mr. WALTERS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Well, we obviously work very, very closely with Army and the American Battle Monuments Commission in our shared mission to serve veterans. For starters, both organizations have a representative on our advisory committee on NCA's advisory committee and their input on that committee, which ranges over a variety of issues, we have found extremely helpful over the years.

With Army, we have also established a board that meets two times a year to discuss areas of mutual interest and to share best practices. For example, Mr. Hallinan mentioned the use of GIS, GPS technology. It is something that the National Cemetery Administration is beginning to use. And we can certainly learn best practices from Arlington's success in that regard. I would also submit that there are many things that NCA has shared with Arlington that has worked equally well in their favor.

With ABMC, we are currently working on a project to construct an interpretive center at the Punchbowl in Hawaii. In fact, Mr. Powers was recently at the Punchbowl to check on the progress of that. So we have many collaborative efforts with ABMC as well to share in the historical aspects of our Nation's veterans at our cemetery grounds.

Mr. RUNYAN. Mr. Hallinan, anything to add?

Mr. HALLINAN. Mr. Chairman, in the direct answer to the question how did it all begin the efforts towards communication and collaboration. I formerly worked with Mr. Ron Walters and the former-Under Secretary, Steve Muro for 33 years with NCA.

When I came over to Arlington in 2010 during difficult and challenging times, one of the first things I did was create a written memorandum of agreement between both agencies, that the Secretary of the Army approved. So we took advantage of training that was ongoing, standards and measures that had been put in place, based on those 30 something, 33 years, decades worth of experience. So that relationship was there. And we just strengthened that relationship and continued to share over the last couple of years.

My relationship with ABMC, the former-Senator of Cleland is a member of our advisory committee. He was also my old boss when I worked at the VA so we have known each other for many years, both professionally and as veterans. So the relationship professionally and personally was there. We reached out and signed a written MOU with ABMC and set up meetings where we can share some of these best practices that the committee is aware of what we have done with technology, what we have done with standard operating procedures, what we have done to train our staff for sensitivity when dealing with families.

So the communications are in place, the mechanisms are in place, the vehicles are there, we are working together. As Mr. Cleland pointed out, he is assigned to a permanent liaison because that is part of my staff that sits right outside my office, actively engaged, proactively engaged looking at what we are doing with technology, at the same time sharing their wealth of experience on teaching the history of those who have worn the uniform.

So across the board here at this table and going forward into the future, excellent working relationship that has been documented that is in place, even when we are gone.

Thank you.

Mr. RUNYAN. Secretary Cleland, do you have anything to add?

Ms. CLELAND. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

Actually, the corporation between these agencies is one of the things I am most proud of. Hadn't always been that way. As you well know, it is unusual for a government agency to work with another government agency because budgets and policies usually stovepiped and everything is lined up to where you are accountable to your Congressional counterparts and oversight people, and you don't really talk to your colleagues, even though they are in the same business.

We are in the same business all of us. We are in the business of honoring those who have served, particularly when they get killed in action and particularly when they die, and looking after their families. So that is the business we are in.

I made sure that Patrick Hallinan and his associate Renea Yates came over to the 70th anniversary of the Normandy invasion. We were there, all of us. They were with the commission, with the President of the United States and then on that June 6th of this year.

Then the next day they went back for a professional tour to look at the cemetery at Normandy, and especially the interpretive center that we have there that we think is world class. Arlington is now looking at that kind of thing themselves. So there is a massive change back and forth. Our computer people, our IT people have shared information for a number of years.

In terms of the VA, like I mentioned, I met with Secretary McDonald. We have memorial where the VA has cemeteries, it is unique. But there in the Punchbowl cemetery—I was just out there Veterans Day, the VA has been out there the last few days, so we are working closely with them on that unique opportunity to work together to magnify the interpretive experience and make sure that the experience at the Punchbowl is something that future generations can grasp.

So I am proud to work with these folks and they are the best in the business as far as I can tell.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you for that.

My time has expired, but I just want to say one thing, because I think what you all do is unique and that there is a personal relationship there with a lot of good professional structure around it. And I just wanted to highlight that point.

So with that I will yield to the ranking member.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you.

Mr. Walters, I would like to talk to you about that urban initiative program and ask you maybe you can explain the justification of why you don't include urban areas that have people who have a difficulty getting to State cemeteries, if they don't have a Federal cemetery. Like in Las Vegas, you have to go out to Boulder City. If you take public transit that takes you 2 hours and you still have to walk 6 miles. So there are any little widows who can make that

trip. So why wouldn't those kind of urban areas be considered for this initiative?

Mr. WALTERS. The purpose of the urban initiative, at least as it is defined now, is to provide ancillary service to existing national cemeteries where we have data that shows that there are problems with time and distance barriers at those locations.

We have five very specific criteria against which we evaluate a potential location for the placement of a columbaria-only cemetery. And again, it is designed to supplement the national cemeteries and to address gaps in service that our customers are telling us through formal surveys and other means and other feedback.

Ms. TITUS. But would it make sense to expanding that to also include access to the state cemetery when there is no national cemetery?

Mr. WALTERS. Well, I think certainly it makes sense to begin to engage those who use state cemeteries and bury loved ones in state cemeteries similar to the way we are doing with national cemeteries. I think from that point on we could then examine whether or not it is most appropriate for the VA to step in to provide those columbaria-only facilities or if we can work with the states to either provide them or perhaps to have is a better rationale for the placement of the cemeteries to begin with at the state level.

Ms. TITUS. Do you think there is something in the funding formula that that discriminates against location of these cemeteries in the west that could be addressed?

Mr. WALTERS. In the state grant funding formula?

Ms. TITUS. No, or in the location of a National cemetery funding formula.

Mr. WALTERS. Absolutely not. There is no formula for the allocation of money. What determines the allocation of money for the placement of new national cemeteries is our access policies, which is wherever we have 80,000 veterans within a 75 mile radius of a proposed site, that is where we place a new national cemetery, regardless of what state it is in or whether it cross-cuts states or other factors.

Ms. TITUS. Well it doesn't seem to be working very well in the west, does it? Because they have more than 80,000 veterans in Las Vegas.

Mr. WALTERS. Well, yes, ma'am. As you know, I mean our access policies at this point consider veterans covered with a burial option if they have convenient access to either a national or state cemetery.

Ms. TITUS. I would argue that that is not a convenient access if you have to ride 2 hours each way on mass transit and walk 6 miles, that is not very convenient.

Mr. WALTERS. Our access standard does not take into account driving time and distance, it is mileage. My understanding is Boulder City is approximately 30 miles from Las Vegas. I am not aware of what the driving time would be.

I think the bottom line, ma'am, is that we do not consider burial in a state cemetery to be an inferior option to being buried in a national cemetery.

Ms. TITUS. If you had that choice, Mr. Walters, would you rather by buried in a state cemetery or a national cemetery?

Mr. WALTERS. I would be prefer to be buried in a place that is a national shrine and states can achieve national shrine standing and be cared for by individuals who are committed to the perpetual care of our Nation's heroes.

Ms. TITUS. Let me ask you this, and I think the little cemetery in Boulder City is great, but how much oversight do you have on state cemeteries after you provide some of the funding, because state cemeteries vary very much in terms of quality, in terms of policy, in terms of burial of same-sex couples.

Do you go back and oversee these or once you give the money you are just going to trust the state veterans association to be sure they keep the national standard?

Mr. WALTERS. No, ma'am. We have a fairly rigorous compliance review program which we just revamped about a year or so ago where we go to state facilities and we apply the same scorecard, the same operational standards, and measures that we do to our national cemeteries to the States where applicable. Obviously, there are some criterion that are on applicability to Federal facilities. But we do we view the States, we have scorecards for them, we give them opportunities to submit corrective action plans in those instances where we find shortcomings and we work with them to, you know, come to closure on problems.

If I may mention one other thing about the acceptance of state cemeteries, we recently conducted the first ever customer satisfaction survey with those who use state cemeteries and buried their loved ones in state cemeteries. We don't have the full results, but we were able to extract some overall results that 98 percent of the respondents believe the appearance of those cemeteries, the state cemeteries with excellent; 95 percent agreed that the quality of service provided at the state facilities was excellent and 98 percent said that they would recommend the state cemetery to a family member.

Ms. TITUS. You know, I appreciate that. I think those are good statistics. My time is up. That is like asking a person in an ice cream store who is eating ice cream if they like ice cream. You are not asking other people who have chosen not to use that facility what the reason is and what they think about it.

So I just worry about state cemeteries having different policies in different states, just like your homeless program, that is a great program, but it is only in national cemeteries, it is not in state cemeteries.

So I just think we need to work together on trying to fix that.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you.

I recognize Mr. Bilirakis.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate it.

And I want to thank you also, Mr. Chairman, for your service, you were an all-pro on the field, on the football field, a champion for our veterans and I really appreciate it. A tremendous advocate. Thank you.

And I want Senator—first of all thank you for your service to our country. I also visited, I got an opportunity to visit the Clark cemetery in the Philippines. I want to also thank the VFW and the other service organizations who have maintained the cemetery up

until now, they have done an outstanding job. And again, the private funding has come from our veterans over the years.

I have a question for Mr. Walters. There have been a few instances in the past where individuals have highlighted concerns to the committee on specific sites or specific issues and my constituents have come to me as well. For example, in one instance a visitor observed a raise and a realign where prone headstones appeared as though they had been run over by construction vehicles.

The committee has largely found the NCA to be very responsive when contacted on these issues in the last few years. My question is how do individuals, how do our constituents who visit national cemeteries raise concerns to NCA? And what actions are taken upon receiving those complaints or questions?

Mr. WALTERS. Yes. And thank you for the question. We have a variety of forms through which those who visit our cemeteries can voice concerns, beginning with complaint logs that are maintained at the cemeteries. If an individual has a concern about something that he or she encountered, whether it be the physical appearance of a cemetery or the service that was received, they can record in the complaint log their observations.

That complaint log is kept and it is reviewed through our organizational assessment improvement program and all of the complaints are followed up on in a timely manner.

Of course there are other ways to do it. We have received a variety of letters from individuals expressing concerns about specific issues at cemeteries and we apply the same level of aggressive resolution to those complaints as well.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Do you respond to individuals?

Mr. WALTERS. Oh, yes, sir. We respond to individual letters absolutely. If not ——

Mr. BILIRAKIS. How long does it take? Is it on a timely basis? Give me an example of how long it takes to respond?

Mr. WALTERS. Sure, I think it would depend on the nature of the complaint and how quickly we can resolve it. We usually try to put out an interim response at first so say we are working on the issue, that usually goes out if we send one within a few days. And then the actual resolution can vary depending again on the nature of the issue.

There was an issue recently at Riverside National Cemetery, for example, where we got contractors that were treating headstones and the grounds in a manner that was inconsistent with what we would regard as national shrines.

This complaint came to us. We acted very aggressively. We corrected the situation. And in fact, we added language referred to as a dignity clause to all of our national shrine contracts where contractors now have to be especially conscious of what they are doing at our grave sites to make sure they are honoring the dignity of the burials.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you very much.

I have one more question, Mr. Chairman.

You testified, Mr. Walters, on the current NCA proposed rule and implementation of the dignified burial act of 2012; it is my understanding that the National Funeral Directors Association expressed concern with one of the details of the proposed rule.

Under previous rules funeral homes were able to apply directly to the VA for partial reimbursement or other associated benefit. In their view this allowed funeral homes to easily provide the veteran with a timely and dignified burial and that is what I am concerned about. The convenience for the family and of course for the veteran. Without any concern about not being compensated for their services.

Additionally, in situations without a next of kin under the proposed rule, funeral directors would have to apply to become the authorized representative, which would add difficulty and additional cost to a process where funeral directors are trying to honor our Nation's fallen heroes.

Can you explain why NCA is not allowing funeral homes to apply directly to the VA? Were there any comments to the provision supporting or opposing this change during the public comment period?

And I don't want to delay the process for the families, particularly when there is no next of kin. So if you could elaborate on that, I would really appreciate it?

Mr. WALTERS. Congressman Bilirakis, the administration of that particular program falls under the Veterans Benefits Administration so I would be happy to for the record provide a response.

I will say that, you know, the intent of the direct payment to the veteran was to do precisely what I thought you said toward the end of your comment, which is to make sure that the family receives the money as quickly as possible and then to pay their expenses with it.

I also know that under Secretary Hickey's leadership the automation of burial claims has been put into place such that nearly half of them at this point are processed that way without human intervention, which then frees up staff time to perform other work. And the processing time for those burial claims has been reduced from a peak of 190 days in February of 2013 to 64 days in December of 2014. But.

Again, sir, I will take the specific question.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Yeah, again my concern is there a lot of local funeral homes and they want to help out our families. I just don't want to delay the process and make it inconvenient for the families. Or if they don't have a next of kin, they can take care of it directly.

So I appreciate very much, Mr. Chairman.

Again, thank you for your service. We are going to miss you.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you. Thank you very much.

I recognize Mr. O'Rourke.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I also want to join my colleagues in thanking you for your service in the way that you have lead this committee. I have enjoyed working with you in my first term in Congress. I have learned a lot and look forward to watching the great things that you are going to do in the future after you leave this institution, so thank you.

To the Secretary, to Mr. Walters, first of all, I want to thank you for the great job that you do and that your team does. You have a new person in El Paso, Texas, the community that I have the honor of representing Amy Callahan is doing a terrific job, incredibly responsive, works well with our team, works well and is atten-

tive to the veterans and their families in El Paso. So through you I want to thank her and the team in El Paso who do a phernomenal job. Thank you.

Mr. WALTERS. Thank you, sir. I will pass that along.

Mr. O'ROURKE. And as was your predecessor Mr. Muro, you have been very responsive to us to meet personally. We are able to talk on the phone about concerns before they become real problems and so I want to thank you for that as well.

I think the cemetery in El Paso at Fort Bliss is in many ways remarkable. It is very clean, well kept, a great staff. And the response I think you probably have the data to back it up in terms of the surveys from those customers that you serve has been great.

But as you know, there is one disconnect between the NCA, and El Paso, and our offices and that is the fact that El Paso is one of the three xeriscaped or water-wise I think is the term you use, cemeteries out of the 131 in the system. And it is deeply unpopular amongst those people whose opinion I care about the most and that is the veterans, and their families, the widows, and widowers, the children, the descendants of those who are buried there.

You have approached this as an either or proposition, either we have turf and grass—and I think your argument is that when El Paso and Fort Bliss had that, it was suboptimal or you have xeriscaping, which is water-wise, doesn't require a lot of management or maintenance, it is cost efficient. And in the opinion of some, it is aesthetically pleasing.

So remind everybody when we talk about water-wise with xeriscaping, we are talking about crushed rock and dirt on ground, we are not talking about a desert landscaping. Although, there is some landscaping with shrubbery and some trees. But imagine you are in El Paso, Texas, visiting a family member who is there and it is 110 degrees outside, and you are asked to or want to kneel and you can't because you've asked to kneel on this crushed gravel.

I am looking for an option, some way that we can work together to get past what is unacceptable to my community. And we are also asking to know what the criteria are that you use to make these decisions. My understanding is only 3 out of 131. I don't know if Mr. Hallinan would be comfortable converting Arlington Cemetery into a water-wise facility to save money and time and maintenance costs. I am going to guess the answer is no.

And so our contention in El Paso is that if a water-wise NCA cemetery is not sufficient for the best in our system, then it should not be sufficient for El Paso. I want to get your comments and your thoughts on that and perhaps a suggested path on which we can work to resolve this situation for El Paso?

Mr. WALTERS. Sure. Thank you for the question Congressman O'Rourke.

Our decision to turf or xeriscape a cemetery is not arbitrary, it is based on a variety of factors, to include climate condition, as well as the availability of water.

In the case of El Paso, as you know, the decision to xeriscape that cemetery was based on a congressionally mandated study in 1999. The results of that study indicated that if El Paso were to be maintained as a national shrine, there was not a sufficient amount of water to do so. And the study recommended xeriscaping

the entire cemetery. At that point, we made the decision to make the investment to xeriscape the cemetery.

