

**Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials Minutes**  
**June 22-23, 2016**  
**Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington, D.C.**

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**VA**



**U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs**

**National Cemetery  
Administration**

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**ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CEMETERIES AND MEMORIALS MINUTES**

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## ATTENDEES

### Committee Members Present

Leslie Beavers  
Michael Horne  
John (Jack) Kelly, Chairman  
Lewis Sumner, Jr.

Amy Locklear  
Lupe Saldana  
Edith Smith

### Committee Members Absent

Gordon Lightfoot  
Wil Ebel  
Joe Foster

### Ex-officio Members Present

Katharine Kelley – Arlington National Cemetery  
Tom Sole - American Battle Monuments Commission  
Charles Sellars - Andersonville National Historic Site

### Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Attendees

Robert Snyder, VA Chief of Staff  
Michael Feil, MyVA Task Force  
Jeffrey “Boomer” Moragne, Director, Advisory Committee Management Office  
Carol Borden, Staff Attorney, Office of General Counsel  
Jelessa Burney, Program Specialist, Office of the Secretary, Advisory Committee Management Office

### National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Participants

Ronald E. Walters, Interim Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs  
Matthew Sullivan, Deputy Under Secretary for Finance and Planning  
Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs  
Anita Hanson, Deputy Under Secretary for Management  
Eric Powell, Acting Director, Memorial Programs Service  
Patricia (Tish) Tyson, Director of Communications and Management Service  
Steve Fezler, Program Specialist, Office of Field Programs  
James Geleta, Director, Policy and Planning Service  
Robin Cooper, Advisory Committee Program Manager and Designated Federal Officer  
Barbara Lewandrowski, Program Analyst  
Jessica Schiefer, Public Affairs Specialist  
Richelle Taylor, Public Affairs Specialist  
Shawn Graham, Public Affairs Specialist  
Robert C. Thomas, Geographic Information System/Global Positioning System Program Manager

### Public Attendees

None to report

### **Wednesday, June 22, 2016**

The spring meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials for FY 2016 was held at the 1100 First Street, NE, Washington, DC in Conference Room 104. The Committee convened at 8 a.m. for a meet and greet.

### **Call to Order, Welcome, and Pledge of Allegiance**

Committee Chairman Jack Kelly called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. and gave opening remarks. Committee members stood and recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

Chairman Kelly introduced Robin Cooper who gave an overview of the agenda for the two-day meeting and welcomed new Committee member, Colonel Lewis Gordon Sumner, Jr., USA (Retired)

### **Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly introduced Ronald E. Walters, Interim Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs to provide opening remarks.

### **Interim Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs,**

### **Ronald E. Walters**

### **Opening Remarks**

Ronald Walters provided an overview of ongoing NCA Projects and NCA's 2017 Budget Request.

NCA's budget is focused on better serving our Veterans. It has several key areas:

- Operations and Maintenance (O&M) reflects a \$15 million increase (5.5%) above the 2016 appropriation and 7.5% increase over the 2016 requested level
- The O&M account includes funding for 1,809 FTE up from the FY 2016 level of 1789
- Increase of 20 FTE for Pre-Need (4), Burial Scheduling (11), and Legacy Program (5)

As of January 31, 2016, NCA has 68 Cemetery Directors and three Acting. Operations budget includes robust and ongoing Director Intern Training Program to help ensure a trained cadre of professionals is ready to take over as cemetery directors.

National Shrine funding totals \$12.5M, up 16.8 % over planned obligations for FY 2016 however we are still far from previous year funding totals (\$46M in 2010) while facing increased workload to address gravesite renovations to raise and realign headstones and markers and repair and replace turf. The ongoing costs of perpetual care will continue in order to maintain the



highest standards ensuring Veterans and families receive the very best care that they have both earned and deserve.

The request for Major Construction includes \$137 million for two gravesite expansion projects and two new cemeteries.

The request for Minor Construction is \$56.9 million, a decrease of \$12.1 million from 2016. NCA has requested \$45 million for the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP), a reduction of \$1 million from 2016. Survey data from 2014 and 2015 indicates that satisfaction with the quality of service at State or Tribal Veterans Cemeteries is comparable to the high satisfaction at a VA national cemetery.

### **Major Construction**

NCA requests \$193.9 million for construction funding in 2017.

