

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CEMETERIES AND
MEMORIALS Virtual Meeting Minutes

June 16-June 17, 2021

11:00 am – 3:00pm

Committee Members Present:

- Joey Strickland, Committee Chairman
- Donn Weaver, Committee Member
- Heather Mitchell Braatz, Committee Member
- Michael Hoplight., Committee Member
- Floyd Watson, Jr., Committee Member
- Edward Saunders, Committee Member
- Kathleen Moakler, Committee Member

Ex-officio Members Present:

- Karen Durham-Aguilera, Army National Military Cemeteries
- Gia Wagner, National Park Service

Ex-officio Member Absent:

- Tom Sole, American Battle Monument Commission

Army National Military Cemeteries Attendees:

- Renea Yates
- Cynthia Riddle

Louisiana State Department of Veterans Affairs:

- Charmagne Scott
- Dustin Guy
- Kate Seba

Office of the VA Secretary Attendees:

- Jeffrey Moragne, Director, VA Advisory Committee Management Office
- Jelessa M.H. Burney, Program Specialist, VA Advisory Committee Management Office

Office of General Counsel:

- Carol Bordon, VA Staff Attorney

National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Attendees:

- Ronald Walters, Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
- Tom Howard, Chief of Staff
- Melissa Decker, Senior Advisor to the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
- Gerard Alvira, Executive Assistant to the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
- Tanya Turner, Special Assistant to the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
- Glenn Powers, Deputy Undersecretary, Field Programs and Cemetery Operations
- Lisa Pozzebon, Executive Director, Office of Cemetery Operations
- Artis Parker, Executive Director, Office of Field Programs
- Lauren Kusen, Acting Executive Assistant, Office of Field Programs and Cemetery Operations
- Eric Powell, Director, Memorial Products Service
- Jane Kang, Director, Legislative and Regulatory Service
- Daniel Devine, Executive Director, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations (OEMI)
- Timothy Nosal, Deputy Director, OEMI
- Les' Melnyk, Chief of Partnerships and Outreach, OEMI
- Bryce Carpenter, PhD, Senior Program Manager, Veterans Legacy Program, OEMI
- Lisa Hollenbeck, Program Manager, NCA Web Services
- Christine B. Hamilton, Designated Federal Officer
- Larry Provost, Alternate Designated Federal Officer & National Outreach Officer, OEMI

VA Office of Tribal Government Relations (OGTR):

- Stephanie Birdwell, Director, Office of Intergovernmental Affairs
- Junita Mullen, Center for Minority Veterans

Public Attendees:

- Michael Cahn, PhD
- Heather Salazaar, Congressional Research Service
- Leslie Witter, National Funeral Directors Association
- Bill Riordan

Wednesday, June 16, 2021

The semi-annual meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials was held via teleconference. The session was open to the public; and the meeting information and teleconference number was published in the Federal Register announcement.

Opening Remarks

The Committee Chairman, Colonel Joey Strickland, called the meeting to order at 11:00am. The meeting was opened with a moment of silence for Veterans, Servicemembers, Survivors, family members, and others afflicted by the Coronavirus pandemic.

The Chairman provided a brief overview of committee activities and discussed the agenda for this meeting. He strongly recommended for the committee to regroup and meet in Washington, DC for the Fall 2021 meeting.

Christine Hamilton, Designated Federal Officer, provided the rules of engagement and confirmed that seven of seven members were in attendance.

Remarks on Vision for NCA

Mr. Ronald Walters, PhD, Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, thanked the Joey Chairman for staying on the committee, despite his many obligations as the Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs; and he thanked the returning members for their continued commitment to NCA, and the work of this committee. In addition, Mr. Walters briefly introduced and welcomed the newest members, Michael Hoplight and Floyd Watson, Jr.

Mr. Walters mentioned that NCA is moving to fill the five vacancies as soon as possible. Mr. Walters also briefed the committee on key NCA activities. His key points were as follows:

National cemeteries remained open throughout the pandemic, for visitation and burials. In June 2020, a year ago, NCA restored committal and memorial services. Within the last several weeks, in accordance with new CDC guidance, NCA discontinued the mask-wearing and physical-distancing requirements for fully vaccinated individuals at cemeteries, to include the committal services which have now been restored. Non-vaccinated individuals must still follow the previous safety requirements. Kiosks and administration building are now open. with some precautions. NCA is encouraging all employees, including cemetery field-staff members, to get vaccinated. The VA healthcare system has vaccinations available for all of NCA team members who have not already done so.

Activities during Memorial Day included the continued expansion of the Veterans Legacy Memorial program, also known as VLM. Two years ago, Memorial Day 2019, NCA rolled out the VLM platform for the first time, and last year the availability of that platform helped to alleviate some of the understandable disappointments related to the cancellation of Memorial Day ceremonies at VA cemeteries, due to COVID 19. VLM contains a memorial page for each of the nearly four million veterans and service members interred in a VA national cemetery, where visitors can leave written tributes.

Additional features were added to VLM in time for Memorial Day. VLM now permits online visitors to submit photos and biographical summaries of a veteran's life, along with historical documents such as award citations, letters, and newspaper clippings.

Another feature allows visitors to follow their Veteran's page and receive email alerts when new content is posted to that page.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough was confirmed by the Senate earlier this year and, in just the past few months, he has visited various national cemeteries to meet with staff. He has also personally posted tributes to Veterans on the VLM website. Secretary McDonough is committed to ensuring VA can fulfill our obligation to Veterans by continuing to focus on four fundamental principles as a vision for the future: advocacy, access, outcomes, and excellence. NCA's mission to provide a final resting place as a lasting tribute to Veterans' service is informed by each one of these guiding principles. NCA's key goals and objectives are tied directly to the secretary's four principles.

