

**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)**  
**Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials**  
**Meeting Minutes**  
**November 2-3, 2022**  
**8:30 am - 4:30 pm**

**Committee Members Present:**

- Heather Braatz, Committee Chair
- Paul Adkins, Committee Member
- Eric Brown, Committee Member
- Amerophan “Ame” Callahan, Committee Member
- Alvin Duncan, Committee Member
- Gina Farrisee, Committee Member
- Thomas Hernandez, Committee Member
- Michael Hoplight, Committee Member
- William “Bill” Kennedy, Committee Member
- Kathleen Moakler, Committee Member
- Floyd Watson, Jr, Committee Member
- Candace Wheeler, Committee Member

**Ex-officio Members Present:**

- Karen Durham-Aguilera, Office of Army Cemeteries
- Thomas Sole, American Battle Monuments Commission
- Gia Wagner, National Park Service (virtual)

**Office of Cemetery Army Cemeteries Present:**

- Lieutenant Colonel Maxwell Pappas
- Major Judith Phinn
- Cynthia Riddle
- Renea Yates

**Office of the VA Secretary Attendees:**

- Donald Remy, VA Deputy Secretary
- Jeffrey Moragne, Director, VA Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO)
- Matthew Webb

**National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Attendees:**

- Matthew Quinn, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs (USMA)
- Gerardo Avila, Acting Chief of Staff
- Jacqueline Hillian-Craig, Executive Director, Strategy and Analysis
- Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations
- Lisa Pozzebon, Executive Director, Cemetery Operations
- Joshua de Leon, Executive Director, Midwest District
- James Earp, Deputy Director, Veterans Cemetery Grants Program
- James Geleta, Director, Performance Assessment and Planning Service
- Jay Dalrymple, Director, National Cemetery Scheduling Office
- Jerry Sowders, Executive Assistant, Cemetery Operations
- Tanya Turner, Special Assistant to the USMA

- Artis Parker, Executive Director, Office of Field Programs
- Donald Owens, Assistant Director, Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery Complex
- Jillian Angelo, Deputy Director of Training, National Training Center (NTC)
- Daniel Devine, Executive Director, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations (OEMI)
- Timothy Nosal, Director, History and Education Programs, OEMI
- Faith Hopkins, Designated Federal Officer (DFO), OEMI
- Antonio Addressi, Alternate DFO, OEMI

**Other VA Staff**

- Patricia Hall, Network Director, Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 15, Veterans Health Administration
- Mitzi Marsh, Director, Regional Office, Veterans Benefits Administration
- Thomas Murphy, Director, Northeast Division, Veterans Benefits Administration
- Michael Visconage, Chief Historian, Construction and Facilities Management

**Also Present:**

- Mark Belinsky, Military Officers Association of America
- John Kelley, Private Citizen
- Claire McKinney, Private Citizen
- Heather Salazar, Veterans Policy Analyst, Congressional Research Service
- Ashli Turner, Executive Director, Illinois Funeral Directors Association

## **Wednesday, November 2, 2022**

The semi-annual meeting of the Veterans Affairs (VA) Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials (herein referred to as the ACCM or Committee) was held in St. Louis, MO. The session was open to the public, and the meeting information and teleconference number were published in the Federal Register announcement.

### **Opening Remarks**

The Committee Chair, Ms. Heather Braatz, called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. The Chair opened the meeting by thanking the Jefferson Barracks Medical Center for allowing ACCM the use of their facilities for the meeting. The Chair provided a brief overview of the Committee's role and reviewed the agenda. Paul Adkins led the attendees in the Pledge of Allegiance. The group stood for a Moment of Silence for servicemembers no longer with us and served domestically and internationally to protect our nation. Faith Hopkins, Designated Federal Officer, provided administrative announcements and rules of engagement for the meeting.

### **Committee Introductions**

Each committee member and ex-officio in attendance introduced themselves and Chair Heather Braatz acknowledged new members Alvin Duncan, Gina Farrisee, Jared Peatman, and Candace Wheeler.

In further comments, Chair Heather Braatz mentioned the importance of developing recommendations that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely and align with NCA's Long Range Plan. The Chair introduced Matthew Quinn, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. Mr. Matthew Quinn joined the meeting with the Honorable Donald M. Remy, Deputy Secretary, Veterans Affairs, Ms. Jacqueline Hillian-Craig, and Mr. Thomas Murphy. Mr. Matthew Quinn introduced Mr. Donald Remy who followed with remarks.

### **Remarks from Honorable Donald M. Remy, Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs**

Mr. Donald Remy thanked Mr. Matthew Quinn for the introduction and acknowledged Mr. Murphy who served as Acting Under Secretary for Benefits as a valuable contributor to VA's leadership efforts. Mr. Donald Remy also acknowledged Ms. Jacqueline Hillian-Craig, his official travel partner for the St. Louis site visit, and Ms. Patricia Hall, Veteran Integrated Service Network Director, and Chair Heather Braatz. On behalf of the Secretary of the VA, he thanked everyone on the committee for their valuable input on ways to improve the services that the VA provides to the Veteran community and their families caregivers, survivors, and loved ones. He also acknowledged new members Alvin Duncan, Gina Farisee, Jared Peatman, and Candace Wheeler.

The Deputy Secretary stated that as we are nearing Veterans Day, it is a reminder for all of us to remember, to express our appreciation and gratitude for the services of those who have served in uniform and the families that support them and the sacrifice

they have made on behalf of our nation. This advisory committee meeting is a great opportunity to talk about things we can do to honor and remember them properly.