- Our major construction requests of \$137 million includes \$72 million for two new cemeteries, one in Western NY and the other in Southern Colorado and 2 Phase II gravesite expansion projects in Jacksonville and South Florida
- Western NY – Phase I- 55 acres of land and 12,200 gravesites, including development of 5,900 gravesites for casketed interments, 4,800 columbarium niches and 1,500 in ground sites for cremated remains
- Southern CO. Phase I develop 13,300 gravesites including full casket and cremains sites: 5,800 casketed interments, 4,500 columbarium niches, 3,000 in ground sites for cremated remains
- Jacksonville – Phase II development of 30 of the remaining 435 undeveloped acres, providing over 20,000 gravesites for both casketed and cremated remains
- South Florida – Phase II development of 25 of the remaining 189 undeveloped acres providing nearly 22,000 gravesites for both casketed and cremated remains
- We are requesting a total \$56.9 million in minor construction funding to support our highest priority cemetery expansion and improvement projects

### **NCA Long Range Goals**

- Veterans and eligible family members will have increased access to burial benefits
- More Veterans and eligible family members will use VA burial and memorial benefits
- Veterans will be memorialized through enhanced tributes befitting their service and sacrifice to the nation
- Stakeholders will place greater trust in NCA based on enhanced accountability
- Stakeholders will be served more efficiently and effectively by NCA's internal capacity

The earlier access threshold to build a new VA national cemetery was 170,000 Veterans within 75 miles. The current threshold is 80,000 Veterans within 75 miles. With the new threshold in place, NCA identified 18 locations across the country for expansion. Thirteen will be full service national cemeteries of which eight will be located in rural locations. The remaining five are Urban Initiative columbaria-only cemeteries.

The new national cemeteries will include casket and columbaria interments. They are located in Omaha, Nebraska; Western New York; and Southern Colorado. Tallahassee and Cape Canaveral National Cemeteries opened in late 2015 and Omaha National Cemetery will open August 2016.

## Urban and Rural Initiative

NCA will open columbaria-only cemeteries to meet the needs of Veterans in densely populated metropolitan areas which include San Francisco and Chicago. NCA is developing columbaria-only cemeteries in response to a nationwide trend of Veterans choosing cremations over casket funerals. Almost half the burials (49%) in national cemeteries are for cremated remains. NCA will also improve access to Veterans who live in rural communities and open cemeteries in more remote places like Wyoming and Northern Wisconsin.

## Extending the Life of Existing National Cemeteries

NCA is preventing the loss of a burial option for Veterans who are currently served by an existing national cemetery in three ways: use of pre-placed vaults, construction of columbarium on existing land and new land acquisition.



- Pre-placed vaults decrease land requirements and gravesite construction costs by 50% because land does not have to be purchased and supporting sod and irrigation systems do not have to be installed. This program also reduces annual maintenance costs by \$34,000 per acre because of reduced mowing, irrigation, pesticide/fertilizer applications, and correcting soil settlement. The vaults also help keep headstones from sinking. Approximately 600,000 preplaced vaults were installed since FY 2000, saving 800 acres of land, \$24 million in land purchases, and \$136 million in maintenance costs
- In addition to pre-placed vaults, thousands of columbarium niches are in process of being designed and constructed at existing national cemeteries to keep up with demand for cremation
- NCA also extends the life of existing cemeteries through the purchase of additional land. Over the past three years, NCA has purchased 1,639 acres of land for new or existing cemetery expansion throughout the country. Examples are:
  - Morovis, Puerto Rico; 247 acres
  - Fayetteville, Arkansas; 2.4 acres

There are multiple property acquisitions that VA Real Property Service is currently acquiring before the end of calendar year 2016 and several more beyond that date.

## Major Construction

Major construction involves contracts greater than \$10 million. VCGS is a program that assists state and tribal organizations with construction and operations of state and tribal funded cemeteries.

## **Veterans Legacy Program**

- Official launch of Veterans Legacy Program held on Memorial Day, May 30, 2016 at the Riverside National Cemetery in Riverside, California.
    - Secretary Bob McDonald served as keynote speaker.
    - More than 2,500 attendees
    - Veterans Legacy Program
    - Launched at two pilot sites
      - Beaufort NC and Riverside NC
    - Developed online resources for the general public
      - Interactive maps
      - Lesson plans
      - Short videos
    - Partnership with ABMC to co-sponsor a “Teachers Institute”
      - Educators to conduct research at VA and ABMC cemeteries
- Next steps
- Develop similar resources at other VA national cemeteries
  - Expand local and national partnerships



## **Presentation of Certificates to New Committee Members**

Chairman Jack Kelly, VA Chief of Staff Robert Snyder and Interim Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Ron Walters, presented a certificate to new Committee member, Colonel Lewis Gordon Sumner, Jr., USA (Retired).