Twelve of the 18 new cemeteries are now open; remaining six are in various stages of development. NCA will continue to work with our state and tribal partners, through the Veteran Cemetery Grant Program, to reach the strategic goal of providing 95 percent of the Veteran population with access to a burial option within 75 miles of where they live. NCA is also going to continue to try to address the five percent of the remaining population that won't have convenient access, as NCA defines it.

NCA will continue to pursue excellence in modernizing our IT systems and implement other technology that will help the organization to operate more efficiently and enhance grave-site accountability.

NCA will continue to focus on achieving unprecedented outcomes for Veterans and their families, by continuing to build on the success of the Veterans Legacy Memorial and the Veterans Legacy Program, to reimagine how we memorialize Veterans and engage families and the public.

As always, NCA will continue to focus on customer satisfaction and to seek continuous feedback from our stakeholders, to ensure that Veterans and family members receive the world-class service that they expect and deserve.

Ethics Refresher

Ms. Carol Borden, Staff Attorney, VA Office of General Council, presented on important ethics reminders for committee members. Her key points were as follows:

18 USC 208 states that it is a crime for you to participate personally and substantially as a Government officer or employee in a particular matter, which will directly and predictably affect your financial interest or a financial interest imputed to you.

For example, if a member is in a committee meeting and they're talking about a certain topic that directly affects the member's outside organization, the member must you recuse himself or herself from the meeting and make sure the recusal is documented on record. This conflict of interest rule also extends to the member's spouse, dependent child, and business partner.

This committee is a filing committee, which means that all members are required to file an annual OGE Form 450 (Confidential Financial Disclosure Report). Ms. Hamilton and Ms. Borden reviews the report to determine if there are potential conflicts of interest that may need to be mitigated or addressed. The report must be certified by the Office of General Council before a member can participate in any deliberative meetings.

Where Can You Get Ethics Advice?

VA Ethics Officials: GovernmentEthics@va.gov

Mike Hogan, Deputy General Counsel, General Law Designated Agency Ethics Official (DAEO)

VACO Deputy Ethics Officials:

Brenna Daugherty, Jonathan Gurland, Chris Britt, Carol Borden, Office of General Counsel (023)

810 Vermont Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20420

(202) 461-7694 or (202) 461-6000

Best Practice Tips: Federal Advisory Committee Act

Mr. Jeffery Moragne provided brief reminders about the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) and best practice tips. The Advisory Committee sets the gold standard with 85-90% of recommendations enacted by the Secretary.

What is the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA)?

The Federal Advisory Committee Act is a Federal statute that governs the establishment, termination and management of Federal Advisory Committees (FAC). Enacted to promote openness and transparency and accountability to regulate the number and duration of FACs.

When does FACA apply?

FACA applies to all groups with at least one non-Federal employee established or utilized by an agency to obtain advice or recommendations, unless an exception applies.

What are Federal Advisory Committee requirements?

- Signed/filed Charter;
- Designated Federal Officer (DFO);
- Public meetings with agenda announced in Federal Register 15 days in advance of the meeting and an opportunity for public to speak or submit written comments;
- Balanced membership; and
- Records maintained and available for public inspection.

What constitutes a Federal Advisory Committee (FAC) meeting?

- A published Federal Register Notice of Meeting
- Open, Closed or Partially Closed
- A Designated Federal Officer (DFO)
- A FACA Committee that:
- Meets in-person, virtual or through tele- and video-conference
- Provides advice or recommendations
- A quorum unless otherwise established in the Committee's charter or legislation.
- Majority (more than one half) of the committee's authorized membership including ex-officio members (i.e. 50% plus one)
- An approved agenda

What constitutes a "closed" meeting?

- FAC meetings may also be closed in whole or in part under limited circumstances, such as when discussing trade secrets, personal information, and criminal matters.
- Per FACA, there are three common exemptions to "close" a meeting:
- Discussion of classified information
- Reviews of proprietary data submitted in support of Federal grant applications (i.e., research committee)
- Deliberations involving considerations of personal privacy (i.e., Veterans' PII, VA Medical Center tours, etc.)
- Note: OGC must concur on the meeting closure

May FACs ever meet privately?

Yes. According to the FACA Final Rule, FACs can conduct two types of work without a public meeting:

Preparatory work. Two or more Committee or Subcommittee members gather to solely gather information, conduct research, analyze relevant issues, facts in preparation for a FAC meeting or to draft papers for deliberation by FAC; and
Since this isn't a FAC meeting, a submission to the Federal Register is not required.

Administrative work. Two or more Committee members gather to discuss administrative matters of the FAC.

What are “Administrative” Calls?

During an administrative call, the Committee members are allowed to discuss the following:

- Conduct FACA 101 session with Jeffrey Moragne (15 to 20 minutes)
- Conduct Ethics Training session
- Using Ethics Training slides (30 to 45 minutes)
- Ensure members take the VA OGC Ethics Training for Special Government Employees located at: <https://www.va.gov/OGC/docs/SGE/10.html>
- Provide / Obtain the SGE Self-Certification Statements from members
- Review, discuss, complete Financial Disclosures form 450s, if applicable
- Vendorize Committee member in VA systems, if needed
- Discuss research (i.e. what to include on the agenda, SMEs, topics)
- Finalize meeting agenda; Finalize travel plans
- Finalize meeting logistics (i.e. date, location, number of days)
- However, they are not allowed to engage in discussing any REPORTS or RECOMMENDATIONS. This is not a regular FAC meeting.