Mr. O'ROURKE. And if I could interrupt you because I only have 20 seconds, you are going me the history, I am asking for the future. How are we going to work together to resolve this situation? What we have today is unacceptable.

Mr. WALTERS. Okay. Well, just to say, I mean our survey results just to put them on the record, our survey results from those who are using the cemetery suggest a high degree of acceptance, but in answer to your question.

Mr. O'ROURKE. I would refer to my colleagues ice cream shop analogy. I don't know that we are asking those whose family members were already interred or buried at that cemetery who did not have a choice in whether it was converted from grass to rocks. And who are deeply disappointed in that and are asking me as their Federal representative to do something about it.

And what I get is the process that you used to arrive at this decision that is deeply unpopular and unacceptable to me and the people I represent.

What I am asking for now how can we work together to do something? Perhaps we cannot turf the entire cemetery. Perhaps there is some water-wise solution that is an improvement upon the crushed rocks that cover the grave cites that we have in El Paso at Fort Bliss today. But because I am out of time and because it probably involves a longer conversation I would just like to gain your commitment that we can work together to do that.

Mr. WALTERS. Absolutely. Congressman, we are always willing to work with you and your staff. We have done so in the past, we will continue to do that with you. I think a good launching point may very well be the study that UT El Paso is currently undertaking when they are examining soil conditions and perhaps coming up with some recommendations or thing that we can consider.

So absolutely we are more than willing to work with you and your staff.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Great.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you.

I recognize Mr. Stivers.

Mr. STIVERS. Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for accepting unanimous consent to allow me to sit in on this hearing. I really appreciate your leadership, it has been an honor to serve with you in Congress. I know that other than going to the University of Michigan you have had a distinguished career, I happen to be a Buckeye so that part, you know, I wish you would come to Ohio State.

Mr. RUNYAN. Good luck in the playoffs.

Mr. STIVERS. But, I really do appreciate the way you treated our veterans and the way you treated this committee and worked with both sides to come to common ground.

Thank you for allowing me to be here.

I have a couple of questions for Mr. Walters and then I have one question with Mr. Hallinan.

Mr. Walters, I appreciate your new October 1st draft of regulation that would deal with next of kin. Frankly, the old policy

caused homeless veterans and folks whose next of kin couldn't be identified because they had served at a conflict much further back in our history, real hassles in getting headstones. So I appreciate the updating version.

There are only a few questions that I have about it, because there are some folks that are historians and other Archivists that are interested in helping and there are a few pieces of language that they don't quite understand and I wanted to talk with you about it.

The first part involves where you say any individual who provides documentation of such lawful duty basically can provide information on these headstones. A lot of the interested parties are having trouble understanding what the language of such lawful duty means. I assume it means of the duty of the VA to provide a headstone. But is there any way you could clarify that here in this hearing or in writing later?

Mr. WALTERS. To make sure, Congressman Stivers, that I get it right, I would prefer to answer that and submit it for the record.

Mr. STIVERS. I appreciate that and I knew that might be the result.

The second is your proposed rule creates an actual date on the calendar, it uses April 6th, 1917 the date we entered World War I, but as you know, our archival records and our procedures on archives actually say basically anything 62 years back and further they don't use a date on the calendar.

I really think it would make much more sense to have those two things be the same and use the archival records as 62 years back, instead of the drop dead date of April 6th, 1917, because, you know, consistency makes a lot of sense and I would ask you to take a look at whether you could consider that change as well.

Mr. WALTERS. Sure. We received 383 comments on this particular proposed rule and we are going through them right now and I am sure that is one of them.

In general, sir, what I will say is that our primarily motivation in establishing the April 1917 date was to really honor family members' wishes to the extent possible. If we establish the 62-year timeline, that would be in place through NARA, we are basically establishing a date of 1952 as the launching point. And we felt that family members would be alive for veterans who served prior to 1952.

So because of that, we thought it would just be best to move the date back to just say standard date of our entrance into World War I and then go from there.

Mr. STIVERS. And I certainly appreciate that.

I would ask you to look at it. Because certainly many of our veterans during the draft were more socioeconomically disadvantaged. There were more broken families. And so I just would ask you to take a look. If you can have consistency, I think it makes sense.

You know, I don't think the April 6, 1917, is the worst thing in the world, but I think consistency—one of the rules we need to live by up here is, if we can create things that are consistent, it just makes it easier for everybody. So please take a look at that.

And the last thing I would ask is if you could consider community—the sort of community of historians. Every State has a State

historic preservation officer. And if you can include some language about that. It is a State Governor-appointed position.

If you could, you know, allow those folks to be included in this by name and by spelling them out, I think it would be really helpful because there is one in every State. There is actually, I believe, one for federally recognized Indian tribes separately from our 50 States and the 4 territories as well.

So they are everywhere. And it is a position that could and should be, I think, recognized in this regulation. But I would ask you to take a look at it. I am not asking for a response to that, but take a look at that as well.

Mr. WALTERS. Sure. We would be happy to do that, sir.

Mr. STIVERS. Thank you so much.

And, Mr. Hallinan, I just wanted to thank you for the Tomb of Remembrance that I have worked on for almost 4 years here in Congress. I had a bill dealing with it. You guys took it and did it by regulation. And I appreciate what you are doing to implement that.

You mentioned it a little bit earlier in your comments, and I want to thank you because it sets forward a place so that what happened a few years ago where some unidentified remains of our men and women ended up in a landfill—this will make sure that never happens again. I really appreciate the efforts you have put in it, and I just wanted to say thank you.

Mr. HALLINAN. Well, Congressman, on behalf of my staff, you are most welcome. They exist. The only reason they have a job is to serve our Nation's heroes. And to people that wore the uniform, that was a sensitive subject. We understood your concern. We were out front. We have worked the process.

I am happy to update the committee that we will advertise that project in March of 2015. We anticipate a contract being awarded in April of 2015, with 180 days to start and complete that project. So October or November of 2015, I anticipate having a Tomb of Remembrance at Arlington.

Mr. STIVERS. I appreciate that.

Even our unidentified soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines, and even their fragments and remains deserve a place of honor. I really appreciate that.

Mr. HALLINAN. You are most welcome, sir.

Mr. STIVERS. Thank you.

Last I would like to thank Senator Cleland for employing one of my constituents, John Marshall. It is good to see John here. But I really appreciate you and what you do for our veterans. And thank you for serving our veterans that happen to be buried around the globe.

I happened to visit one of your cemeteries in France this year. It was very well kept up. I really appreciate that you take your mission seriously and honor our heroes, regardless of where they happen to have their final resting place.

Mr. CLELAND. Thank you very much, Mr. Congressman.

Mr. STIVERS. Thank you. I yield back the balance.

And I want to again thank the chairman and wish him great luck on his future. I know you have got great things.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you very much.

Mr. STIVERS. We will miss you as a blocker.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thanks.

I have one more question. I will open it up to the other members, also, if they have another one, or if they want another five, feel free.

Only because the first meeting that I had with Secretary McDonald—he sat down and he said something that really got the wheels turning. And I know Arlington's kind of strategic plan.

I want to address this really to Mr. Walters about NCA and strategic plan moving forward. Because specifically after these conflicts we are coming out of, are we prepared for the volume that we are going to have? And what studies, plans, do we have to be able to deal with this moving forward?

Mr. WALTERS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The National Cemetery Administration has a very robust strategic planning effort. As far as predicting the future gravesite need or interment rates, we use the Vet Pop 2011 model that we received from another office within the VA. That model provides us with veteran-level data at the county level.

Using that data, which is based on the 2010 census—using that data, we then look at historical patterns down to the individual cemetery level and make projections and assumptions 20, 30 years into the future. I will say that we have been historically extremely successful with these predictions.

In most years, we have a variance of about 1 percent from our projected interment rates, which, in turn, informs the need for additional gravesites and construction projects.

So any cohort in the future would be reflected in these models. We would reflect it in our utilization rates—our prior year utilization rates, and that would be translated into our future projections and our construction planning models.

As a result of our planning models, we have never had an interruption in burial service at a national cemetery, and we intend to continue that record.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you for that response. Because I know we all sit with what we deal with with VBA and VHA and how we are unable to predict a lot of that stuff. So thank you for that response.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you.

I would just ask Secretary Cleland if the typhoon that has recently hit the Philippines has an impact on our cemeteries there and what is happening, and, second, what you all are doing with Normandy and the French Government to have that site declared a UNESCO international heritage site and how that effects our cemeteries.

Mr. CLELAND. Thank you very much.

The last question I don't know the answer to, and I will call upon Mike Conley, who might know an answer to it.

The first question about the typhoons, typhoons hit the Philippines from time to time. Sometimes the trees are blown down. Gravesites are impacted.

So we are subject to the weather like anyone else. However, we have a great crew out there and a great leader, and they are always Johnny-on-the-spot in responding and setting things right.

Ms. TITUS. That is good to know. Thank you.

I would just be curious to know about the heritage site.

Mr. CLELAND. The heritage site—I will have to ask Mike Conley does he knowing anything about the heritage site at Normandy.

Mr. CONLEY. Ms. Titus, forgive my voice. I have got a cold.

But we are in contact with the UNESCO folks. Our overseas operations office in Gars just outside Paris has reviewed paperwork, and we are considering whether we want to endorse that.

Our concern, obviously, is that, if it is declared a world heritage site, that there is nothing in there that would prevent us from maintaining and improving upon the site as we deem appropriate as the years go ahead.

But clearly the nature of the events that happened there clearly fall under the criteria and deserve to be so recognized.

Ms. TITUS. I agree with that. Well, thank you.

Mr. RUNYAN. Mr. Secretary, can you identify him for the record, please.

Mr. CLELAND. That was Mike Conley, our chief administrative officer.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you very much.

Mr. O'Rourke.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Yeah. A question for Mr. Hallinan.

A constituent of mine and her husband are both eligible for burial at Arlington, but my understanding is that the rules do not allow them to reserve a plot next to each other and, if they do want to be buried together, they will be buried one on top of the other and they will share a headstone with one's name on one side, the other's on the other.

Is that a rule in place because of space limitations, in other words, you are not allowed to reserve a plot next to your spouse like you might at another national cemetery because I think it is 2050 that we are running out of room?

Mr. HALLINAN. Congressman, to answer your question, there were prior reservations at Arlington under the U.S. Army, which ended in 1962 by law. So there are no legal reservations anymore. Arlington is unique. It is a space issue.

There are different types of burial patterns at our national cemeteries, as Mr. Powers and Mr. Walters and former Senator Cleland are aware of. But that would be a driver to bury people side by side. To give them their own grave would quickly use up the remaining capacity at Arlington National Cemetery. So that was part of the process that developed.

But you are 100 percent accurate. Both are eligible. I am taking that as a given. But they would be buried together in the same gravesite. Whoever predeceases will go in first, and the remaining spouse, when he or she were to pass, would go in on top. They would share the information on a government headstone. Yes.

Mr. O'ROURKE. And is there a plan in place to add additional grounds post-2050.

Mr. HALLINAN. I don't want to say no, Congressman. I believe that, when we approach in that year of the decade, there may be some opportunities.

But it is very difficult in the area that we are in in Washington. We have taken—under the Millennium Project, we have taken space from Fort Myer—a possibility of looking at Fort Myer again.

But when one looks for available space outside of the current—the next expansion process, the southern expansion, you have to look at what is going to be gained by it. It is not just a matter of maximizing burial space. A place like Fort Myer is a place where the Caissons and military units and MDW support Arlington on a daily basis. It has a small footprint already.

Any future expansion will probably come at great financial cost. There may be land, you know, towards where the current Iwo Jima Memorial is now. But we are really starting to get out there.

And I am sure any interest we show beyond our current footprint and where we are going to go to 2050 will be rather difficult and a sensitive issue. But we are looking. We do project beyond, what comes after 2050 for Arlington.

Mr. O'ROURKE. And, lastly, for Mr. Walters. Thank you for your commitment to work with me. I really appreciate that. And while I feel very strongly about the position that we hold related to the cemetery, I do again want to commend you and your team for the way in which you take care of it. I think, again, it is very clean, looks really nice for what it is.

But I have just heard from too many veterans and their families at this point who desperately want something that is more accommodating for them as they pay tribute to their loved one. And so I know that there is a way that we can work together to get this done. So I appreciate your willingness to work with me on that.

Mr. WALTERS. We look forward to working with you, sir.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Thanks.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you.

And, with that, gentlemen, on behalf of the subcommittee, I thank you for your testimony. I wish you all success 2015. And you are now excused. And we will wait a few minutes to switch over the witness table.

At this time we welcome our second panel, Ms. Ami Neiberger-Miller, who is the Director of Outreach and Education for the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors; and Ms. Diane Zumatto, National Legislative Director for AMVETS. We appreciate your attendance here today. Your complete and written statements will be entered into the hearing record.

Ms. Neiberger-Miller, you are now recognized for 5 minutes for your testimony.

STATEMENT OF AMI NEIBERGER-MILLER

Ms. NEIBERGER-MILLER. Thank you.

I am pleased to submit this testimony on behalf of TAPS, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. TAPS is a nonprofit organization that provides comforting care to anyone grieving the death of someone who died while serving in our Armed Forces, regardless of where they died or how they died.

We appreciate the subcommittee's continuing interest in ensuring our Nation's veterans and servicemembers have final resting places that are honorable and well maintained. These issues touch my family. My brother was killed in action in Iraq and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery, and my father-in-law is also buried at Arlington.

We hope you will review our submitted testimony, which includes opinions on legislative initiatives related to national cemeteries and Arlington.

The scandal that enveloped the Department of Affairs also touched the National Cemetery Administration last year. Unfortunately, the previous Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs retired after an OIG report revealed he had engaged in prohibited practices and preferential treatment.

But new leadership is now in place, and we very much appreciate the opportunities we have had to meet with VA Secretary Robert McDonald and Under Secretary Sloan Gibson. We know they have a commitment to assisting survivors, and it is our hope that new VA leadership will move forward in a positive and honorable way.

We are pleased to report the number of pending burial allowance claims has declined significantly since last year at this hearing with 17,818 on last week's VA report. While these benefits do not route through the National Cemetery Administration, delay in their delivery hurts families by forcing them to delay settling estates and does impact their view of the VA.

At Arlington National Cemetery, we are in a different place today than we were even a year ago when surviving families were upset about the removal of mementos from gravesites at Section 60. Section 60 is where hundreds of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq or Afghanistan are buried, including my brother.

Superintendent Hallinan met with families and has extended a compromise permitting them to leave handcrafted objects and small laminated photos at gravesites. Initially, this was a pilot during the non-growing season last year, and the compromise was extended into the growing season and is still currently in place.

The families are very grateful for this compromise. They have worked to educate each other about the rules, and the majority follow them. A few still do not follow the policies, but the appearance of the section is much more uniform and improved. One town hall meeting was held earlier this year with families, and we are hopeful lines of communication will remain open between the families and the Administration.

Because some families were turned away on Memorial Day from Arlington due to logistics issues out on the bridge with security, we are also working with the cemetery leadership to help better distribute logistics information to survivors in advance of these major events. So no one is turned away.

We would like to see greater survivor involvement in an advisory capacity. No survivor has served on the advisory committee for Arlington National Cemetery since Janet Manion's death in April of 2012.

While the members of the committee all have exemplary military and veteran service credentials—and I should add the chair of that committee just testified on the previous panel—we believe their deliberations would benefit from the insight of a survivor's perspective.

We thank you for the opportunity to submit our testimony, and we welcome any questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF AMI NEIBERGER-MILLER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Ms. Neiberger-Miller.

With that, I recognize Ms. Zumatto for her testimony.

STATEMENT OF DIANE M. ZUMATTO

Ms. ZUMATTO. Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, on behalf of AMVETS, I thank you for the opportunity to assist you in the important job of overseeing our national cemeteries.

Previously my testimony before this committee has been somewhat limited to a repetition of facts and statistics. However, today's testimony will be much more heartfelt and personal.

Because I love history, am a trained historic preservationist, love my country, and grew up visiting and documenting cemeteries in the New England area, today's topic is important to me both personally and professionally.

I think it is safe to say that everybody in this room knows and appreciates the sacred responsibility entrusted to the National Cemetery Administration to honor the memory of America's military men and women.