## **Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly introduced Robert D. Snyder, VA Chief of Staff.

## **Remarks by Robert Snyder, VA Chief of Staff**

Mr. Snyder’s remarks covered the origin and need for the MyVA initiative and how Secretary McDonald seeks to improve the overall Veteran Experience.

## **MyVA Initiative**

The MyVA Initiative is driven by four principles:

- Putting the Veteran's interests first
- Empowering employees and helping them deliver excellent customer service to improve the Veteran experience
- Improving or eliminating processes that impede good customer service
- Rethinking our internal structures and processes to become more Veteran-centric and productive

Mr. Snyder also reiterated the VA's mission; which is to ensure Veterans get the support they have earned.

## **Remarks by the MyVA Taskforce Program Manager, Michael Feil**

Snyder introduced Mr. Michael Feil, the current MyVA Program Manager. Feil cited NCA's outstanding customer service and how the administration's goals meshed with VA goals.

## **MyVA Vision**

- Puts the Veterans in control of how, when, and where they wish to be served
- Measures success by outcomes for the Veterans
- Integrates programs and organizations to optimize productivity and efficiency

## **MyVA Primary Focus**

- Improving the Veterans experience by examining Veteran-facing processes and organizations from the Veteran's perspective to enable every Veteran to have a seamless, integrated and responsive VA customer service experience every time
- Achieving support services excellence by identifying common services that are performed in support of VA mission components and seeking to optimize these services to increase efficiency and eliminate duplication

## **These Services Include:**

- Human Resources, Legal Services, Information Technology, Acquisitions & Logistics, Real Property Facilities Management, Public Affairs, Congressional Affairs, Budget & Finance, and Security & Preparedness
- Establishing a culture of continuous performance improvement so conditions are set at the local level for issues to be raised, addressed, and solutions replicated across as many facilities as needed to achieve enterprise level results
- Enhancing strategic partnerships by making better "matches" and formal partnerships between community, nonprofit, and other organizations and the work being done for Veterans at VA facilities across the country
- Improving the employee experience and focusing on "people and culture" so employees are empowered to better serve Veterans and their families

## **Community Veterans Engagement Boards**

Key Functions:

- Engage community resources
- Promote opportunities to benefit Veterans and the community
- Establish regular meetings and host both closed and open forums
- Foster community education on VA services and benefits

- Enable direct feedback from community leaders on Veterans issues during closed forums, which community VA leaders can then resolve
- Share efforts and outcomes with VA
- Enable direct feedback from Veterans and the public through open forums

### **Intended Community Outcomes:**

- An integrated VA presence in the community (VHA, VBA, NCA)
- Two-way communication between VA and community shareholders
- VA leaders understand local Veteran issues and can work in concert with other shareholders, including VSOs, to proactively address them
- Community leaders are educated and empowered to help Veterans leverage VA services in the community
- Veterans and local community members are informed of local VA strategies

Mr. Snyder also touted the benefits of state cemeteries and how they support MyVA initiatives and Veterans in underserved areas and took questions regarding the pending Commission on Care Report.

### **Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly introduced Mr. Jeffrey “Boomer” Moragne, Director, Advisory Committee Management Office and Staff Attorney Carol Borden, Office of General Counsel Attorney, for committee overview and ethics training.

### **Mr. Jeffrey “Boomer” Moragne, Advisory Committee Management Officer**

Mr. Jeffrey Moragne gave a brief history about the creation and administration of governmental Advisory Committees and addressed the ethics rules for the Advisory Committee members who are considered Special Government Employees (SGEs). SGE’s will serve less than 130 days during any 365-day period – with or without compensation. Mr. Moragne, also asked committee members to recommend capable replacements once their membership terms expired.

### **VA Office of General Counsel, Attorney Carol Borden**

Ms. Borden discussed the ethics rules governing SGE’s and provided contact information. She provided the annual compliance briefing that covers the two major components of ethics laws: standards of ethical conduct for the Executive Branch (not using public office for personal gain and not giving any unauthorized preferential treatment) and criminal conflict of interest. Attorney Borden reminded Committee members about the requirement to sign and submit their Ethics Review statements upon completion of their training.

### **Committee Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly recessed the Committee for lunch.

### **Break for Lunch-Noon-1 P.M.**

### **Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly reconvened the Committee and read Oral Public Comments.

### **Oral Public Comments and Response**

The Committee received written comments from Dr. Michael Cahn, Secretary, University of California Los Angeles Bicycle Academy (See Appendix A). Dr. Cahn’s requested Los Angeles National Cemetery (LANC) open its eastern pedestrian gates, which was closed following 9/11,

to pedestrians and cyclists. Mr. Cahn states that the intersection of Wilshire Blvd and I-405, ranked the busiest in the world presents a hazard and that an open cemetery would increase the safety of pedestrians and cyclists in the area. He also states that the cemetery is closed.