Can Committee Members testify/speak on Federal Advisory Committee matters?

Permissible

If asked to testify, you may speak about FAC matters only in your personal capacity. Your testimony should clarify that you are providing your personal opinion and are not speaking on behalf of VA or the FAC. As a courtesy, we appreciate you informing the FAC's DFO if you are going to testify.

Misconduct

Federal Advisory Committee members do not have authority to testify on behalf of the Committee and do not speak for VA. Since you are acting in your personal capacity if you testify or speak, VA cannot reimburse you for expenses or pay a stipend.

VA Federal Advisory Committee Best Practices

- ✓ Master Your Committee Calendar...plan 18 months of committee meetings in advance during the next meeting or an administrative call
- ✓ Know your role:...understand the Committee's Charter and guidance located in the VA Committee Members Handbook
- ✓ Subcommittees...formally establish these groups in accordance with the VA guidance to do the heavy lifting on research and assist with drafting recommendations
- ✓ Meeting Mechanics...dedicate meeting time to discuss individual presentations and how they connect to the Committee's advice/recommendations
- ✓ Cross Committee Collaboration...use your Subcommittee to engage other FACs
- ✓ SMART Template...use the template to achieve better results
- ✓ VA Library Services...use this service for data and information searches
- ✓ Subject Matter Experts...recommend stakeholders for the Committee to engage
- ✓ Annual Field Visits...do field visits and Capitol Hill meetings to better understand Veterans, Caregivers, Survivors, Stakeholders and VA Employees challenges
- ✓ FACA and Ethics questions...ask your Designated Federal Officer for guidance.

Burial Needs of Native American Indians and Alaskan Veterans/Emerging Trends and Cultural Awareness

Chairman Strickland began the discussion with background information regarding the burial needs for Native American Indians and Alaskan Veterans (AIAN). The Chair stated that there are about 13 tribal Veterans cemeteries throughout the country, most of them in the Far West, Maine, and Alaska. In 2019, the committee were first recognized challenges for this Veteran population after their visit to San Carlos Apache Veterans Cemetery in Arizona. At the time of the visit, no burial had taken place and the cemetery was in disrepair. There may be cultural reasons that can be considered when looking at the under-utilization of American Indian burials in Veteran cemeteries. The Chair also stated that the committee does not have a clear understanding about eastern tribes.

Therefore, Member, Mike Hoplight has been asked to move forward with the study on eastern tribal cemeteries. Other challenges, in addition to Veterans not being buried in their own cemeteries, are the upkeep and the ability to maintain the tribal Veteran cemeteries, similar to state Veterans cemeteries or national cemeteries. The Chair acknowledged that the "NCA-Tribal/ Peer Mentor Program" addresses some of these concerns.

Member, Ed Saunders provided the list below, which are critical items to look at:

- AIAN Veterans serve in largest number of any minority in America.
- AIAN tribes and corporations are not the same.
- Spiritual beliefs are a complex dynamic.

He and Chairman Joey Strickland prepared and presented a report in 2019 which covers some of these complexities. Mr. Saunders has visited seven of tribal cemeteries, one officially as a committee member and six unofficially as a private citizen. He and the Chairman looks forward to working with the new Tribal and Indian Affairs Advisory Committee on some of these opportunities for improvement.

Present challenges:

- **Expectations:** What do the tribes and the Alaska corporations look at versus what does the National Cemetery Administration require?
- **Long-term sustainability for AIAN VA-grant cemeteries:** How does VA ensure the tribes are financially able to maintain the infrastructure?
- **Optimize size and infrastructure:** How does VA optimize the size and infrastructure of these cemeteries?
- **Lack of use in AIAN cemeteries by tribal Veterans:** Why are the tribal Veterans using VA cemeteries in very limited numbers?

Recommendation for Continued Direction: The National Cemetery Administration, in conjunction with the VA Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs, work with the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) regional offices for better awareness of VA-grant tribal Veterans cemeteries as a burial option for AIAN Veterans.

Mr. Saunders mentioned that the committee can also work with the National Congress of American Indians and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). He also believes that substantial dialogue with these entities can lead to better recommendations to VA.

Chairman Strickland echoed Mr. Saunders up by stating that the committee must respect the sovereignty of the tribes when making recommendations. He asked Ms. Juanita Mullens, Office of Minority Veterans, to say a few words.

Ms. Mullen pointed out that not all tribes are members of the National Congress of American Indians. The committee should also consider reaching out to the United South and Eastern Tribes (USET). Ms. Mullen also mentioned that she is a member of the Seneca Nation of Indians in upper New York State. Within her tribe, a lot of her family members are buried on their property. There are a couple cemeteries on the reservations. However, Veterans are buried on the property owned by their families.

Ms. Stephanie Birdwell, Office of Tribal Government Relations, offered further clarification on the subject. Ms. Birdwell mentioned that 13 out of 574 federally recognized tribes have Veteran cemeteries. The Veterans Cemetery Grants Program has been successful in terms of the consistent outreach and the collaboration with tribes. Since Native American Veterans are accustomed to being buried on their own property, VA will need to cooperate with the process in place at the tribal level. It is going to take some time. Also, BIA have appropriations and, therefore, no authority to encourage tribes to utilize tribal Veteran cemeteries.

Status Update: NCA - Tribal/ Peer Mentor Program/PDUSMA Charge to ACCM on AIAN

Mr. Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations, gave an update on the NCA - Tribal/ Peer Mentor Program and the charge to the committee on AIAN. He started by discussing the Veterans Cemetery Grant Program.