I would like to set the stage briefly to convey the true importance of our national cemeteries not only to our Nation's veterans, but to all American citizens.

Historically, cemeteries, especially military cemeteries, were much more than established sites of burial with regimented internal layouts conducive to both the expression of personal grief and accepted societal funerary rituals.

Few individuals are aware, I believe, of some of the equally important social and political aspects of cemeteries, including promoting and preserving the individuality and status of the deceased, the setting aside of landscaped spaces in or near communities delineated by defined boundaries, the organized commemoration of significant events and/or persons, serving as places of beauty and tranquility where friends and family can gather, as expressions of national identity and pride, especially in the case of military cemeteries, and as sites of pilgrimage and permanence.

I am hopeful that this brief introduction has sparked a greater appreciation of historic national value of the many unique and irreplaceable cemeteries held in trust within the NCA system. The monuments, gravestones, architecture, landscape, and related memorial tributes within each NCA cemetery are richly steeped in history and represent the very foundations of these United States.

How can we do any less than our absolute best to develop and maintain these truly American shrines? After having spent several weeks this summer visiting national cemeteries—there were seven that I was able to get to in four different MSNs—my impression of NCA cemeteries and its employees is higher than ever.

Having had the rare opportunity for in-depth visits where I was able to observe every facet of cemetery operations, I was both moved and impressed with the care and professionalism at every level of the organization.

None of the cemeteries I visited displayed any blatant shortcomings that would be obvious to the casual observer. This level of attention to detail, dedication, and commitment to providing the highest quality of service to veterans and their families would not

be possible without positive role models and strong leadership throughout the NCA system.

I certainly acknowledge that perfection does not exist in this world and that I have not yet had the opportunity to visit every cemetery under the stewardship of the NCA. But given the resources, both human and financial, I must equally acknowledge that NCA continually strives to meet its most important obligation, providing dignified resting places for our Nation's veterans and their eligible family members.

This concludes my testimony. And I will be happy to answer your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF DIANE ZUMATTO APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you very much.

And we will begin a round of questions.

Ms. NEIBERGER-MILLER. TAPS has sought to inform surviving families who visit Arlington National Cemetery about the enhanced security procedures resulting in access constraints during major holidays and at a time when many families choose to visit their fallen loved ones.

How successful has TAPS outreach been, as your testimony noted several areas where TAPS has volunteered to assist in spreading word? And how do you think outreach could be more effective while also compassionate?

Ms. NEIBERGER-MILLER. Well, sir, I think for us it is about reaching out to our families and distributing information. We have made improvements in our survivor database so that we can better track our families around the burial location of their loved one.

One of the challenges is that many of the families who bury their loved ones at Arlington do not live in the Washington area. So unlike people who reside here, they are not familiar with the security precautions that occur when the President or the Vice President travel to an event.

And so sometimes those families, especially when they are coming in from out of town, get caught on the bridge or in very serious traffic issues and are not familiar with the security lockdown procedures. And so our role has been to compile the information and to distribute it by email to families.

I would say we still have some improvements that we are trying to make, but we are working hard at that. And we have also met with the Cemetery Administration over the summer to actually make some additional improvements because of some concerns over Memorial Day.

Mr. RUNYAN. And very similar to information. And I wanted to thank TAPS for participating in discussion with Gold Star families and Section 60 in particular.

You said in your testimony that it is an agreement and it is not a formal—do you have any suggestions on how to move forward and kind of ease that anxiety?

Ms. NEIBERGER-MILLER. Well, I think for all of us it has been about keeping the lines of communication open. You know, the situation a year ago, we had a group of very upset families.

And for our families to really talk with the Administration, to see them as people, for the Administration to meet them as people and

to look them in the eye and say, you know, "We want to work with you on this," that went a long way.

And so I think it became about how to humanize the conversation and then how to figure out what could work for everyone, recognizing that the cemetery has to be at a certain standard as a national shrine, but also recognizing that grieving is different today and, for some people, leaving an object or a photograph is extremely important, and, so, how could we work out something that would work for everyone.

And so the families have really done a lot, I think, to help educate each other, and they have kept those lines of communication open. And that has been key.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you.

Ms. Zumatto, you were talking about the consistency you have seen across your visits.

Is there anything that stood out to you when you visited the sites that was different, that wasn't—because the object is, obviously, to be uniform. Is there any specific things that stood out?

Ms. ZUMATTO. I am going to say not really. The seven sites that I visited—and they were not just brief run in and out. I usually spent a minimum of two days or more at each site. I just did not—I mean, I wasn't going through their records.

This was more observing—for instance, at Jefferson Barracks, I spent one day just at their training center. I spent another day at the scheduling office so I could see the process. And then I spent a day at the cemetery itself.

But every site that I went to I was truly—I was surprised, I think, by the care of the chain of custody, if you will. I had no idea what the process was like until I went to Jefferson Barracks, where I started, and the redundancy at every point to ensure that, you know, it was the right veteran and that the site where they were going to be interred was the right site.

I mean, they use maps. They draw—you know, this stone is here. This stone is here. Just the detail so that there are no errors is perhaps one of the things that really struck me. That, and, as I was riding around with different employees during my visits, I would constantly see—they would stop the vehicle if they saw somebody walking around who looked like they needed help or, if they saw a piece of trash in the road or, you know, in the cemetery itself, they just got out. They took care of it.

It was just really very reassuring to see that level of care at every step of the way.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you. Good to hear.

With that, I will yield to the ranking member, Ms. Titus.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you.

Thank you both for all the good work you do with families during this most difficult time.

I would ask Ms. Neiberger-Miller if you have the same experience dealing with people and talking to families that we heard reported in the surveys that the NCA does. They say their surveys show that 95 percent of the people are satisfied. It has got the best marks of any government agency.

Is that compatible with what you hear on the ground from families?

Ms. NEIBERGER-MILLER. We hear from families that they are often very satisfied with the burial process. Unfortunately, we do work with people who are traumatically bereaved. And so many of these people are struggling, also, with short-term memory loss issues or some other issues going on. They are often in a great state of shock.

These are people who died young, who were not expected to die, who often died in very violent ways. And so their family is often in a great degree of shock. The burial is often very quickly after the death. There is not a wait, typically, for an active duty service that is extremely long.

And so the family sometimes even needs the photographs or other things from the service to really recall it very well. And that is unfortunate, but they always will say that they feel their loved one was honored and that they feel that placement at Arlington or at a national cemetery honors their loved one's service and sacrifice for our country.

Ms. TITUS. Do you ever talk to families who feel like they don't live close enough to a national cemetery to be able to access it, so, they just resort to some other kind of more private funeral?

Ms. NEIBERGER-MILLER. Well, there are families sometimes who really have to make very difficult decisions also because this was someone who wasn't expected to die. So there was no family plan in place, per se, like their might be for, say, an older veteran like my father-in-law who knew for several decades he wanted to be buried at Arlington and told all of us that.

And so families sometimes don't always recognize the travel distances that they may be assuming or may not realize they want to visit as often as they do after a death. And that can be challenging for them to make a long-distance trip to go and visit a location. We don't hear often from families about that, but it certainly is something that is discussed sometimes.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you.

And, Ms. Zumatto, when you visited those seven cemeteries, did you visit any State cemeteries or just national?

Ms. ZUMATTO. I have not yet had the opportunity to visit a State cemetery. No, ma'am.

Ms. TITUS. Do you think some of your veterans would like to see more cemeteries in the west where they could be buried in a national cemetery, not just a State cemetery or some convenient facility?

Ms. ZUMATTO. Well, personally, just from my knowledge—not personal experience, but from research, if you will—I don't really believe that being buried in a State cemetery—a State veterans cemetery is any less honorable. I just don't see it as a negative.

If there is no National cemetery or if that National cemetery has no more available space, then, you know, I don't see why, as long as the State cemetery is being maintained to, you know, the shrine standard, that that should be an issue.

However, I did have a member tell me the other day about a problem in Alaska having to do with access. And, apparently, there are two national cemeteries in Alaska, one of which is only accessible by boat, and the other, apparently, is on an active military installation.

And the issue that he brought up was the fact that it is difficult, not everybody has access to a boat, but that, if there is any sort of security issues going on on the base, then the base is closed and then you can't access the cemetery.

But, as I say, as far as State cemeteries go, I haven't been to one. It is on my list. And I am going to continue visiting cemeteries.

Ms. TITUS. I just worry about policy varying from State to State, even with the checklist. For example, a same-sex couple might be able to get buried together in a State that recognizes it, but not in a State that doesn't, if it is a state cemetery, not a national cemetery.

So I think, while state cemeteries—I think the one in Nevada, in Boulder City, is great—I think there are still differences that we need to address. Appreciate it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. RUNYAN. Mr. O'Rourke.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Neiberger-Miller, thank you for your testimony. I really enjoy hearings like these that our chairman and ranking member put together.

Other than your testimony, I really didn't know about a lot of these issues. So I appreciate you bringing your perspective directly to us.

And, likewise, Ms. Zumatto. I really appreciate all of the work and time that you took to go to these different cemeteries, including the one at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas. And I really appreciate that.

I just want to note for the record that Mr. Walters and Mr. Hallinan are here as well, which I really appreciate the fact that you are listening as well to gain insight.

And, Ms. Zumatto, I really appreciated your remarks in your written testimony about the national cemetery at Fort Bliss. And you described it as serene and beautiful and very well maintained and a little bit of a surprise because you had heard that there was some discontent in El Paso about the cemetery, and I really can't argue with your conclusions.

I think it is a very serene, a very beautiful place, again, so clean and well maintained for the resources that they have. You know, if you are going to have that crushed rock and some small areas of grass, some small areas of trees and landscaping, it is excellently maintained.

I think the disconnect might come when we talk to the families, the survivors, who can also appreciate everything that you describe in your assessment, but then that act of actually kneeling at the gravesite or being close to the headstone is a lesser experience for them—and this is, you know, their experience as they relate it to me—because of that environment and not having that grass and that expectation because it was there before and because it is in the vast majority of other cemeteries in El Paso and almost every other single national cemetery.

But you also said something that I thought was so important in your testimony—or wrote in your testimony, which was that, when you visited with VSOs prior to visiting the cemetery, you found that they were not as upset with the aesthetics as they were with

the process and they felt like they had been disconnected from the process used to choose the xeriscaping or the WaterWise.

Talk a little bit—I had a great exchange with Mr. Walters in the previous panel where we agreed that we would try to work together to find a way to make an improvement. Maybe it is not turf and maybe it is not staying with the status quo. Maybe it is something better for all concerned.

Talk a little bit about a process that you might recommend from your experience that we could use in working with survivors, working with veterans, working with VSOs in our community, and working with the NCA.

Sorry to put you on the spot. Since you had that great conversation with the VSOs there, I thought you might have some thoughts on it.

Ms. ZUMATTO. Well, I have not done a study of xeriscaping, so, I am not sure what other types of low maintenance or WaterWise options there might be.

I would doubt that what is currently at Fort Bliss is the only avenue available. I have seen pictures of Fort Bliss back when it was turfed, and in the picture I can see a lot of brown and bare patches.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Doesn't look good, does it?

Ms. ZUMATTO. So I can't imagine that that would be any better.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Right.

Ms. ZUMATTO. I don't know if I said this in my written testimony or not, but—and this was my first experience being in a desert. But when you stand in the cemetery and you look at the environment all around, it is perfectly suited the way it is.

I did ask—I went to a local VFW post, actually, while I was there, the day before I went to the cemetery, to talk to veterans and see what they thought about it. And you mentioned that—you know, a couple of things.

I asked them if it was difficult to walk on. Somebody was saying that, you know, an elderly person, perhaps, or somebody with some disability—you know, do they have difficulty either with a wheelchair on that surface or, you know, walking on that surface. So that possibility came up. I didn't try either myself when I was there. It was 120 degrees that day, so, I didn't try kneeling.

But there were people visiting the cemetery when I was there and I did notice at least two individuals had brought like—almost like a small prayer rug, if you will, something to put on the ground to kneel on, which I thought was, you know, a pretty good option.

But one other thing that I will mention is I recently came back from a visit to a national military cemetery in Israel, and they did not have any grass in that cemetery.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Now, what is on—I saw your picture from the cemetery in Israel, and it looks like there is grass on the actual grave. It looks like it is surrounded by stones and there is some material in between the stones over the grave.

Is that grass or some other covering?

Ms. ZUMATTO. The ground is mainly flagstone-type material, and then each individual grave is sort of built up. There is a wall, a surround, if you will. And on top of that, there is grass—excuse me—there is soil, but it is not grass.

There are plants there, and there were a variety of different things. And I don't know—because of that variety, I wonder if family members maybe tried to personalize their loved one's site. But it wasn't grass. And anyplace that didn't have flagstones was bare dirt.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Well, I appreciate you bringing that to our attention. I have got the pictures here in front of me, and it just provides yet another option.

In other words, it is not a choice—I would say a false choice between bad turf and grass, which is what Fort Bliss had, and the crushed rock.

But as you saw in the Chihuahuan Desert, it is full of life and there are forms of grass and plant life that thrive there, and I think there is some middle ground we can reach. And maybe looking at what others have done, including in Israel, gives us some options.

So, again, thank you for doing the work and providing us some other perspective on this. I really appreciate it.

Thank you both for your testimony.

Ms. ZUMATTO. My pleasure.

Mr. RUNYAN. Anything further? No. Okay.

Well, on behalf of the subcommittee, I would like to thank you for your testimony and for the works that TAPS and AMVETS does to honor our veterans and care for their families and loved ones. You are now excused.

I want to thank everyone for being here today. The status reports from our cemetery and memorial representatives and the input from the VSO community was well presented, and the subcommittee appreciates the work that went into the preparation for today's hearing.

I am certain that this subcommittee will continue to engage in these issues in the next Congress as the final resting place for our veterans and the families left behind deserve the highest standard of care.

I would like to once again thank our witnesses for being here today and ask unanimous consent that all members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include any extraneous material. Hearing no objection, so ordered.

I thank the members for their attendance today. And this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:44 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

STATEMENT OF
RONALD E. WALTERS
ACTING UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
December 9, 2014

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today in order to provide you with a review of the National Cemetery Administration's (NCA) accomplishments achieved during the last fiscal year, our plans for continuing to meet the needs of Veterans in the current year, and our efforts to identify the needs of our future Veterans. Before I begin, I wanted to note that one of our national cemeteries was recently recognized as one of the World's Most Beautiful Cemeteries; in an article published just in October, the Smithsonian's online magazine distinguished Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery for its "elegant simplicity." Such recognition is only made possible with the continued dedication of our employees as well as the continued support of our stakeholders, including the members of this subcommittee. I am accompanied by Mr. Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs, NCA. I look forward to testifying alongside our partners from the Army National Cemeteries and the American Battle Monuments Commission. The partnerships between our organizations continue to result in the sharing of best practices and a strengthened commitment to serving our Nation's Veterans.

I was appointed the Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs this past June. I joined NCA in 2006, and most recently served as Acting Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs and Deputy Under Secretary for Finance and Planning/Chief Financial

Officer prior to assuming my current position. While the process moves forward to identify a nominee for the Under Secretary position, I want to assure you that I, as well as all employees within the National Cemetery Administration, remain dedicated to continuing to serve Veterans and their families with the highest level of customer service. While the past fiscal year has been full of transition, both for NCA and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), it was also one in which we continued to accomplish our defined goals and advance many initiatives.

I would be remiss if I did not address the Department's "I CARE" core values of Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence. These values are not abstractions in NCA. They are part of how we do business every single day. I CARE is a responsibility that never stops.

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN
RECENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION

NCA employees continue to focus on our organizational mission to provide quality burial and memorial benefits to those who served in uniform to defend our Nation and for their families. NCA operates 131 national cemeteries and one national Veterans burial ground in 40 states and Puerto Rico, and 33 soldiers' lots and monument sites. More than 4.2 million Americans, including Veterans of every war and conflict, are buried in VA national cemeteries on more than 8,800 developed acres of land.