The Committee discussed the request and determined LANC has a specific mission to honor Veterans, and opening the gate to accommodate non-cemetery thru traffic would lessen the cemetery safety, security, and serenity, while making it substantially harder for NCA to meet its mission of serving Veterans and their families. NCA's primary mission is to honor Veterans and their families with national shrine cemeteries as if each day of the year was Memorial Day. "Thru traffic visitors" with no cemetery visitation purpose other than to shortcut across the VA national cemetery property, whether travelling by foot, wheelchair, skateboard, hover board, roller blade, bicycle, or scooter could adversely affect NCA mission by:

- a. Being disruptive to the cemetery visitor experience,
- b. Creating security concerns when occurring during non-business hours on evenings and weekends when cemetery staff are not present to monitor the thru traffic occurring on the cemetery grounds.
- c. Requiring VA and/or NCA manpower to monitor, police, and enforce cemetery rules and regulations on non-cemetery thru traffic persons.
- d. Presenting potential safety issues between cemetery corteges and visitor vehicles who would have to interact with and navigate thru non-cemetery visitor "through traffic" occurring by foot, wheelchair, skateboard, hover board, roller blade, bicycle, or scooter.

The cemetery is open to some new first and many second interments throughout the year and opening the gate can decrease the overall quality of the cemetery visitor experience.

### **Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly introduced Mr. James Geleta, Director of Policy and Planning Service and Digital Memorialization Work Group.

### **Digital Memorialization Work Group and Recommendations**

Overall Charge:

- o Recommend whether NCA should offer new "digital" memorials for Veterans interred in national cemeteries and, if so, the format of such an initiative

Three new memorial options considered in the 2014 NCA Emerging Burial Preferences Study:

- o Locate Veteran's gravesite via a GPS-supported application
- o A memorial that includes information about the Veteran's military service
- o A memorial that includes information about the Veteran's personal life or post-military activities

### **Working Group Recommendations**

- o Digital memorials are consistent with NCA mission, to not offer them would be a failure of NCA's mission
- o Digital Memorials are commonplace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- o Legacy.com, Ancestry.com, Genealogy.com are Supported by the Emerging Burial Practices Study
- o Veterans surveyed prefer digital memorials by 3:1 ratio
- o Concerns with Federal involvement can be mitigated

- Limit information to what VA already collects
- Do not share information with third parties
- VA must tightly control content to ensure honor and dignity
- Private sites such as Legacy.com do not offer sufficient control
- No advertising, public comment, or read/write capability outside of VA
- GPS-supported system that provides:
  - Location of gravesite to include a photo of the gravesite
  - Veteran’s military information that is currently collected
  - Include gravesite location of spouse/dependent
  - Option: Photo of Veteran, perhaps in uniform – *discussed but no group consensus*
- No Veteran personal information outside of military information
- Partnerships are acceptable with
  - Other Federal agencies
  - New memorials should include National Park Service (NPS) and State/Tribal partners
  - Arlington and ABMC offer good examples
  - Contractor support is acceptable
- Survey results showed somewhat lower support among 60-79 age group
  - Older Veterans may engage less in technology
  - This may change over time – today’s younger Veterans may be more tech-savvy later in life than today’s older veterans
  - Interment options may be more important to older Veterans while memorials may be of more importance to younger veterans
  - Recommend breaking this age group out to assess preferences of Veterans who are age 70 or older.

Mr. Geleta also recommended GPS supported application for smart phones on the premise that the applications can enhance memorialization efforts. According to extrapolated data, Veterans have an overwhelming preference for Digital Memorialization.

Mr. Les Beavers suggests the information be tightly controlled to gravesite locations. He also recommends that NCA conduct a pilot program and said, “There are still a lot of questions before any rollout of this program.” Mr. Beavers also had questions about the implementation, funding and impending usage.

The committee unanimously authorized continuation of the workgroup. Chairman Kelly also asked for volunteers to participate in the workgroup’s continuation.

### **Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly introduced Ms. Edith Smith and Ms. Barbara Lewandrowski, Outreach Work Group.