His key points were as follows:

- NCA has 13 tribal cemeteries, with the fourteenth under construction in Alaska. The Tribal Program is under the Veterans Cemetery Grant Program, which was created to help states create cemeteries. VA was given authority to expand to tribes and to allow sovereign nations to also apply for the grants. There's a prioritization scheme that determines who gets the grant money, based on the funding.

- George Eisenbach is the Director of the Veterans Cemetery Grant Program. He has been very successful in bringing about tribal cemeteries onto the landscape. NCA does not own or operate the cemeteries that we give tribal grants to. The state-cemetery director or a tribal-cemetery director is responsible for the operation and administration of VA grant-funded cemeteries. The grant funds are used for expansion, establishment, improvement, and operations and maintenance of those cemeteries.
- NCA is allowed to visit and conduct compliance reviews and assessments to determine if cemeteries are meeting national shrine standards.
- The Veterans Benefits Administration pays a \$800 plus plot allowance for burial plots in state cemeteries. VA is currently looking into legislative changes that may be needed to amend the plot allowance in 38 USC 2203, to include tribal cemeteries.
- All visits and communication to tribal Veteran cemeteries should be coordinated thru the DFO, Christine Hamilton. Ms. Hamilton will make sure that the committee is engaged with the Office of Tribal Government Relations.

PDUSMA Charge to ACCM on AIAN

Background

Since 2011, the VA's National Cemetery Administration has provided grants to establish, expand, or improve Veterans' cemeteries to 13 Tribal Organizations. Additionally, one Alaskan Native group received its first grant in 2020 and will open for interments in 2021. Observations show American Indian Veterans in large numbers are not using these cemeteries for burial.

Charge

The Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs charges the ACCM to identify and examine reasons or conditions which influence American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans' decisions regarding burial in VA-grant Tribal Cemetery (i.e. to choose or not to choose) and to make recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs that would assist American Indian and Alaska Natives to choose burial in VA-grant funded Tribal cemeteries. ACCM will make their Report and Recommendations at the Spring 2022 meeting.

NCA - Tribal/ Peer Mentor Program

National cemetery directors ask tribal Veteran cemetery directors to become peers. Experienced national cemetery directors can be mentors to the tribal cemeteries in this program. NCA has not done a formal reach-out to the tribes to inform them about the program. NCA is focused on training the employees first. Then, NCA will work with the VA Office of Tribal and Government Relations to make sure that communication is done

correctly, when inviting the tribes to participate in the Peer-Mentor Program. This is not a one-size-fits-all mentorship program. The intent is to be respectful of the culture and the tribes' needs. Please see the phased approach is shown on the slide above. The green highlighted items have been completed.

Work Group Update: Burial Needs and the Hardest Five Percent

Members, Heather Mitchell Braatz, Ed Saunders, Michael Hoplight and Floyd Watson, Jr. presented the burial needs and the hardest five percent.

Objective

To provide evidence-based recommendations to the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, on providing interment/inurnment options to the last five percent of Veterans not being served by a VA-operated national cemetery, a VA-grant state veterans cemetery, or a VA-grant tribal cemetery within a 75-mile radius of the veteran's home.

Background

- May 2019: ACCM charged to look at Hardest 5-Percent.
- Oct 2019: ACCM presents first briefing to USMA with recommendations.
- May 2020: ACCM reviews issues.
- Oct 2020: ACCM updates Hardest 5-Percent report.
- June 2021: ACCM gives updated briefing and recommendations.

Ms. Braatz stated that the work group reviewed some past reports, such as the Booz Allen Hamilton report, that surveyed Veterans' preferences for burial and their needs. They also looked at various statistical reports in the funeral-and-cemeteries industry, specifically regarding types of disposition, in order to put forth some recommendations to the NCA, in terms of accommodating our veterans now and in the future.

Mrs. Braatz mentioned that there does seem to be an overwhelming trend, towards cremation, that will continue to increase over time. It is presently the dominant type of disposition over burial. In the report presented to the committee in fall of 2019, the work group discussed different options for rural Veterans and how to best serve them., with a focus on the majority of most decedents choosing cremation or having cremation chosen for them.

The idea of mirroring the urban columbarium initiative in high-density-population areas may also provide some solutions or opportunities for Veterans residing in the more rural areas and the Great American West.

Mr. Ed Saunders discussed the courses of action considered during the work group's research.

Original Courses of Action Considered:

- Maintain status quo
- National cemetery annexes
- Capped travel reimbursement to visit burial site
- Veterans' burial plots in municipal cemeteries
- Increase emphasis on Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP)
- Rural columbaria-only burial sites through VCGP
- The NCA expand its Rural and Urban Veterans Burial Initiatives with smaller-in-scale veterans burial grounds emphasizing columbaria and in-ground cremains interment / inurnment.
- Engage state veterans departments through the NASVD to use economy-of-scale interment / inurnment options under VCGP.
- Propose Congressional legislation for efficient federal interagency land transfer policies and procedures

Summary of Recommendations:

- The NCA expand its Rural and Urban Veterans Burial Initiatives with smaller-in-scale veterans burial grounds emphasizing columbaria and in-ground cremains interment / inurnment.
- Engage state Veterans departments through the NASVD to use economy-of-scale interment / inurnment options under VCGP.
- Propose Congressional legislation for efficient federal interagency land transfer policies and procedures.

Note: Mr. Saunders presented the above summary of recommendations. However, on day 2 of the meeting, the Committee voted to dispose these recommendations since they were addressed in the recommendations package signed by SECVA on 07-08-20.