NCA'S Continued Customer-Focus: I am pleased to report that for the fifth consecutive time, NCA achieved the highest score in either the private or public sector in the history of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI). The 2013 results of this prestigious, independent survey were published in January 2014 and demonstrated that NCA achieved a customer satisfaction index of 96. The score is 28 points above the 68 point average for Federal Government agencies. NCA participates in the ACSI every 3 years; it is the only national, cross-industry measure of direct customer satisfaction with the quality of

goods and services available in the United States. Beginning in 1999, the Federal Government selected ACSI to measure citizen satisfaction. The ACSI survey polled the next-of-kin or other people who had arranged for the interment of a loved one in a VA national cemetery 6-months to 1-year prior to the start of the survey. Surveys were sent to 2,500 people, 494 responded, a high response rate for a mail survey.

Continued Focus on Provision of Burial and Memorialization Benefits: With the close of Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, NCA continued to serve Veterans and their families by performing over 125,000 interments—a record number for NCA. We continued to provide perpetual care for 3.4 million occupied gravesites that we maintain. We awarded $28.8 million in National Shrine contracts to repair gravesites and to raise and realign headstones. NCA issued over 600,000 Presidential Memorial Certificates as well as provided over 350,000 headstone and markers and over 10,000 medallions.

Continued Increase of Veteran Access to a Burial Option: Great progress was made in FY 2014 as NCA continued to implement one of the largest expansions of the national cemetery system since the Civil War. By the end of this decade, VA plans to open an additional 18 new burial facilities to provide access to a burial option for over 680,000 additional previously unserved Veterans and to provide enhanced burial options for over 2 million Veterans. The new facilities include five new national cemeteries, two in Florida, one each in Colorado, Nebraska, and New York. These locations were determined when the Veteran population threshold was lowered from 170,000 to 80,000 unserved Veterans within a 75-mile service area. Additionally, in FY 2014 we began to implement our Urban Initiative and Rural Initiative that I will highlight in a moment. These expansions, along with continued grant awards to states, territories, and tribal organizations, will allow NCA to meet its strategic target of providing 96 percent of Veterans with a burial option within 75 miles of their home.

On November 3, 2014, the Department of Navy transferred hundreds of acres of land from the former Alameda Naval Air Station to VA. This land will host an outpatient clinic for 9,000 Veterans and a columbaria-only national cemetery that will provide burial for 3,000 Veterans and their eligible family members. This past fiscal year, VA acquired land for the

new national cemeteries in Southern Colorado and Western New York, which finalizes all land acquisition steps for the five new national cemeteries. We also awarded construction contracts to build three national cemeteries: Cape Canaveral National Cemetery, Tallahassee National Cemetery, and Omaha National Cemetery. Together, the five new national cemeteries will provide a burial option to over 550,000 currently unserved Veterans, and their eligible family members. We continued land searches for urban satellite cemeteries in New York, Chicago, and Indianapolis, to provide columbaria-only cemeteries in urban locations where time and distance barriers to the existing national cemetery location have proven to be a challenge to burial and visitation.

I am pleased to announce that in FY 2014 we opened our first exclusively rural national Veterans burial ground \in Montana. As the first of eight planned national Veterans burial grounds as part of the Department's rural burial initiative, Yellowstone National Cemetery was officially dedicated on Memorial Day 2014 and began serving the Veterans and their family members this year. We additionally continued land searches and acquisitions in seven other rural locations in Maine, Wisconsin, North Dakota, Wyoming, Nevada, Idaho, and Utah. The rural locations align with the Department's priority to meet the unique needs of Veterans in rural areas and will provide access for 136,000 Veterans who reside in sparsely populated areas where access to a national, state, or tribal Veterans cemetery is limited or does not exist.

Successful Federal-State Partnership: The authority Congress gave VA to provide grants to states, territories, and tribal organizations has fostered a critical and valuable partnership. Grants are used to establish, expand, or improve state, territorial, and tribal Veteran cemeteries in areas that do not qualify for a national cemetery. Since 1978 thru the end of FY 2014, VA has awarded more than $614 million in such grants. Currently, there are 93 operational state and tribal Veteran cemeteries in 45 states, Guam and Saipan, with six more currently under construction. NCA looks forward to working with states, territories, and tribal organizations to share lessons learned from our new Urban and Rural Initiatives and to develop grant applications and award grants that reflect the needs, resources, and preferences of the local Veteran community.

Implementing a New Benefit for Veterans: NCA published a proposed rule in 2014 that outlined plans for implementing a new benefit program authorized by Congress in Public Law 112-260 to allow VA to provide a reimbursement for a casket or urn for a Veteran who will be interred in a VA national cemetery and who has no known next of kin, where there are no resources otherwise available to cover the cost of a dignified burial receptacle. We are striving to have the final rule published by in early 2015. NCA will provide reimbursements for deaths that date back to the effective date of the statutory provision, January 10, 2014. We appreciate the public comments that we received, including those from the National Funeral Directors Association. This new benefit also reflects the continued support and partnership of this subcommittee, as well as that of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, to ensure VA has the authorities it needs to honor the unclaimed remains of our Nation's Veterans.

Ensuring Burial of Unclaimed Remains of Veterans: In July 2014, NCA took steps to refine its processes to assist in following-up on those cases in which a Veteran is determined to be eligible but no burial arrangements are scheduled. VA defines a "pending" case as one in which VA has determined that a Veteran was eligible for burial after an initial inquiry, but the inquirer has not selected a date for burial in a VA national cemetery. The most recent review of all eligible "pending" cases over 30 days old, continued to find that the vast majority are waiting for the decedent's next of kin to select a burial date that is convenient for all family members. Only a few cases were pending in which a coroner's office, morgue, public administrator, or medical examiner was the authorized representative of the unclaimed remains of a Veteran. Although we provide families as much latitude as possible in determining the timing of burial, we continue to follow-up every 30 days with these public officials on any cases shown as pending until the cases are scheduled and the Veterans' remains are buried with honor.

Increased Flexibility to Apply for the Headstone and Marker Benefit: During the oversight hearing in October 2013, Members and various individuals and historic groups expressed concerns that the current definition of "applicant" for headstone and marker claims

is too limiting. In follow-up testimony before this subcommittee on March 26, 2014, VA acknowledged that the current regulatory definition of applicant was too restrictive, and stated that VA was drafting a proposed rule to amend the definition to address those concerns, and intended to solicit and consider comments from the public in connection with publication of that proposed rule. This rulemaking was listed on the Department's high priority rulemaking list to move it as expeditiously as possible.

On October 1, 2014, VA published a proposed rule (2900-AO95)—which began a 60-day comment period—in the Federal Register. In this rulemaking, we propose to amend the regulations defining who may apply for a headstone or marker. The intended effect of this proposed rule would be to expand the types of individuals who may request headstones and markers on behalf of decedents. This amendment would address concerns that the existing applicant definition is too restrictive and results in identified Veteran gravesites going unmarked. The comment period closed on December 1, 2014. As of November 25th, we received 148 comments, many of which supported our proposed revision to the definition. We look forward to responding to the comments in the final rule and will ensure that all public comments are fully considered in determining the final applicant definition.

WHAT ARE WE DOING NOW
ACTION FOR THE CURRENT FISCAL YEAR

While I am pleased to report on our recent successes, we cannot rest on our past accomplishments. We are moving forward to face several current challenges and advance several initiatives to better serve our Veteran customers. As we begin FY 2015, there are several major initiatives critical to NCA's achieving its strategic goals. They include opening new national cemeteries and continuing master planning efforts to meet the burial needs of our Nation's Veterans and Servicemembers; continuing gravesite accountability efforts; partnering with states and tribes to ensure all Veteran cemeteries meet customer needs and National Shrine standards; and hiring Veterans, including homeless Veterans. I will now review each of these initiatives in greater detail.

Opening of Two New National Cemeteries: In FY 2015, NCA will open two new national cemeteries: Tallahassee National Cemetery (FL) and Cape Canaveral National Cemetery (FL). We will begin design and construction on a third, the Omaha National Cemetery. The FY 2015 President's Budget request includes operating funds for these three cemeteries. These three facilities will serve approximately 350,000 Veterans and their eligible family members.

Continuous Improvement in Gravesite Accountability: When NCA testified before this subcommittee in April 2013, we addressed the findings of the recently completed review of all gravesites within the national cemetery system. We continue to build on the findings of that expansive review. From October 2011 to December 2012, NCA conducted a comprehensive review of the entire inventory of the 3.2 million headstones and markers within the 131 national cemeteries and 33 soldiers' lots administered by VA. Based on findings of independent checks by Memorial Service Network (MSN) teams, NCA noted in our February 2013 report to Congress that NCA leadership would conduct additional full reviews at 17 facilities to achieve reasonable assurance that all gravesites are accurately marked at those cemeteries. Cemetery and MSN staff members have continued to focus on these cemeteries to identify and fix issues at the local level. National-level reviews at these cemeteries, and at other cemeteries which NCA identifies for gravesite reviews, will employ enhanced techniques including use of Burial Operations Support System records and Geo-Spatial Information System (GIS) technology to permanently record key gravesite and headstone data.

NCA is developing a Scope of Work to begin the independent GIS location and marker analysis surveys in FY 2015. Eventually, NCA intends to use the same GIS-enabled processes to review all 131 of our national cemeteries and to automate our processes to incorporate state of the art positioning and mapping technologies.

Compliance Review Program for State and Tribal Veterans Cemeteries: In FY 2015, NCA will reach full implementation of two new partnership initiatives through our Veterans Cemetery Grants Program. The Veterans Cemetery Grants Compliance Review

Program was launched in FY 2012 with the pilot program concluding in 2014. This program's primary goal is to align the process for evaluating the performance of grant-funded cemeteries with NCA's Organizational Assessment and Improvement Program (OAI). OAI evaluates the performance of VA's National Cemeteries against VA's Operational Standards and Measures to determine National Shrine status as well as to identify opportunities for improvement. All VA grant-funded Veterans cemeteries are required by regulation to follow NCA's Operational Standards and Measures. In FY 2015, the program will move into sustainment as a regular schedule of evaluation visits is implemented. Annually, the Compliance Review Program will develop a site review schedule with the objective of conducting on-site compliance reviews at all 90 grant-funded Veterans cemeteries at least once every 5 years.

Customer Survey Initiative for State and Tribal Veteran Cemeteries: The second partnership program conducted through the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program is an independently-administered customer satisfaction survey for those families and funeral directors who have selected burial in a state or tribal Veterans cemetery. The program is closely aligned to annual customer satisfaction survey methods used to assess VA national cemeteries' service to families and funeral directors. We plan to have the final report from the first survey issued by the end of December. We look forward to sharing the results of these surveys with you once they are available.

NCA's Veteran-Centric Workforce: NCA's committed, Veteran-centric workforce is the main reason we are able to provide world-class customer service. Not only are we focused on serving Veterans, we continue to maintain our commitment to hiring Veterans. Currently, Veterans comprise over 74 percent of our workforce, and 34 percent of Veterans appointed in FY 2014 were 30 percent or more disabled. In addition, 85 percent of NCA contracts in FY 2014 were awarded to Veteran-Owned and Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned small businesses, which exceeded our established goal of 84 percent for the fiscal year.

Homeless Veterans Apprenticeship Program: In 2012, NCA stood up a Cemetery Apprenticeship Program in support of VA's initiative to end Veterans homelessness.

Apprentices are hired as WG-04 Cemetery Caretakers, using either a Schedule A or non-competitive Veterans hiring authority (30 percent disabled, Veterans Recruitment Act). We partnered with VA's Homeless Veteran Supported Employment Program to identify potential candidates for the inaugural class and also the second cohort of apprentices, who just completed their training and will graduate December 5, 2014. Improvements made to the initial screening process for apprentice candidates contributed to a significantly improved retention rate from the first to second cohort (54 percent to 83 percent.) Apprentices spend a year learning their trade and receiving instruction in such areas as professionalism and conflict management. Graduates can choose to stay at their training cemetery or compete for other positions elsewhere in NCA, VA, and the Federal Government. We are proud to report that 10 former apprentices have already been promoted in NCA beyond their entry grade of WG-04.

Based on the success we have seen with the program in developing cemetery caretakers, we plan to expand the program in FY 2015 to include creation of a training pipeline for Cemetery Representatives, with targeted recruitment of homeless women Veterans. In addition to providing homeless Veterans with competitive Federal Government employment opportunities, the Cemetery Caretaker Apprenticeship Program has enabled NCA to increase diversity within our total workforce, as well among Veteran employees.

CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT INTO THE FUTURE

As we look to the future, we must both maintain the gravesites of those who served during past conflicts and eras while we seek to identify the burial needs of our current Servicemembers and future Veterans.

Perpetual Care of Our VA National Cemeteries: We are continually seeking better and more efficient ways of managing our cemeteries. We place a high priority on environmental stewardship and managing facilities to maximize resources and at the same time, convey the dignity required of National Shrines. We believe it is possible to use resources efficiently and maintain our national cemeteries as National Shrines. NCA is recognized as an industry leader in environmental conservation efforts at cemeteries. These efforts reflect NCA's commitment to conserving resources, achieving cost savings and providing a dignified burial environment.

NCA's use of pre-placed crypts is an excellent example of a practice that both increases efficiency and enhances cemetery appearance. Their use reduces the cemetery footprint thereby requiring less land, decreasing the cost to maintain and operate cemeteries, and improving cemetery appearance. In addition, the use of memorial walls instead of memorial sections allows more grounds to be used for burials. Finally, undeveloped land is leased out for agricultural purposes so that there is some monetary return that can be used to improve cemetery appearance until the land is needed for burials.

Identifying Future Burial and Memorialization Needs of Our Veterans: The funeral industry and memorial practices and customs are changing at a fast pace in the 21st Century, especially with respect to cremation and the presentation of other burial options. In order to keep pace with changing memorial practices and customs, NCA has conducted an independent and extensive examination of new and emerging burial and memorial practices around the world as well as a nationwide survey of Veterans to ascertain their opinion and interest in burial and memorial options not currently offered in national cemeteries. Our strategic plan provides us the opportunity to assess the adequacy of our current practices

and benefits and to propose new policies/legislation if required to better meet Veterans' needs. NCA is in the process of reviewing the data collected by the study.

We are also working closely with VA's Center for Minority Veterans and the Office of Tribal Government Relations to identify and interact with key stakeholders. Understanding and meeting the burial and memorial needs of minority Veterans, such as Native American/Alaskan and Muslim American Veterans—two very fast-growing groups—is key to ensuring all Veterans are satisfied with the benefits available to them through VA.

CONCLUSION

Thank you, again, for having me here today to talk about the National Cemetery Administration. I look forward to continuing to serve Servicemembers, Veterans and their families as well as the employees of NCA. Both this subcommittee's as well as the full committee's support is evident and appreciated; we look forward to continuing our partnership with you. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have at this time.

RECORD VERSION

STATEMENT BY

MR. PATRICK K. HALLINAN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ARMY NATIONAL MILITARY CEMETERIES

BEFORE

THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SECOND SESSION, 113TH CONGRESS

TIMELESS HONOR: REVIEWING CURRENT OPERATIONS
OF OUR NATIONAL CEMETERIES

DECEMBER 9, 2014

NOT FOR PUBLICATION
UNTIL RELEASED BY THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

STATEMENT BY MR. PATRICK K. HALLINAN
EXECUTI VE DIRECTOR, ARMY NATIONAL MILITARY CEMETERIES

Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on operations at Arlington National Cemetery and our efforts to sustain the sacred trust of our Veterans and Families. I'm honored and appreciate the opportunity to testify before this subcommittee today.

Since my testimony to this subcommittee a year ago, we continue to build upon our tremendous progress at Arlington National Cemetery. We are setting industry standards for best practices, becoming a center of excellence while working closely with our partner organizations that I testify with today. Over the past six months, while we have commemorated the rich history of the past 150 years since the first burial at Arlington National Cemetery, the team has identified and created industry-leading standards with auditable business practices and institutionalized them at Arlington. We have continued to improve the processes that have reduced the time for placement of headstones and niche covers from multiple months after a service to an average of 45 to 60 days. We have made additional improvements to our website and public facing applications design in order to enhance user experience and to provide interactive capabilities to the general public. We have updated our master plan to detail the strategy for repairing and replacing our aging infrastructure, and have two significant projects underway to increase burial capacity at Arlington and extend the active life of the Cemetery. Army National Military Cemeteries continues to refine their Organizational Inspection Program which will capture in Army policy the current standards and practices in place at Arlington. Our team is dedicated to improving the

Arlington experience for our visitors and perfecting our logistical and administrative best practices. We remain focused on our core mission – on behalf of the American people, lay to rest those who have served our Nation with dignity and honor, treating their Families with respect and compassion, and connecting guests to the rich tapestry of the Cemetery's living history, while maintaining these hallowed grounds befitting the sacrifice of all those who rest here. The pace of requests and burials at Arlington remains at an all-time high, and our workforce is meeting the challenge.