### **Outreach Work Group Recommendations**

The areas that were tasked were:

- Outreach Awareness
  - Video, Print Products
  - Burial Flag
  - Traditional and Mobile Outreach
  - New and Social Media

## **Charges**

- Which outreach areas currently targeted should NCA modify or change? Should any of the current initiatives be dropped? Are there any new areas that justify expansion?
- Is NCA targeting appropriate groups to inform them of memorial benefits? If not, what groups should NCA consider targeting with outreach? Is NCA using appropriate communications methods to raise the awareness of targeted groups? If not, what methods of communications should NCA consider to inform groups of memorial benefits?
- Demographic data available to NCA currently consists of VA's Veteran Population, 2010 National Survey of Veterans and NCA's annual Survey of Satisfaction (most recent 2013 data). What other information would enhance NCA's capability to plan effective awareness outreach programs and how would NCA acquire this information?

## **Committee Recommendations**

- The committee recommends NCA produce a new version of "A Sacred Trust," (AST) to demonstrate greater diversity
- The committee recommends NCA develop various versions of AST
- The committee recommends NCA hire a contractor to professionally develop the NCA brand and to oversee the MOV when it is deployed to the field
- The Committee recommends that legislation be introduced to compel funeral directors, nationwide to disclose burial entitlements for Veterans and their families.
- The committee recommends NCA works with Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) to standardize fact sheets
- The committee recommends VBA add burial flag program on VA-Form 27-2008, the application for burial
- The committee recommends NCA purchase new, modern table top displays to maximize NCA exposure at major events
- The committee recommends NCA sustain its efforts on social media
- The committee recommends NCA monitor other government websites and that NCA mirrors those website's efforts to keep pace with technological innovation
- The committee recommends NCA focus outreach efforts to reach out to major Veterans Service Organizations, Veterans and their families
- The committee recommends NCA hire a nationwide marketing firm to help develop and market NCA



## **Chairman Remarks and Updates**

Chairman Kelly opened the floor to remarks concerning the recommendations and voiced his concerns about awareness of burial benefits and how to properly communicate to family members who have no military experience. The Chairman also suggested NCA partner with professional sports franchises and teams to transmit the NCA message to a wider audience.

## **Chairman Adjourns Meeting with a reconvene time of 8 a.m. Thursday, June 23**

## **Chairman reconvenes the Committee Thursday, June 23**

Chairman Kelly reconvened the Committee and introduced Steven Fezler, NCA Program Specialist, Field Programs to provide a brief on the Weekend Burial Work Group and Recommendations.

### **Weekend Burial Work Group Recommendations**

Mr. Fezler provided background on the weekend burial option and its potential impact on NCA and its personnel. VA national cemeteries provide burial services Monday through Friday and the cemetery gates are open seven days a week. The Scheduling Office/Eligibility Determination is open seven days a week, 362 days a year and closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day. NCA will provide weekend burials when a federal holiday falls on a Monday or Friday. VA national cemeteries will open for burials for one day over the holiday weekend as a service to Veterans and their families. NCA provides burial of active duty/KIA services on the weekends.

### **The Working Group on Weekend Burials was charged with:**

- Research and analyzing the impact of weekend burials on stakeholders and developing a plan to engage them
- Developing a pilot project to implement the initiative

### **Advantages of weekend burial:**

- More convenient than during work week for family members, travelers, friends and clergy
- More immediate burial scheduling
- No additional funeral costs (storage) incurred
- More interment opportunities
- May decrease interments throughout the week
- Alleviates burial surges on Mondays and Fridays

### **Disadvantages of weekend burial:**

- Possible disruption to visitor experience on weekends
- Increased funding requirements for weekend burials
- This requirement would impact smaller cemetery's the most
- Possible implications for employee/employment union bargaining requirements
- Possible impacts on stakeholders (honor guards, volunteers, and supporting businesses). Survey indicates that funeral homes share same concerns with staff, budgetary restrictions and flexibility

### **Recommendations:**

- Remanded to Working Group for further study

Mr. Les Beavers' main concern was cost and how new costs would significantly impact state veterans cemeteries the most. He also cited that some states have laws that prohibit weekend burials at state run cemeteries.

### **Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly introduced Tom Sole, Director of Engineering and Maintenance, American Battle Monuments Commission.

### **Remarks from Director of Engineering and Maintenance, American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), Tom Sole**

Mr. Sole gave an overview of staff and operating size and history of American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC).

Established by Congress in 1923, ABMC commemorates the service, achievements, and sacrifice of U.S. armed forces. ABMC manages 24 overseas military cemeteries, and 25 memorials, monuments, and markers. Nearly all the cemeteries and memorials specifically honor those who served in World War I or World War II - ABMC is tasked with “telling the story.”