Public Comments

Michael Cahn, Phd presented to the Committee his concern about green burial practices and the impact of the Los Angeles National Cemetery in the community. He stated that the cemetery is a barrier for healthy and sustainable modes of transportation, such as walking and cycling thru the cemetery as opposed to driving. The Chairman thanked him for his comments.

Heather Salaazar from the Congressional Research Service mentioned that the Hill may be interested in feedback regarding confederate monuments that are in various national cemeteries and what to do with the monuments. The Chairman thanked her for her comments.

Closing Remarks & Adjournment

Chairman Strickland asked the members for last comments and mentioned that he would like for the Committee to mee in Washington, DC in October 2021. He thanked the Committee for a great job and participation. Chairman Strickland thanked attendees and closed the meeting at approximately 2:55pm.

Thursday, June 17, 2021

The semi-annual meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials was held via teleconference. The session was open to the public; and the meeting information and teleconference number was published in the Federal Register announcement.

Opening Remarks

The Committee Chairman, Colonel Joey Strickland, called the second day of the meeting to order at 11:00am. the meeting opened with a moment of silence.

Christine Hamilton, Designated Federal Officer, discussed the rules of engagement and confirmed that seven of seven members were in attendance.

The Chairman provided a brief recap of the first day's discussion.

New Charge: HR 7105 Urn/Commemorative Plaque Benefit

Mr. Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations, presented a new charge to the Committee. Under Section 2207 of the Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (Public Law 116-315), the charge to the Committee is to:

- Concur with Basic Concept for the plaque and urn.
- Assign Subcommittee to assist MPS in product designs.
- Recommend final product design to USMA at Fall ACCM meeting

Basic Concept

- Detachable and reusable folded flag
 - Use the folded flag design (from NCA's Medallion) on both products to achieve "branding".
 - Make the folded flag detachable from the plaque and urn to accommodate family desires, (which could include attaching to a private grave marker at final disposition).
 - Fast Ship
- Commemorative Plaque
 - Approximately 8.5 x 11 x ½", hang from wall or stands up.
 - Bronze plate with name and date of birth/date of death.
- Urn
 - Wood or Bronze, basic shape is cube or cuboid.

Mr. Powers introduced Mr. Artis Parker, Executive Director of Field Programs. Mr. Parker demonstrated the commemorative plaque. The committee workgroup will be working on the design with Mr. Eric Powell, PhD, Director, Memorial Products Service.

Status Update: Army National Military Cemeteries

Ms. Karen-Durham-Aguilera, Executive Director, Office of Army Cemeteries and Army National Cemeteries, provided an update of the revised eligibility and rulemaking for Arlington National Cemetery. Her key points were as follows: Army Cemeteries and Army National Military Cemeteries, provided an update of the revised eligibility and rulemaking for Arlington National Cemetery. Her key points were as follows:

Arlington National Cemetery continued to operate during all of the COVID-19 restrictions. Until the Fall of last year, visitors had limited access. On April 1, 2021, the cemetery was fully open to the public.

Right after the Civil War, the Indian Industrial School was established to educate Native American children from all over the U.S. Unfortunately, nearly 200 Native American children became ill and passed away. The children are buried in Carlisle, Pennsylvania at Carlisle Barracks cemetery, which is managed by Arlington National Cemetery. Some of the tribes of families requested the disinterment of their Native American children and re-interment into their tribal lands. Arlington started this effort in 2017 thru 2019. Efforts were stopped in 2020 because of COVID restrictions. This effort started again the week of June 14th for the next round of repatriations and return of the children's remains to the tribes. Ms. Durham-Aguilera agreed to provide the Committee with an update at a future meeting.

Currently, Arlington National Cemetery has less than 84,000 spaces. The cemetery is being expanded for approximately 88,000 more spaces. About one percent of this population traditionally comes onto National Cemetery. With eligibility changes and the southern expansion, the cemetery can remain open until the mid-2060s.

Over 260,000 people responded to a public survey conducted in 2017 and 2018. Over 95 percent of respondents stated Army National Cemeteries should stay open into the future.

Ms. Renea Yates, Director of Director of the Office of Army Cemeteries, expounded upon the survey responses to changes in eligibility criteria. She emphasized that the survey was designed in coordination with the Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemeteries and Veterans Service Organizations. The survey results were as follows:

The vast majority, about 75 percent, thought that the cemetery should restrict the eligibility in order to remain active.

About 91 percent of the respondents supported keeping retirees eligible but making it only for above-ground inurnment. It's important to note that Arlington does have eligibility.

The majority of respondents supported continued eligibility for Medal of Honor and Killed in Action Veterans. A substantial number of respondents also supported Silver Star, Purple Heart, and Prisoners of War.

There was waning support for retirees, traditional Veterans with an honorable discharge, and Veterans who are high, public figures.

There is significant support for continue eligibility for active duty deaths.

Before the end of the calendar year, the final rule is expected to be published in the Federal Register for 30 days for public comment before it's actually implemented.

Status Update: National Park Service (NPS)

Ms. Gia Wagner, Superintendent, Andersonville National Historic Site, provided an update on the National Park Service. Key points were as follows:

- There are 14 National Cemeteries in 4 different administrative regions:
- 1 in the Intermountain Region, 2 in the National Capital Region, 4 in the Northeast Region, and 7 in the Southeast Region.
- Over 94,000 graves.
- Only two are open for initial interments (Andersonville NC and Andrew Johnson NC).