THE FOUNDATION OF EXCELLENCE IS IN PLACE

Sustaining Accountability

The Arlington National Cemetery team continues to refine and improve upon the foundation set by the 100% baseline accountability for all decedents interred at Arlington National Cemetery and Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery. Continual accountability process improvements and use of geospatial mapping technology allows cemetery personnel to certify each burial service conducted daily, using a duplicative verification of grave location and decedent remains. Additionally, we continue to digitally photograph every casket or urn that is interred or inurned, and digitally associate that image with the burial record in our authoritative and auditable system of record. Our current efforts include system and technology updates to enhance this process and automate the digitable photo transfer.

Continual accountability processes have allowed Arlington National Cemetery to reconcile and begin corrective actions for the 5,496 remaining administrative errors in headstone and niche cover commemorations. These include errors of fact impacting

the date of birth, date of death, spelling of names and the spouses of veterans not listed on headstones in the middle of the 20th century. Updated system improvements allow for continual review of current interments, and have facilitated a review and validation of authorized grave reservations prior to 1962 for side-by-side interments. Additionally, a systematic validation of numerous available grave locations identified as previously obstructed by trees or utilities is currently underway. Arlington National Cemetery established a system that requires senior leaders to walk and review each section of the Cemetery two times per year to ensure proper care and maintenance.

The Arlington team conducted a baseline organizational self assessment in Spring 2014. This was followed by a validation, by the Army National Military Cemeteries in September 2014, of the baseline assessment in accordance with our Organizational Inspection Program. The staff at Arlington National Cemetery continues to use and improve our detailed Organization Inspection Program as well as the Standards and Measures Program to self-evaluate operations and performance measures at Arlington National Cemetery and the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery. Arlington has instituted the process mechanics required to be a continually learning organization. Concurrently, with the completion of the initial inspection at Arlington National Cemetery, Army National Military Cemeteries' personnel began a systematic train, assist and inspect program across all 40 Army cemeteries, completing inspection of the United States Military Academy Cemetery at West Point and the Fort Knox Army Post Cemetery in Kentucky in September 2014. With additional personnel on-boarding to the Army National Military Cemeteries team, and an

aggressive inspection schedule, we should reach most, if not all, Army cemeteries in Fiscal Year 2016.

With our ongoing work the Organizational Inspection Program and updates to our authoritative regulations and policies, we also look to improve and expand our training programs. In April 2014, the staff of Army National Military Cemeteries established a training program for Army installation Cemetery Responsible Officials. This recurring training program, centered on Arlington National Cemetery's Standards and Measures Program, formed the backbone of an Army National Military Cemeteries-led training program for Cemetery Responsible Officials, and other personnel responsible for cemeteries that installation commanders desire to attend training. The training is conducted at Arlington National Cemetery, and provides authoritative training in best practices and standard procedures, complementing the information found in the Army Regulation (AR) 290-5 and Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA PAM) 290-5. This in-person, on-the-ground training provides a clear picture of operational standards and norms for a national military cemetery. We established memorandums of agreements with the American Battle Monuments Commission and Department of Veterans' Affairs to share best practices and training opportunities. Arlington National Cemetery leaders meet on a regular basic with the leaders from the Department of Veterans' Affairs National Cemetery Administration and American Battle Monuments Commission. Furthering this cooperation, the American Battle Monuments Commission proactively assigned a liaison for the next three years to work alongside Arlington National Cemetery.

Interment Scheduling

Interment scheduling remains a focus for improvement to provide Families an improved wait time. Demand for burial services at Arlington National Cemetery continues to increase. In Fiscal Year 2013, the staff scheduled 6,092 and conducted 5,823 committal services for Veterans and their loved ones. In Fiscal Year 2014, we scheduled 8,192 and conducted 7,163 committal services. This is a 15 % increase in services scheduled and a 19% increase in funeral services conducted. While offering inurnments on Saturday requiring no honor guard resources, wait times for scheduling services remain above preferred levels. As of November 10, 2014, Families awaiting burial for casketed remains wait less than two weeks from their first contact to schedule a funeral service. Those eligible and requesting the highest level of military funeral honors, in accordance with the Family's wishes, may wait several months for their service to occur. Families awaiting burial of cremated remains generally wait approximately 10 to 12 weeks to schedule a service during peak preferred burial months, but may wait up to six months for the highest level of military honors, if eligible. To reduce wait times, we have increased scheduling personnel, implemented an informational technology solution to more readily identify and offer the next available date in order to optimize resource utilization and availability. The auditable system of record requires supervisor review and approval of all funeral services, generates and then forwards all required confirmation documents upon approval to the primary next of kin. This process improvement ensures timely and accurate confirmation of the military funeral honors requested and a review of the headstone or niche cover template.

Government Headstones and Niche Covers

Arlington National Cemetery continues to ensure quality and timely placement of government headstones and niche covers, electronically ordered from the Department of Veterans' Affairs contractor. Timely ordering ensures the primary next of kin or person authorized to direct disposition of the remains, is able to view the grave marker of their loved one using our public website and Arlington National Cemetery *Explorer* smart phone application. Our cemetery representatives continue to work with Families to finalize the headstone or niche cover prior to the interment using an automated headstone design tool to create a proposed headstone template. After the template is agreed upon, we wait a minimum of two weeks from the date of service to allow Families the opportunity to change terms of endearment or other items of personal preference on the headstone. Following this designed intentional wait time, our Interment Services Branch staff reviews, approves, and submits the order to the Department of Veterans' Affairs contractor. The average time from date of interment to setting of the stone remains constant at 45 days from the date of the actual interment, which is a significant improvement over the previous timeframe of 60 days to several months.

Technology at Arlington

Arlington National Cemetery continues to refine the software for our Interment Services System to support cemetery administration and field operations. The system is our official system of record for burial information and is used for scheduling of interments, management and accountability of burial records, headstone ordering and

scheduling of resources associated with providing honors for each military branch of service. Over the last year we have refined process workflows into the scheduling system to increase our scheduling efficiency and accountability. Key improvements were made to headstone/niche cover documentation processes which automatically email the next of kin at key points in the scheduling process. These improvements have resulted in substantially reduced approval times versus the prior manual process.

Arlington National Cemetery continues to implement technology to streamline cemetery operations and improve our visitors' experience within this National Shrine. We have made improvements to Arlington's Interment Services System and our Geographic Information System (GIS) to manage day-to-day cemetery operations. We revamped our public facing applications to improve the visitors experience while they honor our Nation's heroes and explore the rich heritage of Arlington National Cemetery.

Arlington National Cemetery GIS mapping application, ANC Mapper, has made several key operational improvements within the past year. ANC Mapper is our system of record for grave location data that is designed to facilitate the assignment of burial locations, manage funeral procession routes, and generate excavation slips through Interment Services System web services. This past year we launched a Field Operations Dashboard capability allowing the staff to manage and track the operational status of each grave location (Scheduled, Open, Closed, And finalized). Supervisors now have the ability to track daily progress, and provide an automated method of assigning and reallocating field resources to maximize field crew resources. Audit logs were initiated to increase accountability to track the lifecycle of a location, and identify field crew personnel that completed each functional task. Other features such as

Cemetery Representative Call Signs, Active Duty and Group Burial indicators were added to the schedule panel to increase situational awareness and to round out the common operational picture.

Over two years ago, Arlington launched *ANC Explorer*, a web-based application that transformed how visitors explore the Cemetery. *ANC Explorer* allows Families and the public to locate gravesites, events or other points of interest throughout the Cemetery; to view and download photographs of the front-and-back of a headstone or monument; and receive walking directions to these locations. On May 22, 2014, we released version 2.0 of *ANC Explorer* that further enhanced the visitor experience at Arlington National Cemetery. The 2.0 release simplifies navigation, provides pertinent cemetery information, offers custom tour capabilities, and allows the staff to push emergency alert notifications to families and visitors inside of the Arlington National Cemetery's fence line. Most recently, we have added the search capability for mobile devices, allowing the general public to locate and explore the burial locations of Medal of Honor recipients buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Citing the "Congressional Medal of Honor Society", a user is presented with a brief description of the significance of the Medal of Honor, the citation explaining the prominent actions of the honoree while serving in the Armed Forces, and photographs of the front and back of their headstone. We are pleased to report that in two years, we have reached over 121,000 downloads an average of over 1.45 million decedent searches each month across *ANC Explorer* platforms.

On August 4, 2014, as part of Arlington National Cemetery's user experience based development methodology, we released the new website. The website is the main information portal for the Cemetery; users can find information on Veteran eligibility,

funeral planning, watch overview videos on what to expect throughout the funeral process, perform decedent searches, submit group requests for wreath laying ceremonies, and plan their visit to Arlington National Cemetery. The revamped website simplifies navigation, enhances information discoverability, provides custom alert functionality and maximizes compatibility with mobile devices. To keep information accurate, relevant, and current we deployed a content management system or CMS. The CMS functionality allows our Public Affairs Officer to update content to the website without reliance on contractors, or submitting help desk tickets which allows information to be disseminated within minutes instead of days or weeks.

Cemetery Expansion and Infrastructure

The Army is committed to maintaining Arlington National Cemetery as the Nation's premier national shrine in perpetuity. We are also committed to keeping the cemetery active as long as possible to serve our Nation's Veterans and their Families. In line with those commitments, we continue to responsibly expand our capacity. After years of planning, in January of this year we broke ground on our Millennium Project to expand the cemetery to the North. With the support of the US Army Corps of Engineers - Norfolk District, this important project is currently within budget and on schedule to be completed in 2016, and will provide the Cemetery and the Nation an additional 27,282 burial opportunities.

Likewise, we continue planning for expansion of the Cemetery to the South. In July 2014, again through the US Army Corps of Engineers – Norfolk District, we hired an Architect and Engineering firm to begin formal planning and design efforts for our

intended "Southern Expansion." This expansion will occur in the area formerly occupied by the Navy Annex. The Navy Annex is now demolished and the Army is negotiating the details of an appropriate transfer of land with Arlington County that will provide us the maximum contiguous burial space in this area. It will be a complicated project and requires close and continuous engagement with a myriad of interested stakeholders. In the final analysis, this project will appropriately honor and respect our Nation's Veterans and ideally extend our first interment capacity out to the 2050's.

The Cemetery staff also continues to make progress repairing and replacing much of our outdated utility infrastructure. We continue to replace the waterlines throughout the Cemetery and we have repaired or plan to repair many of the Cemetery's roads in the next year. Tied to the repair of the roads is repair and update of our storm water drainage system to ensure that we are removing storm water in an efficient and environmentally appropriate manner.

We are also making great strides improving the infrastructure that supports our operational capabilities. Along this time of effort, the recently renovated public areas of our Welcome Center remain open while renovations on the visitor's bathrooms and basement office space began in October 2014. Additionally, planning and design efforts are well underway for the establishment of an ossuary called the Tomb of Remembrance. This critical project will allow us to provide the Nation with a dignified place to provide final disposition of cremated remains which maybe comingled or unidentified. We are also focused on continuously improving the experience of each Family who arrives to inter their loved one. Redesigning and improving the manner in which we gather and escort our funeral processions is a critical goal for Fiscal Year

2015. A new Funeral Procession Queuing Area will make our funeral organization and lineup much more intuitive and easier to negotiate for the Veterans and Families we serve.

Lastly, but importantly, we recently completed an Americans with Disability Act accessibility study that will help us program and execute projects to ensure that our National Shrine is as accessible as possible to all those who wish to visit.

Section 60 Memorial Collection

Engagements with Gold Star Families continued in April 2014 regarding the issues associated with cemetery maintenance and the Section 60 Mementos Pilot Program. As the Cemetery again entered the growing season this past spring and summer, when mowing of the grounds is more frequent, we continued to allow small photographs and small handcrafted items not affixed to the headstone to be left at gravesites. This effort was supported by Families and while items were removed when they became unsightly or disassociated with a particular grave site, Families continued to cooperate with the new policy.

Additionally, in accordance with the Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery recommendation to the Secretary of the Army, the items collected during the pilot program will be designated as a Memorial Collection. Arlington National Cemetery has begun management of items previously collected items of historical, artistic or intrinsic significance as we shift from collection phase at the end of hostilities in Afghanistan this winter. Between September 11, 2014 and November 7, 2014, the first

Memorial Collection exhibit was on display in the Welcome Center and the Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery.

Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery

The Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery, a non-discretionary advisory committee Chaired by Former Senator Max Cleland, continues to provide strategic oversight and recommendations to the Secretary of the Army and Arlington National Cemetery. Current agenda items include monitoring of the Section 60 mementos memorial collection, review and assessment of the status of historic monument preservation, a review of actions associated with the recommendation to establish Arboretum designation at Arlington National Cemetery, as well as efforts to continue to enhance the visitor experience. Continued review and assessment of our expansion and maintenance projects has provided insightful and critical input to current actions underway.

The Committee now has eight of nine full members appointed and recently updated the committee Charter. Sergeant Major, United States Marine Corps Retired, Ronald Fetherson was appointed to the committee this summer. Additionally, currently we are working to ensure Gold Star Family member nominations to round out our subcommittees. We continue to assess possible candidates to nominate to this beneficial advisory role.

CONCLUSION

Under the proactive support and leadership of the Secretary of the Army, through diligent efforts, adherence to established policies, repeatable processes, embedded technologies, and institutionalized standards, Arlington will sustain the sacred trust it

has reclaimed. In conjunction with the Military District of Washington and all our military service partners, the military service chaplains and the Arlington Ladies, along with the dedicated staff at Arlington National Cemetery can assure the Nation of this: Every burial service at Arlington National Cemetery will continue to be conducted with the honor and dignity our service members have earned, and their Families will be treated with respect and compassion.

We appreciate the support of the subcommittee and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MAX CLELAND

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee

On behalf of our Chairman General Tony McPeak and our Board of Commissioners, I thank you for this opportunity to discuss the mission, operations and programs of the American Battle Monuments Commission.

Since 1923, our purpose has not changed—to commemorate the service and achievements of America's armed forces, yet our methods have changed. We execute our mission by creating memorials worldwide where U.S. forces have served, and by administering 25 overseas military cemeteries—shrines to our fallen and those that fought by their side.

We do this with the words of our first Chairman, General of the Armies John J. Pershing ever in mind. General Pershing's words serve as the foundation statement for all that we do:

"*Time Will Not Dim the Glory of Their Deeds*"

The cemeteries and memorials we administer have been entrusted to our care by the American people—we take that as a solemn responsibility. For the first 80 years of our history, ABMC's principle focus was to maintain our commemorative sites to the highest of standards. That remains and always will be our core mission—the war dead we honor deserve nothing less.

2014 has proven to be a significant commemorative year for the Nation and for our Commission. We were honored to host President Obama at three of the Commission's overseas cemeteries this fiscal year: Flanders Field American Cemetery in Belgium; Manila American Cemetery in the Philippines; and Normandy American Cemetery, France.

At Normandy on June 6th, the president was joined by French President Hollande, Secretary of State Kerry, Secretary of Defense Hagel, Congressional delegations, and many other civilian and military dignitaries to commemorate the 70th Anniversary of the D–Day landings. Before an audience of 10,000, including more than 300 D–Day veterans, the President reflected on the historical significance of June 6, 1944:

"We come to tell the story of the men and women who did it so that it remains seared into the memory of a future world. We tell this story for the old soldiers who pull themselves a little straighter today to salute brothers who never made it home. We tell the story for the daughter who clutches a faded photo of her father, forever young; for the child who runs his fingers over colorful ribbons he knows signify something of great consequence, even if he doesn't yet fully understand why."