In FY 2014, ABMC acquired Clark Veterans Cemetery located in the Philippines. ABMC has started the process of operating and improving the cemetery. ABMC staff is conducting surveys to prioritize cemetery needs.

### **Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly introduces Ms. Katharine Kelley, Acting Superintendent, Arlington National Cemetery.

### **Remarks from Acting Superintendent, Arlington National Cemetery, Katharine Kelley**

Ms. Kelley provided an overview of Arlington National Cemetery daily functions, operations and future initiatives. Arlington, which is overseen by the U.S. Army, is the busiest Army National Cemetery in the country, with 160 interments per week and nearly 7,000 per year.

Specific future projects include:

- ISS Enhancements
- Establish ISS as an Army Enterprise System
- QA Module Deployment
- Mobility Tablet Workflow Development
- Wi-Fi Network Coverage Expansion
- GPS Tracking for ANC Resources
- Kiosk Modernization
- ANC Website Enhancements
- Internal Events Management Module
- Headstone Designer / Marker Ordering System Revamp

### **Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly resumed the meeting and introduced Charles Sellars, Superintendent, Andersonville National Historic Site.

### **Remarks from Superintendent, Andersonville National Historic Site, Charles Sellars**

Mr. Sellars provided an overview of the functions of the National Park Service (NPS) and provided background on specific cemeteries that NPS manages. NPS hosted *The Funeral for 13,000 Event* in conjunction with National POW Recognition Day, September 16-20, 2015. This event served as the culmination of the commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the Civil War, and as a commemoration event for the 100th Anniversary of the NPS. Mr. Sellars was also asked if NPS had changed the policy on Confederate Flags by IUSMA Walters, to which Mr. Sellars responded “no”.

### **Remarks from Glenn Powers, Under Secretary of Field Programs and Rob Thomas, Geographic Information System/Global Positioning System Program Manager**

Mr. Powers and Mr. Thomas provided background on digital memorial options. NCA contracted a private company to conduct a survey for assessing Veteran preferences for burial and memorial options. The survey was mailed and conducted online to 30,000 Veterans nationwide. NCA also

recruited 22 focus groups and 64 structured interviews with Veterans based on geographic, age, gender, and ethnic diversity factors. The study highlighted Veteran interest in expanding NCA's memorial options, particularly in the area of digital and online memorials.

#### Focus Group and Interview Results:

- Supported Survey Results:
  - Higher Interest in New Memorial Options
  - Lower Interest in New Interment Options
- Memorial Options
  - Higher interest in locating the Veteran's grave and providing information on military service
  - Less interest on making post-military life public as it seems more personal

#### **The Advisory Committee was charged with:**

##### Determining Suitability of Federal Involvement:

- Deciding if online digital memorialization is consistent with NCA's mission to inter and memorialize Veterans
- Making suggestions for NCA to mitigate concerns associated with Federal involvement in public online tributes, such as censorship and oversight of comments

##### The Need for Federal Involvement:

- Determining if private sites are sufficient for Veteran memorialization? If not, why not?
- Determining characteristics or elements these sites provide as a model for NCA to consider
- Determining bases for public/private partnerships
- Determining what federal digital memorialization efforts provide a model for NCA

##### Data Review and Sources:

- Researching viewpoint difference among age groups
- Making recommendations for NCA to address the differing levels of interest among age groups
- Determining what groups would provide NCA insight on its consideration of digital memorialization options
- Selecting specific populations for NCA to survey

##### Programmatic Considerations:

- Making recommendations for NCA to pilot a digital memorialization approach

##### Recommendations

- Collect data from NCA's largest cemeteries
- Tie each photo and piece of data to BOSS data

#### **Chairman Kelly opens the floor to Oral Public Comments**

There were no oral public comments.

#### **Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly called the Committee to discuss old and new business.

## **Old Business**

None to report

## **New Business**

Mr. Les Beavers proposed the committee explore whether management of Burial and Plot Allowance benefits be moved from VBA to NCA. Mr. Beavers also proposed a rewrite of the VA 38 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Federal-State Funds Transfers. Mr. Beavers cited concerns about residency and why that requirements should be disestablished.

## **Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly closed discussion on old and new business and opened the floor and introduced Ms. Kimberly Wright, Director of Field Programs for a brief on NCA Pre-Need Determination of Eligibility for Burial Update.

## **NCA Pre-Need Determination of Eligibility for Burial Update**

Mrs. Wright gave an overview of the casket and urn reimbursement program and pre-need eligibility determinations.