Andrew Johnson National Cemetery (Tennessee) closed to first interments in the spring 2019. Spousal burials are anticipated to continue for another 15 – 20 years. Several local groups have expressed their desire for expansion of the national cemetery. Public meetings were held to explain why the national cemetery cannot expand and the park has briefed local, State and Federal elected officials regarding this issue. A line item construction project for the preservation of the national cemetery was awarded in Sept 2020; work is progressing on schedule with an anticipated completion of Jan 2021. The cemetery will remain open and operational throughout the project. The park is hosting ranger-led programs of the cemetery and tying stories of those interred here with the local community. Also, the park has conducted several headstone preservation workshops to educate the public on the proper methods for headstone care and maintenance.

Stones River National Cemetery (Tennessee) contracted with NPS Historic Preservation Training Center for Repointing, Preservation and Cleaning of the interior and exterior of the West Wall of the National Cemetery. Work began in June 2020 and was completed in October 2020. Adopt-A-Section volunteers continue to clean headstones throughout the cemetery.

In 1934 at **Poplar Grove National Cemetery (Virginia)**, the NPS cut or lowered grave markers for a perceived ease of maintenance. Over time, the grave markers went missing or were damaged. The rostrum and cemetery wall base was failing. Flooding persisted throughout the 9.5-acre site. Over 90% of assets were in poor or serious condition. The cemetery has a **\$4 Million Rehabilitation Project to:**

- Replace over 6000 grave markers
- rehabilitate rostrum
- resurface and realign carriage lane
- install historic flagstaff and way finders
- repoint and repair damaged or missing brick,
- replace and repaint all roofing/ flashing
- grading to alleviate flooding

Gettysburg National Cemetery, Gettysburg National Military Park -Pennsylvania
Notification to Chief of Policy and AD for CR of the conflict between DO61 and RM61:
36CFR Part 5, Commercial Operations
Tightening of Specially Used Permit/Commercial Use Agreement requirements for
GETC
Denial of engraving the unnumbered headstones, Civil War Section 100 Nights of Taps

***Fredericksburg National Cemetery, Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National
Military Park - Virginia***

The development of a Cultural Landscape Report continues. The annual Memorial Day weekend events and commemorations in the national cemetery were cancelled for both 2020 and 2021 due to COVID 19. Park staff did proceed with the placement of flags on all graves.

Yorktown National Cemetery, Colonial National Historical Park – Virginia

The ground operations and maintenance accomplished primarily through by dedicated Veteran volunteers. They completed pre-design work on rehabilitation/waterproofing of the Cemetery Lodge basement, held workshops with the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation to recommend landscape treatments for Cemetery grounds rehabilitation. This site is potentially funded through Great American Outdoors Act/Legacy Restoration Fund Restore the gravitas and “sense” of the site to honor the sacrifice of those interred.

Antietam National Cemetery, Antietam National Battlefield - Maryland

The Rostrum is undergoing rehabilitation to replace deteriorated components of the pergola. The Historic Preservation Training Center is completing the work. This Rostrum design sign is the standard plan developed by Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs for the national cemetery system.

Fort Donelson National Cemetery, Fort Donelson National Battlefield -Tennessee
The normally large events and volunteer efforts were greatly reduced due to COVID.

Status

2020

6 Interments

2021 (as of May 21)

5 Interments

1 Disinterment **Observances** *Memorial Day 2020*

Wreaths Across America 2020 Memorial Day 2021

National Cemetery talks/hikes by Rangers

Projects/Undertakings Completed

Repair and Repointing of historic stone wall

Completion of select repointing of joints to lodge, carriage house, and pump house(comfort station)

Straightening and realignment of all grave markers

Projects/Undertakings 2021

Painting and duplication of decayed wood of lodge, carriage house, and pump house(comfort station)

Shiloh National Military Park and Cemetery (Tennessee) was established in 1866. It has 16 acres, 3,590 Civil War Union Soldiers buried here (2,361 of them are unknown), the total number of Veterans interred is 3,892.

Chalmette National Cemetery, Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, New Orleans, Louisiana

- The Cultural Landscape Report is in the 70% review stage. There was one Interment in 2021, 13 headstones were repaired and 12 were replaced.
- Commemoration was held at the grave of Private Joseph Landhart with the World War I 801st Pioneer Infantry Regiment through Homecoming 21 organization that included Consul General of France, Homecoming '21 Representative, District Commander of American Legion, Director of New Orleans VA Medical Center and NAACP Representative.
- The Park is proposing a pilot project when funding is available to test plots in order to address long term issues of subsidence, high water tables and environmental pollution.

Andersonville National Cemetery, Andersonville National Historic Site – Georgia Preservation, Maintenance, and Operations

- Last open NPS-managed National Cemetery
- 207 Interments in 2020
- 21,206 total interments
- Employ multiple youth crews each year for headstone placement and straightening
- Wreaths Across America

Public Law 115-184 (June 15, 2018):to provide outer burial receptacles for remains buried in national parks; Reimbursements initiated May 2021 at Andersonville NC which include an allowance for installations up to \$500 plus the annually published liner costs.

- Virtual event across 25 parks
- Constructed an attachment for the mini excavator to dig headstone holes
- Facebook live-Strolling bagpiper 35,000 likes
- Fawn and flag on unknown soldiers grave: picked up on all the major news channels and went viral just after Memorial Day.

Societal Burial Trends

Member, Heather Mitchell Braatz, presented on societal burial trends. She is an expert in the funeral home industry. Prior to the meeting, Mrs. Braatz sent the Committee a short informational course described some of the changes in funerals and burials over the past 100 years.