Unlike the Longest Day 70 years ago, it was a beautiful June day in Normandy to remember the achievement and sacrifice of the more than 10,000 brave souls buried in the hallowed Normandy grounds and memorialized on the cemetery's Tablets of the Missing.

Other significant commemorative events this past year included the 70th anniversary of Operation Market Garden at Netherlands American Cemetery and the 70th anniversary of Operation Dragoon at Rhone American Cemetery in southern France.

Not long after these World War II events concluded, attention shifted in August to the World War I Centennial. Although the 100th anniversary of the United States entry into the Great War will not begin until April 2017, the Commission's eight World War I cemeteries in Europe will receive increased attention as visitors travel to the battlefields where the fathers and mothers of the "Greatest Generation" witnessed unprecedented devastation and death; places where American sacrifice ultimately opened an American Century.

I have shared with you previously the ambitious visitor center projects we began as part of our Interpretation Program—what we now refer to as Telling Their Story. I'm pleased to report this morning that two new visitor centers at our Cambridge and Sicily-Rome cemeteries were dedicated on Memorial Day, and the renovated visitor center at the Pointe du Hoc Ranger Monument—just nine kilometers from Normandy cemetery—was dedicated June 5th on the eve of D–Day.

Visitor center renovation projects at two World War I cemeteries—Meuse-Argonne in France and Flanders Field in Belgium—are in design. And three additional visitor center projects are in various stages of development:

- At our Honolulu Memorial in the Department of Veterans Affairs National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific—the Punchbowl;
- At Manila American Cemetery, our only World War II commemorative cemetery in the Pacific; and,
- At the World War I Chateau-Thierry Monument in France, located about one hour east of Paris.

We also have two new monuments in development.

- A monument to be placed at Midway Island has been designed and fabricated, and installation is forthcoming.
- We launched a competition to select an architect to design a U.S. monument for New Zealand's national memorial park in Wellington, responding to an invitation from the Government of New Zealand.

These monument projects are part of an initiative launched by our Board of Commissioners, with the counsel of the military service historians, to honor significant battles and achievements of U.S. forces that have not previously been commemorated by the Commission.

Closer to home, we partnered with the National Park Service to renovate and upgrade kiosks and educational content at the World War II and Korean War memorials on the National Mall, significantly enhancing the visitor experience. Particularly popular is the ability for visitors to access ABMC's World War II Registry and Korean War Honor Roll databases at the kiosks.

We are strengthening our collaboration with Arlington National Cemetery, defining opportunities to share best practices and training. We can learn much from the technological advances ANC has made in recent years, and we can share the core competencies for which our agency has become known, strengthening both organizations. Likewise, we continue our long-standing relationship with the National Cemetery Administration through advisory committees and our shared interest in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, home of our Honolulu Memorial. Through such collaborations we have the opportunity, collectively, to improve the efficiency of our operations and more effectively serve our stakeholders.

Phase two of the Commission's education program initiative has begun with the award of a contract to a joint venture of National History Day and the George Mason University Center for History and New Media to create a World War II-focused, education program developed by teachers that will help students better understand the service, experience and sacrifice of American armed forces that served and died during the war in Northern Europe.

Products related to World War I, developed in partnership with the University of North Carolina and Virginia Tech as phase one of our education program, will be completed by the end of this year.

The Commission received a new mission responsibility in fiscal year 2014 with completion in December 2013 of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the U.S. and the Republic of the Philippines, giving ABMC the ability to restore and maintain Clark Veterans Cemetery in the Philippines as ABMC's 25th cemetery. The action was contemplated by the Dignified Burial and Other Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act (Public Law 112–260), signed into law by President Obama in January 2013. Our staff at Manila American Cemetery began basic maintenance of the cemetery immediately upon signature of the MOU, as well as, restoration of the perimeter fence and construction of a temporary equipment storage facility. We are awaiting the completion of an engineering assessment of the physical condition of the cemetery and expect initial results this month. We will carefully analyze those results to develop recommendations regarding appropriate next steps that will guide future restoration plans, long-term maintenance requirements, and budget requests beginning in the fiscal year 2017 budget cycle.

Although ABMC's core mission remains unchanged, in order that we appropriately continue to honor our Nation's fallen, we have found it essential to place emphasis on "telling the story" of these brave men and women. As we find ourselves further in time from the seminal events we commemorate, it is critical that we provide context for younger generations of Americans who have little understanding of why their fellow Americans rest in the soil of England, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, or the Philippines.

Our visitor centers at Normandy, Cambridge, Sicily-Rome and Pointe du Hoc, and the projects underway or planned, have inestimable value in enabling understanding of the historical events surrounding the "the glory of their deeds" and the placement of these cemeteries. As such, we are re-invigorating our strategic plan to set forth a path focused on better supporting this essential mission. In addition to our standing mission and vision, inspired by General Pershing's foundational statement; and our core values of excellence, integrity, stewardship, commitment and respect; we have codified a new set of guiding principles. These principles were designed to help fill a void in our educational and historical preservation activities, along with informing our new interpretive services program:

We Will Tell their Story

We will preserve, communicate, and interpret the stories of competence, courage and sacrifice of those we honor, while providing historical context for why our com-

memorative sites were established, the men and women we honor, and the values for which they fought and died. Recognizing the changing demographics of our audiences, we will pursue opportunities at our sites and through education programs and emerging technologies to educate and inform our audiences in a way that evokes a lasting, personal connection.

We Will Preserve our Heritage Assets

We will protect and maintain our commemorative sites to their original design intent and to exceptional standards. ABMC commemorative sites are completed works of civic art that reflect the Nation's perpetual commitment to the service and sacrifice honored within them. The horticultural features defined by the original landscape architects are integral to these sites. They will be maintained in a manner that enhances a sense of awe and tranquility and that reflect their status as important heritage assets. We will use noble materials to preserve and maintain the structural features of our sites to a "like new" standard that appropriately honors those for whom they were erected. We will plan and execute infrastructure projects that support stewardship and preservation, actively seeking traditional craftsmen and trades, while evaluating state of the art techniques, technology and products that produce the same results.

We Will Develop our Cultural and Historical Resources

We will actively collect and document archival, photographic, and dimensional materials that enhance scholarship in and interpretation of our mission and our heritage assets. To facilitate management of these assets at the highest professional levels, we will maintain a thoughtful, clear and relevant scope of collections policy and a collection management plan, and routinely document our historical property, allowing us to learn and share critical information with the public and our stakeholders. We will engage in comprehensive planning, including all aspects of collections management. These management activities will focus on professional standards and concepts of inventory, assessment, treatment and management, specifically targeted to areas of Heritage Assets Management such as architecture, landscape architecture, archival and museum sciences, material science, forensic archeology, anthropology and related fields.

These guiding principles will clarify our decision making and shape our way forward as a world class public history organization. When fully developed, our new strategic plan will signal a significant pivot in mission emphasis for the American Battle Monuments Commission.

As we move toward 2020, we will continue our emphasis on maintaining the highest standard for our memorials and cemeteries, while providing a first class visitor education experience at each of our sites.

In conclusion, I invite each of you to visit our commemorative sites on your future travels, to see for yourselves our stewardship of the resources provided to the Commission to execute the responsibilities assigned to us by the Administration and the Congress.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs by the
Hon. Max Cleland, Secretary, American Battle Monuments Commission

Since 1923, our purpose has not changed—to commemorate the service and achievements of America's armed forces. 2014 has been a significant commemorative year: the 70th Anniversary of the D–Day landings at Normandy; the 70th anniversary of Operation Market Garden at Netherlands; and the 70th anniversary of Operation Dragoon at Rhone. Although the 100th anniversary of the United States entry into the Great War will not begin until April 2017, the Commission's eight World War I cemeteries in Europe will receive increased attention as visitors travel to those battlefields.

Visitor centers at our Cambridge and Sicily-Rome cemeteries were dedicated on Memorial Day, and the renovated visitor center at the Pointe du Hoc Ranger Monument was dedicated in June. Visitor center renovation projects at two World War I cemeteries—Meuse-Argonne in France and Flanders Field in Belgium—are in design, and three additional visitor center projects are in various stages of development: at our Honolulu Memorial; at Manila; and at the World War I Chateau-Thierry Monument in France. We also have two new monuments in development: at Midway Island and for New Zealand's national memorial park. Both projects are

part of an initiative to honor significant achievements of U.S. forces that have not previously been commemorated by the Commission.

Closer to home, we partnered with the National Park Service to renovate and upgrade kiosks and educational content at the World War II and Korean War memorials on the National Mall, and we are strengthening our collaboration with Arlington National Cemetery, defining opportunities to share best practices and training. Likewise, we continue our long-standing relationship with the National Cemetery Administration through advisory committees and our shared interest in the Honolulu Memorial.

Phase two of the Commission's education program has begun with award of a contract to National History Day and the George Mason University Center for History and New Media, to create a World War II-focused education program developed by teachers. Products related to World War I, developed in partnership with the University of North Carolina and Virginia Tech as phase one of our education program, will be completed by the end of this year.

The Commission received a new mission responsibility in fiscal year 2014 when Clark Veterans Cemetery in the Philippines became ABMC's 25th cemetery. We are awaiting the completion of an engineering assessment of the physical condition of the cemetery and expect initial results this month. We will carefully analyze those results to develop recommendations regarding appropriate next steps that will guide future restoration plans, long-term maintenance requirements, and budget requests beginning in the fiscal year 2017 budget cycle.

ABMC's core mission remains unchanged, but to appropriately honor our Nation's fallen, it is essential that we tell the stories of these brave men and women. We are re-invigorating our strategic plan to set forth a path focused on better supporting this essential mission; we have codified a new set of guiding principles for this effort: We will tell their story; we will preserve our heritage assets; and we will develop our cultural and historical resources. We will continue our emphasis on maintaining the highest standard for our memorials and cemeteries, while providing a first class visitor education experience at each of our sites.

STATEMENT OF THE
TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS (TAPS)
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE & MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
DECEMBER 9, 2014

Hearing: "Timeless Honor: Reviewing Current Operations of our National Cemeteries"

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. Opinions on Current Legislative Issues Facing National Cemeteries
Discusses, H.R. 1957, the Volunteer Veterans for Cemetery Service Act; H.R.2039; H.R.2157; H.R.2209; H.R. 3369, Hmong Veterans' Service Recognition Act; H.R. 3506, the Honor Our Fallen Heroes With Dignity Act of 2013; H.R. 3876, the Burial with Dignity for Heroes Act of 2014; H.R. 4399, the Comprehensive Department of Veterans Affairs Performance Management and Accountability Reform Act of 2014; H.R. 4712, the Veterans National Remembrance Act; S. 2951, the Veterans Dignified Burial Act.

II. Feedback about the VA National Cemetery Administration (NCA)
Our 131 national cemeteries honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans and service members for their country. Discusses recent Office of Inspector General reports about NCA and delays in burial allowance benefits, which are not paid through the NCA, but do impact how families view their treatment by the Department of Veterans Affairs and delay families from settling estates.

III. Arlington National Cemetery
Discusses events at the cemetery, the memento policy at section 60 where the Iraq and Afghanistan war dead are interred, the memento collection project at section 60, and the continued lack of a survivor representative on the Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery.

IV. Recommendations for Improvement

(1) For the National Cemetery Administration at the Department of Veterans Affairs, continue progress on the Rural Veterans Burial Initiative in response to the OIG report.

(2) Ask the Acting VA Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs and the subcommittee to initiate discussions with the Veterans Benefits Administration to improve the payment of burial allowance benefits.

(3) At Arlington National Cemetery, continue to work with TAPS and to publicize the access issues that occur on major holidays so surviving families are aware of logistics concerns.

(4) Continue the surviving family town hall meetings at Arlington National Cemetery twice per year. Continue the compromise with surviving families who want to leave mementos at section 60 that does not impair family grieving, impinge on mourning practices, nor detract from the dignity and solemnity of the cemetery.

(5) Nominate or appoint a surviving family member with a loved one interred at Arlington National Cemetery to the Advisory Committee for Arlington National Cemetery.

We are pleased to have the opportunity to submit this testimony on behalf of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS).

TAPS is the national organization providing compassionate care for the families of America's fallen military heroes. TAPS was founded in 1994 by a group of surviving families following the deaths of their loved ones in a military plane crash. Since then, TAPS has offered comfort and care to more than 50,000 people. The journey through grief following a military death can be isolating and the long-term impact of grief is often not understood in our society today. On average, it takes a person experiencing a traumatic loss five to seven years to reach his or her "new normal."

TAPS has extensive contact with the surviving families of America's fallen military service members, making TAPS uniquely qualified to comment on issues affecting the survivors left behind. Survivors are referred to TAPS through our relationships with the Armed Services, casualty assistance officers, and direct contact.

In 2013, TAPS sadly welcomed 4,039 new people (11 per day) grieving the death of a loved one in military service to America. In 2013, the number of people turning to TAPS for help and support remained 37% above 2011 levels. In 2012, TAPS welcomed 4,807 new survivors (13 per day) grieving the death of a service member or recent veteran. This number represents a 46% increase over the number of new people coming into TAPS in 2011, when TAPS welcomed on average, 7 people per day.

The 24/7 TAPS National Military Survivor Helpline receives on average 955 calls per month, or 31 calls per day. It received 11,463 calls in 2013. Average talk time for the first conversation with a new survivor is 90 minutes. Many new survivors are in a state of distress and need comprehensive support through peer mentoring, connections to grief counseling and supportive programs like TAPS seminars and camps.

On average, 2-3 new people contact TAPS each day requesting help in coping with the death by suicide of a service member or recent veteran. More than 4,000 people grieving a death by suicide receive care and support from TAPS, representing 19% of the TAPS caseload. However, the true number of these families within the TAPS caseload is closer to 30%, because many deaths that are ultimately ruled suicides are initially classified by the military as an unknown cause of death or as under investigation.

TAPS provides peer-based emotional support, grief and trauma resources, grief seminars and retreats for adults, Good Grief Camps for children, online and in-person care groups, casework assistance, connections to community-based care, and a 24/7 resource and information helpline for all who have been affected by a death in the Armed Forces. Services are provided to families at no cost to them. In a year, TAPS has 32 contacts with each survivor, through the TAPS magazine, invitations to events, anniversary cards, and other communications.

We do all of this without financial support from the Department of Defense. TAPS is funded by the generosity of the American people.

We appreciate deeply the invitation from the subcommittee, and we would like to submit the following statement on the management of our national cemeteries.

I. Opinions on Current Legislative Issues Facing National Cemeteries

The subcommittee has requested our opinion on recent legislative matters concerning the administration of the National Cemetery Administration and Arlington National Cemetery.

Regarding **H.R. 1957**, the Volunteer Veterans for Cemetery Service Act, which would authorize the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to accept voluntary services from veterans and veterans service organizations at national cemeteries. TAPS appreciates this legislation's intent to provide improved

educational programs that would include veterans sharing with visitors the cemetery the stories of their military service.

Regarding **H.R.2039**, to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to furnish headstones and markers for certain deceased veterans buried in veterans' cemeteries of Indian tribes. TAPS has no objection.

Regarding **H.R.2157**, to authorize the ground burial at Arlington National Cemetery of members of the United States Army who served honorably in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier platoon, Third Infantry Regiment (Old Guard), United States Army. TAPS has no objection and believes this would be an honorable way to recognize the service of these dedicated troops. Many members of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier platoon also volunteer in their free time as mentors for the TAPS Good Grief Camp.

Regarding **H.R.2209,** which directs the Secretary of the Army to establish a chain of command for Army national military cemeteries, including a military commander of the Army National Military Cemeteries to replace the current civilian director upon the termination of the tenure of such director. TAPS has no reason to believe a civilian director is a hindrance to the operations of a cemetery. It is preferred that the person who serves as director of the Army National Military Cemeteries be a person who has extensive training, education and experience in cemetery management, especially with older cemetery properties.