### **Casket and Urn**

NCA established the Casket and Urn program stating that Public Law 112–260 “Dignified Burial and Other Veterans’ Benefits Improvement Act of 2012” provides that VA may reimburse applicants for costs associated with the purchase of a casket or urn for the interment of Veterans with no known next of kin where sufficient resources are not available. NCA began processing applications and payment for casket and urn reimbursement on May 13, 2015.

### **Pre-Need**

NCA developed procedures to provide non-final pre-need eligibility determinations upon request. Many funeral homes provide pre-need burial services to their clients that range from recording an individual’s last wishes for final disposition of remains to reviewing trust agreements for cost coverage of funeral services, caskets/urns, cemetery plots, etc.

VA provides a variety of death benefits through the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and NCA. For Veteran families, planning for final disposition may involve determining which VA benefits are available and whether they meet eligibility requirements to receive them. NCA typically determines eligibility for burial in a VA national cemetery at time of death for Veterans and other individuals.

“Through NCA’s customer surveys and other customer information, we have seen an increase in responses for pre-need eligibility determinations to assist families’ funeral decisions. NCA understands this need and is now in the process of developing a Pre-Need Program to provide Veterans better access to their benefits,” Wright said.

The benefits of the Pre-Need Program include providing confidence to individuals that they will likely be eligible for burial benefits at their time of need; VA retaining pre-need eligibility data for use at time of need; Veterans’ ability to communicate wishes to loved ones and service providers ahead of need. Since announcing the program NCA has:

- NCA refined Pre-Need Form VA 40-10007 for customers to use to submit their request. This form will also be incorporated in Vets.gov by mid-2017

- NCA has received more than 3,921 pre-need requests as of June 1, 2016 prior to rollout of a communication plan
- Full Implementation of Pre-Need Eligibility program will emphasize a long term “sale” to Veterans (and other eligibles) where NCA will maintain innovative and positive communications throughout the sale until “closing”
- Ms. Wright also suggested that NCA send out a yearly benefits reminder to the enrolled Veteran or family
- A new project manager has also been assigned to manage the Pre-need program.
- Forms cannot be electronically submitted yet

Eligibility determination procedures were explained for applicants who have committed a capital crime. The Committee also recommended NCA develop a relationship early with participants to facilitate seamless service at the time of need. Chairman Kelly also cited the importance of accessibility and expanding its capability to a mobile platform.

### **Chairman Remarks**

Chairman Kelly called for a break, and then introduced Mr. Tom Howard, NCA Chief of Staff, who provided a presentation on the Veterans Legacy Program (VLP).

### **Veterans Legacy Program**

Mr. Howard said the VLP will bring National Cemeteries into the digital age. “In some cases, this is an act of formalization, of standardization, of coordination – how to present in the digital age. It will teach us how to break through to a new customer base.”

Some long terms goal are to become a content provider and this is to complement other NCA efforts and is not a challenge or replacement to an existing program. This program should also complement NCA’s core statutory mission. The effort is consistent with memorialization of Veteran service. Key elements of the program include:

- Develops a new perspective. The public should consider their local national cemetery as an engaging environment where they can learn stories reflecting the American experience
- Reaching new audiences. NCA should aggressively engage new customers - students, teachers, civic organizations and the general public - through social media campaigns, targeted programming and outreach
- Telling Stories. At its core, the effort is rooted in telling stories - of people (Veterans) and places (cemeteries)
- Creating digital space. The effort will create new, dynamic, engaging digital spaces for the public to explore national cemeteries
- Partnering for success. To create the most engaging and creative content, VLP will partner with others who can specialty, access and resources unavailable to NCA
- Raising awareness. New perspectives, audiences and engagement opportunities will enhance public awareness of national cemeteries - as both national shrines for Veteran burial and also as places to learn and engage with stories

The VLP also seeks to be a digitally-engaging learning resource for each national cemetery to promote on-site and online visitation – a “suite of learning products,” to include; interactive maps, lesson plans and short films. This standardized approach ensures consistency, while customization reflects the interests of the local community and makes connections with other heritage sites.

Mr. Howard also briefed the group on upcoming educational partnership programs. This partnership will allow 18 middle and high school teachers across disciplines to study the experiences of America’s World War II soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coastguardsmen as they fought throughout the Pacific. Selected teachers will visit several ABMC and NCA cemeteries to honor individuals from their home states who sacrificed their lives in the war.

Mr. Howard also stated the program can lead to personalized memorialization, help bridge the inter-generational gap and encourage more visitation and learning at our National Cemeteries.