21st Century Disposition Services

- Overview of Funeral Services
- Most Americans will die in hospitals and nursing homes as opposed to their homes from here on.
- Even if most Americans prefer to die at home, half of Americans take advantage of hospice care due to declining affiliations with churches. A lot of Americans are taking advantage of celebrate services which are more personalized.
- People are having non-clergy lead funerals and green funerals.
- Embalming is not required by law and the deceased can be viewed regardless of disposition.
- Current data shows that the majority of deceased are going to be cremated. In 2020 during the pandemic, 56 percent of Americans were cremated. Cremation is no longer a trend. It is now considered a traditional disposition choice. Cremation has eclipsed burials as the form of disposition that Americans, majority choose.
- Types of Disposition
 - Earth interment (casketed)
 - Cremation inurnment
 - Green burial (inurnment/scattered/ossuary)
 - Burial at sea
 - Entombment
 - Alkaline hydrolysis
- Final Resting Places & Alternatives
 - Natural organic reduction (composite)
 - Whole body donation to medical science
 - Memorial reefs for cremated remains
 - Space burial
- Unclaimed Veterans Remains
 - Unclaimed cremated remains sometimes exist at crematoriums or funeral homes. If a person had no next of kin and was cremated, the remains may stay at a crematorium or funeral home because there are no living survivors.

- Member, Donn Weaver, provided more intel about the Missing in America Project (MIAP), for which is he actively involved in the research, recovery, and interment of thousands of unclaimed remains of Veterans. MIAP began in 2008. They work with funeral homes to research their unclaimed remains list. MIAP then confirms the Veteran status with VA to inter the remains of Veterans and eligible spouses. The COVID 19 pandemic has greatly impacted the Project. In the past 16 -18 months, only ten people have been interred under VA guidelines. In the future, MIAP plans to work with the National Park Service to identify the cremains of people left in the parks.

- Many may not be Veterans. One critical issue is that the MIAP only actively assists in nine states. Mr. Weaver stated that the new charge for a commemorative plaque and urn is great because relatives who turn up generations later will have a way to honor their Veterans in a private plot.
- Mr. Weaver also pointed out that VA's strategic goal to have a cemetery within 75 miles of Veteran's residency is not met in Florida (for some people).

NCA Outreach

Members, Kathleen Moakler and Floyd Watson, Jr. presented on NCA Outreach and communication strategy in the NCA Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations (OEMI).

Workgroup's Objectives:

To become more familiar with the NCA Media Products (Print and Social Media) as they apply to outreach efforts of the NCA

To review and contribute feedback to the Communication Strategies of OEMI.

Mrs. Moakler noted that in light of the recent Pandemic Crisis and the impact on burials being conducted at National Cemeteries, the outreach through social media and other NCA public engagement programs is more important than ever in keeping Veterans, their families, their survivors and the public informed of NCA events, procedures and burial benefits. She also commended OEMI on the following programs:

Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM)

Congrats on the enhanced features available as of Memorial Day 2021

Thanks for allowing survivors to honor their loved ones with the Roll of Honor during the COVID 19 Cemetery restrictions

Veterans Legacy Program (VLP)

Sharing the stories of nearly 1,000 Veterans

Videos are informative and professional – a must see!

Mrs. Moakler stated that the Committee regularly read the Facebook posts, but as they reviewed the last year of posts for this report, they were impressed and most appreciative of the breadth and depth of the information in articles that are included. One could see a progression to the year which resulted in a sense of greater engagement with the desired audience. Mrs. Moakler noted that the Committee had insight into training or programs for cemetery workers and staff. This allowed people to gain a feeling as to what is going on at the Cemetery.

The workgroup's recommendations for Committee consideration are as follows:

1. The NCA OEMI continue with the current social media outreach and programs.
2. The NCA OEMI additionally adapt and expand as new, appropriate socialmedia opportunities or platforms present themselves and outreach programs are developed.
3. The NCA consider doing an update briefing to NASDVA (National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs) on the status of the Veterans Legacy Program and the Veterans Legacy Memorial.

Status Update: Outreach and Memorialization Efforts

Mr. Tim Nosal, Deputy Director, OEMI briefed the Committee on activities and accomplishments. Before proceeding, he provided a brief overview of the offices and responsibilities, as follows:

OEMI Programs/Responsibilities:

- Public Affairs and Outreach
 - Media relations
 - Social Media
 - Outreach
 - Video Production
 - Advisory Committee
 - Special Projects/Events
 - New Cemetery Dedications
- Digital Services
 - Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM)
 - Website
- Veterans Legacy Program (VLP)
 - Education Outreach
 - Innovation
 - Veterans Legacy Grants Program
- History Program
 - Administrative history (Example - COVID Response Oral Histories)
 - Preservation
 - Cemetery Queries
 - NCA Collections
 - Interpretation – Waysides and Historical Publications

- **Forms of communications:**
 - Media Engagement
 - Face to face at public events (Virtual in the COVID Environment – Example *National Council for Social Studies 2020*)
 - Digital
 - Website
 - Veterans Legacy Memorial
 - Social Media & Individual Cemetery FB Pages (24)
 - Rally Point & Veterans Experience Office (VEO) and other VA Programs
 - VLP Education Materials VA and NCA Produced Publications Fact sheets, brochures & booklets History publications
 - NCA Content in VSO and Trade Org publications
 - Interpretative Products
 - Waysides, Exhibit panels and other products

- **FY20 & 21 Review**
 - COVID presented multiple communication challenges but also presented opportunities that didn't exist before. Media interest due to COVID ensured NCA messaging was carried in a variety of outlets across the country

 - VLP contributed with the development of the Roll of Honor (RoH)
 - Created by VLP with support of the Office of Public and Intergovernment Affairs and QITC
 - Instant digital memorialization of over 15,000 Veterans when public committal services were not possible
 - *RoH* is now on “stand by” - can be implemented in response to any change in operational posture

 - The push to place NCA Content in VSO and Trade Org publications was met with great success - stories on NCA's benefits and VLM ran in more than 11 publications in FY20 with an estimated reach of 3,488,100 readers. To date for FY21, 8 publications with more than 2,539,000 readers.