Regarding **H.R. 3369**, Hmong Veterans' Service Recognition Act, which authorizes burial in any open national cemetery under the control of the National Cemetery Administration of the remains of any individual: (1) who was naturalized pursuant to the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000 and who resided in the United States at the time of death; or (2) who the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) determines served with a special guerrilla unit or irregular forces operating from a base in Laos in support of the U.S. Armed Forces between February 28, 1961, and May 7, 1975, and who, at the time of death, resided in the United States and was a U.S. citizen or an alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence. TAPS has no objection.

Regarding **H.R. 3506,** the Honor Our Fallen Heroes With Dignity Act of 2013, which directs the Secretary of the Army to permit visitors to leave on any gravesite or government-furnished marker located in section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery any item that: (1) does not present a safety or health concern, (2) is not permanently affixed to such marker, and (3) does not interfere with the normal operations and maintenance procedures of the Cemetery. This act also requires the History Office of Arlington National Cemetery: (1) to collect, catalog, and store any other items left on a gravesite, headstone, or marker in section 60; and (2) at the end of each calendar month, to collect, catalog, and store all items left on gravesites, headstones, and government-furnished markers. This legislation would continue the memento collection pilot program beyond the current end date, which will be sometime in 2015. TAPS has no objection but believes the legislation would benefit from clarification to ensure the dignity of the cemetery is maintained. Currently, a compromise between the families and the administration permits small laminated photos and handcrafted items to remain at gravesites in section 60.

Regarding **H.R. 3876**, the Burial with Dignity for Heroes Act of 2014, which directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) to carry out a program to make grants to eligible entities to provide for the cost of burials for homeless veterans who: (1) are eligible to be buried in national cemeteries, and (2) the Secretary determines have no next-of-kin. TAPS has no objection and believes this would be a very appropriate way to honor the service of these veterans who do not have next of kin available.

Regarding **H.R. 4399**, the Comprehensive Department of Veterans Affairs Performance Management and Accountability Reform Act of 2014, which would raise standards for Senior Selective Service employees at the Department of Veterans Affairs, TAPS has no objection.

Regarding **H.R. 4712**, the Veterans National Remembrance Act, which directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA), in selecting a location for the establishment of a new national cemetery, to: (1) give priority to a state that does not have a national cemetery and that has the largest population of veterans among states without such a cemetery, and (2) ensure that such location is within 10 miles of a significant amount of the population to be served by such cemetery during the 25 years following its establishment. Permits the Secretary, after establishing two national cemeteries, to waive the requirement of giving priority to a state that does not have a national cemetery if such waiver will allow the Secretary to establish a cemetery that will serve a larger population of veterans. TAPS has no objection.

Regarding **S. 2951**, the Veterans Dignified Burial Act, which directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA): (1) upon confirming the veteran status of a deceased veteran in the custody of a local medical examiner, funeral director, county service group, or other similar entity, to request from such entity the specific date of the scheduled interment of such veteran; and (2) during each 30-day period following such request, to repeat the request until such entity confirms that such veteran has been interred. Requires the Secretary, by January 31 of each year, to submit to the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees a report on deceased veterans who were interred after the 30-day period following the date on which the Secretary made such request. Requires the report to include: (1) the number of deceased veterans who were not interred in such 30-day period during the prior year, (2) the number of such deceased veterans who are not interred as of the date of the report, and (3) the entity with custody of each such deceased veteran. TAPS has no objection. TAPS supports the timely interment of our veterans and would hope that a similar companion bill is introduced in the House of Representatives.

II. Feedback about the VA National Cemetery Administration (NCA)

Our 131 national cemeteries honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans and service members for their country. Since our founding in 1994, TAPS has worked cooperatively with the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The national cemetery system and its 131 cemeteries is the ultimate metaphor for the TAPS model of honoring the service and sacrifice of all those who died while serving in the Armed Forces, regardless of where or how they died.

The shrine status of our national cemeteries is deeply appreciated by survivors and reflects the care and devotion of our nation to honoring those who serve and sacrifice for our freedoms. TAPS appreciates the stewardship of our national cemeteries undertaken by the National Cemetery Administration and its commitment to serving veterans and their families.

Over the last year, surviving families have read the same news reports and heard the same concerns that all of us have heard, about mismanagement at the Department of Veterans Affairs. We are encouraged by the fact that VA Secretary Robert McDonald and his staff have made a point of asking for survivors to be included in some discussions, and have included messaging around improved support for survivors.

We were concerned by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General report, "Administrative Investigation Prohibited Personnel Practice and Preferential Treatment National Cemetery Administration VA Central Office." This report details inappropriate behavior by the former head of the National Cemetery Administration. While this channeled attention and resources away from the operation of national cemeteries, it does not appear this situation significantly impacted national cemetery operations.

We were also concerned by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General report, "Audit of NCA's Rural Veterans Burial Initiative." The authors found that the National Cemetery Administration's Rural

Initiative does not adequately identify the number and percentage of veterans residing in rural areas who do not have reasonable access to a burial option. The authors found that NCA could not adequately identify the number and percentage of unserved veterans who reside in rural areas because it uses a methodology that identifies veterans residing within a 75-mile radius of a National, VA-funded State or tribal organization veterans' cemetery and does not classify veterans as rural, urban, or any other designation. In addition, NCA lacked a specific performance measurement that evaluated NCA's progress towards increasing service to rural veterans.

As a result, NCA cannot evaluate the level of service provided to veterans and their families residing in rural areas throughout the eight targeted states and the entire Nation. Without this veteran population information, NCA cannot adequately report to Congress, and other stakeholders, its performance on serving rural veterans.

We concur with the recommendation of the report authors, who recommended the Acting Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs establish a methodology to identify the number and percentage of served and unserved rural veterans, publish a national map showing the areas and number of served and unserved rural veterans, and establish performance goals for the percentage of rural and urban veterans served. The Acting Undersecretary concurred with the recommendations and submitted acceptable corrective action plans.

TAPS caseworkers continue to support surviving families who need assistance in making arrangements to inter a loved one who died while serving in the Armed Forces or while in veteran status. We assist families with questions about proving eligibility to be buried in a national cemetery, requesting medallions from the VA which can be used to signify a veteran's gravesite in a private cemetery, filing paperwork to request a marker change in a national cemetery, and filing paperwork for burial benefits.

While we realize that the NCA is not responsible for the payment of burial allowances by the Veterans Benefits Administration, this is an issue which we would like to highlight for the subcommittee. VA burial allowances are partial reimbursements of an eligible Veteran's burial and funeral costs. When the cause of death is not service related, the reimbursements are generally described as two payments: (1) a burial and funeral expense allowance, and (2) a plot or interment allowance.

Even though burial allowances, ranging from $300-$2,000, are not managed by the NCA, when excessive delays in payment of these allowances happen, they often sour the experience of the family. The perception of the surviving family is that these agencies are connected. And delays in payment can delay the closure of a decedent's estate and delay the family in being able to move forward following the death.

Each pending burial claim represents a family that is waiting for their VA burial benefits. Looking at the VA's Monday Morning Work Load reports on a quarterly basis, the number of pending burial allowance claims is currently below what it was five years ago and great progress has been made this year to reduce the number of pending VA burial benefit claims. The volume of pending claims appeared to peak at just under 67,000 pending claims in 2012 and began to decline in 2013. That decline has accelerated in 2014 with the volume of pending burial claims cut by more than half this year.

12/01/14 – 17,181 pending claims
10/06/14 – 18,970 pending claims
07/07/14 – 20,336 pending claims
04/07/14 – 38,488 pending claims
01/04/14 – 45,225 pending claims

12/31/13 – 44,997 pending claims
09/30/13 - 45,671 pending claims
07/01/13 - 51,078 pending claims
04/01/13 - 62,094 pending claims

12/31/12 - 63,979 pending claims
10/01/12 - 63,126 pending claims
07/02/12 - 66,754 pending claims
04/02/12 - 65,835 pending claims
01/03/12 - 59,204 pending claims

10/03/11 - 49,819 pending claims
07/05/11 - 49,819 pending claims
04/04/11 - 37,976 pending claims
01/03/11 - 28,115 pending claims

10/04/10 - 26,609 pending claims
07/06/10 - 26,854 pending claims
04/05/10 - 27,198 pending claims
01/04/10 - 22,710 pending claims

The delay in benefits reflects on the entire VA, not just the Veterans Benefits Administration. TAPS also appreciates the subcommittee's interest in this matter. While we realize the burial allowance benefit does not rest within his jurisdiction for his agency, TAPS would appreciate it if Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Ronald E. Walters, could inquire with the Veterans Benefits Administration about this situation and ask what could be done to lower the volume of pending claims even further.

III. Arlington National Cemetery

It has been a significant year for Arlington National Cemetery, with the celebration of the cemetery's 150th anniversary. We appreciate the attention to history that has been part of the celebration and the way it has helped the public better understand the sacrifices our military service members and veterans make for our country. The cemetery continues to make progress, is working toward expansion, and we feel this track record of progress is helping surviving families move forward beyond the scandals and revelations of 2010.

TAPS has worked proactively with surviving families and the administration of Arlington National Cemetery for many years. During the scandal which shook the confidence and faith of the American people in the cemetery, we hosted a public forum in 2010 for families to meet the new superintendent and executive director of the Army Cemeteries Program. We also supported families grappling with issues connected to the mismanagement at the cemetery during the 2010 scandal, including two families who dis-interred their loved ones to determine if they were buried in the correct locations. We are relieved to be beyond those difficult days and to see improved management and financial oversight in place.

Challenges Visiting Arlington National Cemetery for Surviving Families on Major Holidays
TAPS has received complaints from families concerning problems visiting Arlington National Cemetery on major holidays, such as Memorial Day or Veteran's Day. Some of these problems occur because families are traveling from out of town, do not live in the Washington, D.C. area, and are not aware of the security logistics involved in major dignitaries going into and out of the cemetery for official ceremonies. Or they are not aware of the logistics involved in a major event like Wreaths Across America, when a family is not able to drive onto the grounds with a valid family pass, due to the logistics involved with the arrival and distribution of the wreaths. A visit by the President or Vice President often means a security lockdown on the bridge entrance to the cemetery and any people just outside the gates are turned away.

A surviving father contacted TAPS after Memorial Day when he and his wife rode their motorcycles to Arlington National Cemetery to visit their son's gravesite. Unfortunately, because of when they arrived during a security lockdown, they were turned away by the guards at the gate. The father wrote:

> "I can't adequately express how horrible it was to see my wife on her motorcycle pleading with the guard through her tears asking to visit our son. It was heartbreaking and outside my realm of belief. We never thought we wouldn't be allowed to visit our son's gravesite. Particularly on the day set aside by our nation to honor and remember those who gave all. Angry and disappointed beyond words we pulled onto the exit we were told to use.
>
> I understand the need to protect the President. But, there were other families who were already inside the cemetery visiting their loved ones when the guards started directing traffic away. Honestly, we were stunned. We will go back another day, another time, but it is our sincere hope that no parent, spouse, or sibling will ever be told they can't visit their fallen hero."

Because of these concerns, TAPS staff met in July with Arlington National Cemetery staff to discuss how we might assist with distributing event and logistics information to survivors in advance of major holidays, so these difficult situations could be avoided. We felt that by providing detailed information to families about these events in advance, we might help lessen the likelihood of families being turned away at the gate and avoid some of the pain and difficulty situations like this pose. Families could then plan their visits to the cemetery knowing the logistical challenges they might face.

For example, we have distributed information to families about the Wreaths Across America event on December 13, 2014. This is a logistically complex event and survivors with valid Arlington National Cemetery passes for their vehicles will not be permitted to drive into the cemetery on December 13, 2014, as they normally would, until after 3pm. We also provide a TAPS presence at section 60 during the wreath event to offer grief support for families as needed. TAPS seeks to continue to cooperate with the cemetery administration to provide support for grieving families who are in the cemetery on these special holidays.

The Practice of Leaving Mementos at Section 60

At this time last year, a dispute erupted between the cemetery administration and a group of grieving military families with loved ones interred in section 60, where the Iraq and Afghanistan active duty burials occur. In late July and August 2013, cemetery staff removed mementos and items left at the gravesites by families, many of which had been there for extended periods of time. Admittedly, many of these items violated the floral policy of the cemetery. The "enforcement" of the floral policy in section 60 represented a significant departure from the status quo, as the cemetery had permitted families for four years a degree of latitude in what they left at gravesites, and typically only removed items that were deemed "unsightly."

TAPS participated in an emotional family town hall meeting in October 2014 with the Arlington National Cemetery administrative leadership team, where we provided support for survivors. The families were very upset about the removal of mementos in section 60 and were saddened to see the section stripped bare. At the same time, the superintendent and his staff expressed concern about the appearance of the section and their concerns about safety and decorum.

It should be noted that the families themselves have a variety of opinions about what is appropriate to leave at gravesites and that the leaving of items at gravesites is a custom that goes back centuries and is influenced by personal beliefs, religious practice and family custom. Some people leave mementos not because they are "stuck" in their grief, but rather because they are trying to incorporate their late loved one into their new life after the loss. Rather than viewing the practice of leaving mementos at gravesites as a way for people to be held back in their grief, many families talk about how leaving an item helps them live a normal life.

Hearing the concerns of the families, Superintendent Patrick Hallinan indicated his willingness to work with the families and offered a compromise, allowing them to leave small laminated photos and handcrafted items at the gravesites in section 60 during the non-growing season (when the lawns are mowed less frequently) until they become unsightly or present a hazard to the mowing and trimming process.

The families very much appreciated this offer and volunteered to standardize their photos to a particular size if necessary. The families also offered and have followed through on working to educate each other about the cemetery policies and to encourage others to comply with the policies. The families are very grateful for this compromise and appreciate Superintendent Hallinan's support.

An additional town hall meeting between families and the administration was held in April 2014. As a follow up to that meeting on April 9th, the cemetery communicated via email to families that Superintendent Hallinan decided to approve the families' request to continue the compromise allowing small laminated photos and handcrafted items at the gravesites in section 60 through the mowing season as a pilot. The administration also indicated its appreciation of the "collective support rendered to eliminate the placement of items in the trees and shrubbery as well as the general cooperation with the current policy over the winter months."

It is the hope of the families that this compromise permitting small laminated photos and handcrafted items will be continued into the future and from our discussions with the cemetery administration, it appears that will be the case for the immediate future. The families are actively trying to support the cemetery in maintaining the section in a way that honors our service members and their sacrifices. This included assisting in the wreath cleanup in February and talking one-on-one with families in the section throughout the year. The families are very grateful to be permitted to leave small laminated photos and handcrafted items at the gravesites in section 60.

Family/Administration Town Hall Meetings
We believe these meetings have assisted surviving military families and the administration in communicating more effectively and contributed to better understanding between both parties. Rather than being at odds, the families and the administration are partnering to accommodate each other's needs and working together to ensure the cemetery is maintained at a high standard. We encourage the cemetery administration to schedule town hall meetings with survivors at least twice per year and to publicize the meetings in advance so families can attend.

Section 60 Pilot Memento Collection Project
Since 2009, the Army has operated a section 60 memento history collection project within the cemetery as a pilot program. This program was created to collect some of the historically interesting and unusual items in the cemetery from gravesites of those who died by hostile act in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The pilot section 60 memento program emerged after media reports surfaced revealing that cemetery staff were throwing away not only the mementos, but also military medals left on gravesites by battle buddies. The public, and many survivors, had long assumed that the mementos left at section 60, were collected, in a manner similar to what occurs at the Vietnam Wall (where a collection occurs under the auspices of the National Park Service). There was a public outcry in response to media reports, which led to the creation of the pilot program.

In October 2014, the Advisory Committee for Arlington National Cemetery unanimously recommended to the Secretary of the Army to end the Section 60 Mementos Pilot Program no later than December 31, 2014 or upon the withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan. The Committee unanimously voted to recommend that the items collected and retained as part of the Section 60 Mementos Pilot Program be declared and treated as a historical memorial collection.

In February 2014, the Secretary of the Army endorsed their recommendation saying:

> "I endorse the recommendation to establish a specified end date to the collection of mementos in Section 60 which capture the unique sacrifice of our families and service members in the Global War on Terrorism. I have directed the implementation of a policy to ensure continued preservation of the uniqueness of Section 60, a first interment section where the majority of service members killed in current contingencies are interred, while also ensuring the dignity and decorum which is worthy of our Nation's most treasured shrine. Specifically, I concur with the Committee's recommendations for the Army to end the current Section 60 Mementos collection program no later than December 31, 2014 or upon withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan and to designate all items previously collected and retained as a historical memorial collection."