**Selection of Next meeting location and dates**

The next Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials is yet to be determined.

**Recommendations and Endorsements**

Chairman Kelly, DFO and NCA leadership discuss Advisory Committee recommendations and made endorsements.

**Recommendation 1:** Committee recommends NCA explore creating a separate account for all burial activities funded from mandatory appropriations and transfer the funding, management, and administration of these benefits from VBA to NCA.

**Recommendation 2:** Committee requests that NCA examine and report back to Committee the impact of amending Title 38 CFR, Part 39 to remove the reference of state/tribal residency requirement for burial eligibility.

**Closing Remarks, Interim Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs/Committee Chair/DFO**

Each individual offered closing remarks thanking the Advisory Committee members for their participation and welcoming new Advisory Committee members to the group. The DFO informed the group on the procedure for closing the meeting, travel and reimbursement.

**Meeting Adjourned**



John A. (Jack) Kelly  
Committee Chair

## Appendix A

### UCLA Bicycle Academy: Comments for the Annual Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, Department of Veterans Affairs, June 2016

FAO Secretary of the VA, Robert MacDonald, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Ronald Walters

Via email Robin.Cooper@va.gov

The UCLA Bicycle Academy was founded in 2008 as a group of UCLA faculty and staff. Our aim is to improve bicycle and pedestrian access to the UCLA's Westwood campus in Los Angeles.

For 14 years, pedestrians and cyclists at UCLA have complained that access to UCLA from the West is virtually impossible. The I - 405 is a veritable barrier which divides UCLA from Brentwood and neighborhoods further West. But for those who would rather not drive, the green expanse of the VA West LA site and the LANC used to offer an option to reach UCLA. After 9/11, this changed. The cemetery locked an Eastern pedestrian gate at the intersection of Veteran and Constitution Ave. Those who enjoyed a healthy walk have since been forced into a stressful, unsustainable drive across the intersection of Wilshire Blvd and I - 405, ranked the busiest in the nation. Over the last 14 years, the closure of this gate has led to the untold waste of resources, air pollution affecting our communities, and pre-empting healthy commute modes. It has also made access to the cemetery more difficult for visitors arriving from the East.

Our research found that the National Institute of Building Sciences issued a report to the VA in 2002 which offered detailed risk assessments of "VA facilities that must remain mission operational during periods of emergencies or national crisis." Compiled in the aftermath of 9/11, the report included national cemeteries among the facilities which deserve highest levels of security protection. This assessment justified the closure of a pedestrian gate of the LANC.

We are aware of plans to expand the LANC, but for the delimited geography in question, the cemetery is not active. There are no new interments. As civilians, it is not clear to us what "mission operational" means for a non-active cemetery.

We would like to suggest that a non-active cemetery may not deserve the high security rating suggested in the 2002 report. Revisiting this report could start a conversation about a pilot program for controlled non-driving access at the closed gate, with the highest attention to the special ceremonial requirements of the site.

As a precedent, we refer to the arrangements made for commuter cyclists at Arlington, which is an active cemetery.

We believe that a controlled access pilot at LANC

- could benefit a large number of (homeless) veteran wheelchair users who will soon reside on the VA site and currently have no safe (ADA) route to access educational and recreational facilities in Westwood

- could offer employment opportunities for veterans
- could receive support from UCLA because it would facilitate non-driving traffic between the VA hospital and UCLA Medical School. Both sites are in close proximity but moving between them requires the use of a car.

As part of a court settlement, the VA has recently released a master plan for the VA site adjacent to the cemetery. The site will house many homeless veterans. The plan includes a traffic study which has failed to consider the specific transportation needs of a population which rarely has access to a private car. Many homeless veterans are wheelchair users, pedestrians or use a bicycle for transportation. When trying to access destinations in Westwood, the closed cemetery gate poses an insurmountable barrier.

The only alternative route crosses four freeway on-ramps, is extremely hostile and dangerous for vulnerable road users, and has been the site many serious and fatal collisions.

We request that the committee schedule a discussion of this issue at its annual meeting. We would be happy to provide additional information.

Dr. Michael Cahn  
Secretary, UCLA Bicycle Academy

References:

Exclusively car-centric traffic analysis

[http://www.losangeles.va.gov/LOSANGELES/features/VAGLAHS\\_Announces\\_Draft\\_Master\\_Plan.asp](http://www.losangeles.va.gov/LOSANGELES/features/VAGLAHS_Announces_Draft_Master_Plan.asp)

Security Assessment:

<https://www.wbdg.org/ccb/NIBS/physicalsecurityassessment.pdf>