 - VLM development continues. VLM now allows users to post photos, documents, and other items in addition to tributes. To date, more than 19,700 posts with over 4,000 being posted between May 24 – June 1

 - Leveraging social media, many of the FY20/21 Memorial Day ceremonies were livestreamed via Facebook or another medium. This has set precedent and proof of concept for future ceremonies and events at cemeteries where streaming will work.

- OEMI developed several video products including the *FY19 Top Ten*, *Memorial Day 2020 and 2021*, *VLM*, *Pearl Harbor*, and *VLP* video products. The Pearl Harbor videos had a combined total of 71.1k views, 560 shares and 537 likes.
- In November 2020, OEMI Published the booklet “America’s World War II Burial Program” which received the “Program Office Member Award” from the *Society for History in the Federal Government*.
- [*America’s World War II Burial Program*](#), the first of the National Cemetery Administration’s World War II Commemorative Series of educational publications, is the 2021 recipient of the SHFG Member Award for a Group project. This booklet balances the history of the “Return of the Dead Program,” and that of the national cemeteries with plentiful illustrations, and the unique and engaging stories of a diverse selection of individual World War II veterans buried in veteran’s cemeteries across the country. Their approach to the material informs a general audience of the agency’s work, and the U.S. Government’s deep commitment to “the final disposition of our soldiers’ remains, in accordance with the wishes of their loved ones” as “the final gesture of a grateful country to those who paid the supreme sacrifice.”
- NCA continued to collaborate with Carry the Load (CTL) in their “Memorial Month” Relays. Due to COVID 19, NCA and CTL adapted both the 2020 and 2021 programs with a series of coordinated social media posts. For Memorial May 2021, CTL visited 42 National Cemeteries
- VLP helped foster “Homecoming 21” – an event to commemorate the centennial of the return of the first repatriated remains from WWI
- VLP film *Alene B. Duerk: The First Woman Admiral* was featured in the San Diego GI Film Festival
- New cemeteries dedicated in FY 21 – Cheyenne (October), Western New York (November) and Morovis (December)

Open Discussion

The Committee voted unanimously on recommendations for NCA outreach and communications:

- The NCA Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations (OEMI) continue with the current social media outreach and programs.
- The NCA OEMI additionally adapt and expand as new, appropriate social media opportunities or platforms present themselves and outreach programs are developed.
- The NCA consider doing an update briefing to NASDVA (National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs) on the status of the Veterans Legacy Program, Veterans Legacy Memorial and overall NCA public communication efforts.
- Members, Ms. Braatz and Mr. Saunders clarified that the recommendations on burial options for the last five percent have already been addressed in the 2019 recommendations to the Secretary. Therefore, at the end of the meeting, the members motioned to strike the duplicate recommendations.

Public Comments

Dr. Michael Khan thanked the Committee for the good work they are doing. He spoke about the order of the meeting and moments that seemed to require further discussion. Chairman Strickland thanked Dr. Khan for his observations and comments.

Mr. Leslie Witter, National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), mentioned that he is familiar with the Missing in America Project (MIAP) and unclaimed remains issue. Around 2010, he worked with MIAP to see if NFDA could assist with giving dignified burials to unclaimed remains. Mr. Witter stated that if the Committee or the MIAP would like to reconnect with NFDA, he would be willing to look at the issue again.

Heather Salazar, Congressional Research Service, thanked the Committee. She stated that there was a lot of information to take in and for her to help Congress understand some of the issues. She mentioned that the presentation on Societal Trends was extremely helpful.

Closing Remarks & Adjournment

Chairman Strickland recapped the following charges with the Committee. The Committee accepted the following charges from Chairman Joey Strickland:

- Continue review of Societal Burial Trends
- Continue review of NCA Outreach and Communication
- Attend a meeting with the Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs

The Committee also accepted the following charges from the NCA:

Charge #1 – Review American Indian and Alaska Native Veteran’s Decisions to Use VA-Granted Tribal Veteran Cemeteries

The Principal Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs charges the ACCM to identify and examine reasons or conditions which influence American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans’ decisions regarding burial in VA-grant Tribal Cemetery (i.e. to choose or not to choose); and to make recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs that would assist American Indian and Alaska Natives to choose burial in VA-grant funded Tribal cemeteries. The ACCM will make their Report and Recommendations at the Spring 2022 meeting.

Assigned Work Group Members:

- Joey Strickland (Lead) – Alaska
- Ed Saunders – Mid-Western states
- Michael Hoplight – Eastern states

Charge #2 – Review PL 116-315 (Section 2207) Urn/Commemorative Plaque Benefit

- Concur with Basic Concept for the plaque and urn
- Assign Subcommittee to assist MPS in product designs
- Recommend final product design to USMA at the November ACCM meeting

Chairman Strickland asked members if they had any final comments before closing the meeting. All members provided comments reflecting their privilege and honor to serve on the Committee on behalf of Veterans, Survivors, and family members. The Committee recapped

Assigned Work Group Members:

- Heather M. Braatz (Lead)
- Donn Weaver
- Kathleen Moakler
- Floyd Watson, Jr

Chairman Strickland closed the meeting at approximately 2:35pm



Joey Strickland
Committee Chair

Note: Complete transcription may be available upon request. Questions may be forwarded to vaadvisorycmte@va.gov.