Our understanding is that the pilot memento collection project will end sometime after hostilities cease. It should be noted that if this is the case, the previous policy removing and disposing of items that are not small laminated photos and handcrafted items, will commence again.

Survivor Representative Needed on the Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery
As we testified in April 2013 and October 2013, the community of surviving families was saddened greatly by the death from cancer of Janet Manion in April 2012. Mrs. Manion was a gold star mother who served on the Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery. Her son is buried at section 60 and she also resides with him. Mrs. Manion was the only surviving family member of a service member buried at Arlington National Cemetery on the committee. More than two years after her death, no survivor has been named to replace her.

The current members of the committee have exceptional military and veterans service credentials, but none are identified as a surviving family member. This important stakeholder population – the families that are grieving their loved ones - is impacted by decisions made by the advisory committee and could contribute in a positive way to the decisions this committee makes. It is our understanding that a group of candidates are being considered and we hope that the selection process will be completed soon.

IV. Recommendations for Improvement

(1) For the National Cemetery Administration at the Department of Veterans Affairs, continue progress on the Rural Veterans Burial Initiative in response to the OIG report.

(2) Ask the Acting VA Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs and the subcommittee to initiate discussions with the Veterans Benefits Administration to improve the payment of burial allowance benefits.

(3) At Arlington National Cemetery, continue to work with TAPS and to publicize the access issues that occur on major holidays so surviving families are aware of logistics concerns.

(4) Continue the surviving family town hall meetings at Arlington National Cemetery twice per year. Continue the compromise with surviving families who want to leave mementos at section 60 that does not impair family grieving, impinge on mourning practices, nor detract from the dignity and solemnity of the cemetery.

(5) Nominate or appoint a surviving family member with a loved one interred at Arlington National Cemetery to the Advisory Committee for Arlington National Cemetery.

Curriculum Vitae – Ami Neiberger-Miller

Ami Neiberger-Miller is the part-time director of outreach and education at TAPS. Her work with TAPS includes working with the news media, designing strategic outreach campaigns, advising surviving families on media relations, speaking to organizations about TAPS, conducting online outreach to raise awareness with core audiences, writing press releases and other materials, and forging partnerships that build support for TAPS and surviving families.

Because she is a surviving family member, Neiberger-Miller brings a unique perspective to her role with TAPS. Her 22-year-old brother, U.S. Army Specialist Christopher Neiberger, was killed in action on August 6, 2007 by a roadside bomb while serving with the U.S. Army in Baghdad, Iraq. Her brother is buried in section 60 at Arlington National Cemetery among hundreds of others who gave the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq or Afghanistan. Her father-in-law, Marine Corps Captain (retired) Norman Vann Miller, who died in 2003 of natural causes, is buried in section 66 at Arlington National Cemetery. '

In her role as a staff member with TAPS, Neiberger-Miller has supported many surviving families of our fallen military and veterans in communicating with Arlington National Cemetery, organized and supported meetings between surviving families and administrative officials, assisted a family in applying for a burial waiver with the National Cemetery Administration, supported TAPS casework programs assisting surviving families in communicating with administrators, and represented TAPS at meetings with the National Cemetery Administration and Arlington National Cemetery.

Neiberger-Miller works frequently with journalists on stories related to survivors of our fallen military, issues impacting survivors, suicide and mental health care in the military, veteran's benefits, and post-traumatic stress disorder. She has been interviewed by CNN, MS-NBC, CBS Sunday Morning, ABC World News, National Public Radio, the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Associated Press and other media outlets. She appears in the HBO documentary "Section 60: Arlington National Cemetery" and is interviewed in the recently published book, "Section 60 Arlington National Cemetery: Where War Comes Homes."

Neiberger-Miller has devoted more than 15 years of her career to helping organizations improve how they communicate and work with the media. She specializes in helping nonprofit organizations like TAPS, improve their public relations strategies and outreach, with expertise in helping groups that support trauma survivors.

Neiberger-Miller has spoken at events sponsored by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University and the Carter Center. She has spoken on communications for nonprofits at American University, George Washington University, Marymount University, the Public Relations Society of America – National Capital chapter and Public Relations Society of America - Maryland chapter.

She holds bachelor's and master of arts degrees in history from the University of Florida and is accredited in public relations.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT
Neither Ami Neiberger-Miller, nor the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), have received any Federal grant or contract, relevant to the subject matter of this testimony, during the current or previous two fiscal years.

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TESTIMONY OF

DIANE M. ZUMATTO
AMVETS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

BEFORE THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS, SUBCOMMITTEE

ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE & MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION

CONCERNING

TIMELESS HONOR: REVIEWING CURRENT OPERATIONS OF OUR NATIONAL CEMETERIES

334 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
TUESDAY, 9 DECEMBER 2014

Introduction: Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus, and distinguished committee members, I am pleased, as always, to sit before you in support of our National Cemeteries. Though most of us go about our daily lives never thinking about the events surrounding our departure from this world, there is a lesser known branch of the Department of Veteran's Affairs, the National Cemetery Administration or NCA, whose responsibilities are to provide and maintain the final resting place for all honorably discharged American Veterans.

Our national cemeteries not only help foster patriotism and preserve our nation's history; their appearance also demonstrates the nation's appreciation for the selfless service and the sacrifices made by all American Veterans. In order for NCA to accomplish their mission of honoring "Veterans and their families with final resting places in national shrines and with lasting tributes that commemorate their service and sacrifice to our Nation," every national cemetery is required to adhere to rigorous standards necessary to not only attain, but retain, national shrine status.

Establishing a national cemetery as a national shrine suggests that the grounds, the gravesites and the surroundings are both beautiful and an awe-inspiring tribute to those who gave so much to preserve the American way of life. Each cemetery provides an enduring memorial to their sacrifice as well as a dignified and respectful setting for their final rest. Therefore, it is with this sacred duty in mind that we expect the stewardship, accessibility and maintenance of our entire NCA cemetery system be treated as the highest priority. AMVETS believes that the dignified burial of America's veterans is equally as important as any other service provided by the VA.

AMVETS Cemetery Oversight Visits*:* As the 'go-to' veteran service organization on National Cemetery issues, AMVETS has taken on the responsibility of conducting independent oversight visits of our National Cemeteries. Additionally, AMVETS is responsible for writing the NCA portion of the Independent Budget and testifies on cemetery issues throughout the year. In order to better meet these responsibilities, it became clear that a concerted effort to visit several National Cemeteries during the course of 2014 was in order. With the full support of AMVETS I was able to visit 7 National Cemeteries, in 4 different MSNs (Memorial Service Networks). While at Jefferson Barracks, I had the opportunity to view the operations of both NCA's Scheduling Office and National Training Center. I also had the rare privilege of visiting an Israeli Military Cemetery during a trip to Israel in October.

National Cemeteries Visited in 2014

MSN II - Memphis, TN; Shiloh, TN; and Corinth, MS (see photos # 1, # 2 & # 3, respectively)
MSN III - Dallas-Ft. Worth TX & Ft. Bliss, TX (see photos # 4 & # 5/#6, respectively)
MSN IV - Jefferson Barracks, MO (see photo # 7)
MSN V - Tahoma, WA (see photo # 8 & # 9)
Mount Herzl National Cemetery, Jerusalem, Israel (see photo # 10 & #11)

The goals of these visits are to ensure that our National Cemeteries are appropriately serving the needs of our veterans, meeting the requirements of the National Shrine Initiative and to expand the knowledge base for AMVETS staff involved in these issues. Each U.S. cemetery visit consisted of observation of all cemetery operations including:

- committal services and shelters;
- columbaria walls and memorials;
- interments - both casketed and cremated;
- raise and realign projects;
- scheduling and training operations; and
- meeting with all cemetery personnel (Grounds Keepers, office, Directors, Apprentices, etc.)

At each cemetery visited, the high level of care and respect afforded to each and every veteran (and their families), was impressive. The majority of NCA personnel are veterans themselves and they repeatedly expressed the deep sense of honor they felt in being a part of this last phase in a veteran's life. At every cemetery, whether on foot or in a vehicle, if an employee spotted anything amiss or anyone needing assistance – trash of any kind, out of place flags, folks needing directions, etc. – they immediately stopped to fix the situation and/or assist.

Perhaps the most impressive observation involves the extreme care in maintaining the 'chain of custody' of a veterans (or eligible family members) remains – from the moment they arrive at the cemetery entrance, where they are met by a Cemetery Representative who confirms the identity of the decedent, until they are carefully laid to rest – cemetery employees repeatedly verify the identification of the decedent and the location of their final resting place. Each step of the interment process is carefully recorded using drawings, maps, and landmarks and must be verified by multiple individuals before getting a final review and sign off at the end of each days work.

While each cemetery was unique, it was also in character with its surroundings, was imbued with a deep sense of tranquility and was an important part of the nearby communities. At every site, stories were told of the many dedicated visitors - some family members, others not - and their commitment to the individual cemeteries.

I'm pleased that I had my first opportunity to experience one of the 3 water-wise cemeteries in the NCA system in El Paso, Texas. Growing up in the North Eastern part of the country, I had some strong, personal reservations going into my visit to the Ft. Bliss National Cemetery. In fact, I visited a local VFW post the day before my visit, so that I could hear from some local veterans regarding the Ft. Bliss Cemetery. Interestingly, their biggest complaint wasn't the appearance of the cemetery, but the fact that they felt they had not had the opportunity to give any input into the process. To put it into their words, "by the time we heard about it, it was already a done deal; it was nothing more than an announcement of the decision to change to a water-wise cemetery."

Upon my arrival at the Ft. Bliss Cemetery I was briefed by the Director and other staff who seemed to be somewhat on the defensive, so I was braced for the worst. What I saw was quite literally beyond my expectations – the cemetery was not only serene, but it fit beautifully and seamlessly into the surrounding landscape. I honestly believe that grass, even if it could be maintained, would look 'garish' and completely inappropriate in that setting. This is not to say that there might not be other options available, as a matter of fact, Mount Herzl National Cemetery in Israel uses stone, rather than grass, as its main ground cover.

In summarizing my cemetery site visits, overall I was highly impressed with the extreme attention to detail, moved by the genuine care and concern, and satisfied that our veterans and their families were being treated to the highest quality of customer service. It is my hope too that with the ongoing support of AMVETS and the NCA, I will be able to continue visiting several National Cemeteries each year in order to serve as a better resource to both my *Independent Budget* partners and to this committee.

As far as NCA in general, they:

- have continued to move forward with plans for new National Cemeteries to increase veteran access to burial options (18 more expected by the end of this decade);
- are exploring new burial practice options to better meet the changing needs of our veterans;
- continue to award valuable grants to states, territories and tribal organizations, via the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program, for the establishment, expansion or improvement of state veteran cemeteries;
- are working on the implementation of a new reimbursement benefit (as authorized in PL 112-260) for a casket or urn for veterans being interred in a national cemetery who have no next of kin;
- are increasing flexibility in the headstone/marker application process (see proposed rule 2900-A095);

- are continually seeking ways to improve gravesite accountability; and
- doing their part to hire veterans, including homeless veterans, to fill NCA vacancies

Before I close, I need to bring the reiterate the fact that AMVETS strongly believes that the most important obligation of the NCA is honoring the memory of the men and women who have selflessly served in our Armed Forces, we expect the stewardship, accessibility and maintenance of our entire NCA cemetery system, as well as Arlington National Cemetery, be treated as the highest priority. AMVETS believes that the dignified burial of America's veterans is equally as important as any other service provided by the VA. It is with this in mind that, we fully support extending advanced appropriations to the remainder of the discretionary and mandatory programs, services and benefits accounts of the VA, which would include the NCA.

Finally, I want to thank each member of this subcommittee for their tireless support of all American Veterans, but I would like to say a special word of recognition to Chairman Runyan whose leadership on this subcommittee has been second to none, so – Thank You, thank you, thank you for all of your hard work and AMVETS (and I) wish you well as you move forward.

National Cemetery Photo Gallery 2014 – All Photos taken by D. Zumatto

Photo # 1 - Memphis National Cemetery

Photo # 2 - Shiloh National Cemetery

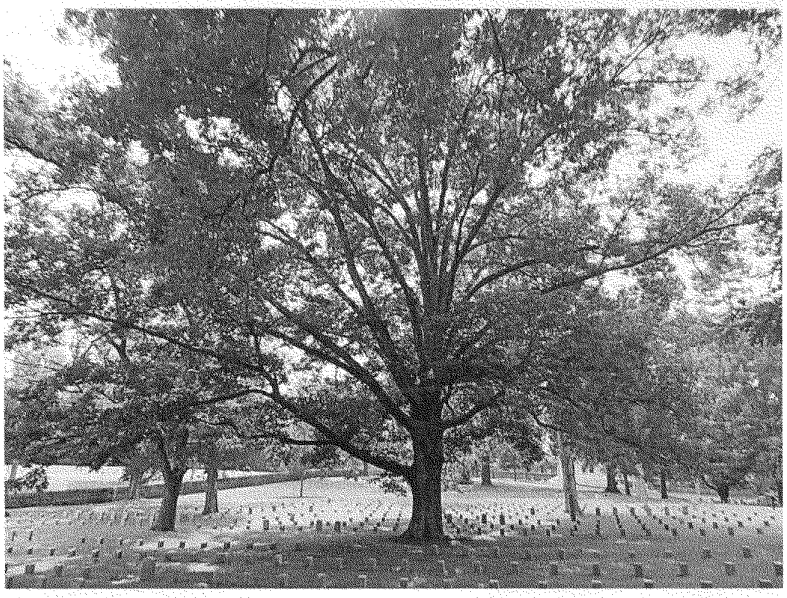

Photo # 3 - Corinth National Cemetery

Photo # 4 – Dallas-Ft. Worth National Cemetery

Photo # 5 – Ft. Bliss National Cemetery

Photo # 6 – Ft. Bliss National Cemetery

Photo # 7 – Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery

Photo # 8 – Tahoma National Cemetery

Photo # 9 – Tahoma National Cemetery

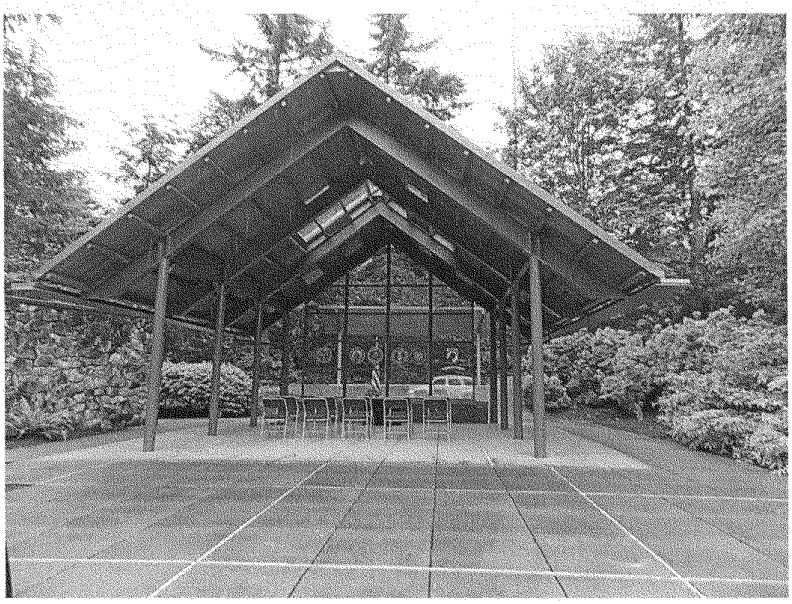

Photo # 10 - Mount Herzl National Cemetery, Israel

Photo # 11 - Mount Herzl National Cemetery, Israel

1 December 2014

The Honorable Jon Runyan, Chairman
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance
& Memorial Affairs
337 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Runyan:

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 of the federal government.

Sincerely,

Diane M. Zumatto

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.

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