He stated that NCA has the highest customer satisfaction scores of any enterprise in America which is a testament to the great people working at NCA. Mr. Donald Remy stated that he has been to many cemeteries and highlighted the unveiling at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, the Cemetery Directors graduation at Miramar National Cemetery, Crown Hill expansion, and the new columbarium, and his first National Day of Service event at Alexandria, National Cemetery.

During the pandemic, NCA forged on amidst the challenges that it presented citing the completion of over 150,000 interments, providing more than 340,000 headstones and markers, over 11, 000 medallions, and issuing more than 460,000 Presidential Memorial Certificates. While the target is 95%; 94% of Veterans have access to burial sites within 75 miles of their residence.

Mr. Donald Remy commented on the importance of the Veterans Legacy Program and Veterans Legacy Memorial Programs to keep the stories and memories alive for Veterans such as the 19 all-black 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry unit interred at Ft. Sam Houston National Cemetery.

Mr. Donald Remy recognized outgoing Chair Heather Braatz with a Certificate of Appreciation and took photos with the Committee after which he remained for a question and answer session. Chair Heather Braatz asked, "What is your vision in terms of continuing to further outreach and educating and making greater awareness for the general public about our national cemeteries and Veterans benefits?" Mr. Donald Remy reiterated earlier comments on the goal of 95% Veteran access to a burial benefit within 75 miles of their home.

One of the best ways to get the word out is to tell the stories of the cemeteries that we have and to connect with local communities in a way they understand what is available to their citizens. Mr. Matthew Quinn added that in addition to the initiatives mentioned NCA needs the support of state and territorial partners to meet the 95% goal. NCA does not have Honor Guards so, interaction with the community is incredibly important for the success. He stated that NCA is the last benefit that the Veteran ever earns and it is a perpetual benefit. Therefore, the importance of what NCA, state and tribal partners such as Arlington National Cemetery do is critical to success.

Committee member, Ms. Gina Farrisee asked Mr. Donald Remy if there was anything he would like to share with the Committee based on his visit to national cemeteries. Mr. Donald Remy commented that he was not surprised by the hard work that the cemetery staff does however, he was surprised at how challenging it was to ensure they are adequately compensated. As a result, he is working with Under Secretary Quinn to provide appropriate compensation and benefits. He also mentioned the difference in how facilities are maintained in some of the state cemeteries compared to national

cemeteries as Mr. Matthew Quinn stated, NCA needs to partner with communities to make sure they receive the same honors no matter where they are buried.

Chair Heather Braatz commented that her goal is to ensure that future funeral directors are better educated and asked if there was anything that funeral directors needed to know to be better allies to NCA and the VA. Mr. Donald Remy expressed that his perception is that funeral directors are aligned with the future of NCA and its provision of services to Veterans and their families. Mr. Matthew Quinn stated that funeral directors need to understand the do's and don'ts of an interment. As a government entity, some laws govern the NCA versus a private cemetery. NCA will keep educating funeral homes and directors for compliance. NCA must also treat them with respect as they have an important mission with the families as well. Lastly, continue to work on national coordination of the unclaimed remains process to ensure Veterans are honored the way that they should be honored.

Mr. Michael Hoplight commented that he is working with the Missing in America Project in New York State. The state passed a law that unclaimed remains can only stay in the funeral parlors for 120 days. He has visited over 20 funeral parlors to find no unclaimed remains. He stated that they have been buried in certain sections of cemeteries dedicated to indigent burials in an ossuary. He also asked Mr. Matthew Quinn if the remains of unclaimed Native Americans are returned to their nation. Mr. Matthew Quinn stated that a report from the Office of Inspector General (OIG) is forthcoming that is integrating VHA, VBA, and NCA in terms of how to handle unclaimed remains. He stated that he will take the question back for discussion at a later time.

### **Remarks from Mr. Matthew Quinn, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, NCA**

Mr. Matthew Quinn expressed his appreciation to the Committee for its engagement with NCA. He presented specific requests to the Committee based on the importance of NCA's partnerships with Arlington National Cemetery, the National Park Service, the American Battle Monuments Commission, states, tribes, and territories. The aforementioned partners are the last opportunities for the nation to say, "Thank You", for the service of a Veteran or family member that sacrificed so that a Veteran could serve.

Mr. Matthew Quinn went to visit a tribal cemetery inspected two years ago and found that nothing had been done to care for the Veterans' graves. There were temporary markers and the grass was overgrown. The cemetery had a new director and no funds to maintain the graves. NCA sees this condition at tribal cemeteries and as a result, he has started having calls with tribal leadership to determine the barriers to interring Veterans. For example, the Pascua Yaqui tribe has not yet buried a Veteran and the cemetery has been in existence for 10 years. The barrier is cultural as this tribe uses crosses to mark the graves and NCA headstones. Another difference is that they mound their graves and do not tamp to make them level with the ground which, is a requirement of NCA.

Mr. Matthew Quinn has made two calls and spoken with tribal leaders who recommended a cultural committee to discuss tribal traditions and rules to determine if NCA should implement. He asked the committee to sit with tribal governments to see what the barriers are to utilization and make a recommendation to NCA. Ms. Ame Callahan clarified Mr. Matthew Quinn's request to contact the tribal leaders regarding barriers. Mr. Matthew Quinn stated that he would facilitate the contact.

Ms. Ame Callahan pointed out that the tribal nation is a sovereign nation and should be addressed appropriately for this matter. Mr. Matthew Quinn agreed and the question should be, "How can we work better together". NCA and the Committee should consider the tribal culture. Mr. Hoplight stated that the Clan Mothers should not be bypassed and to consider that there are many customs for every tribe. Mr. Matthew Quinn suggested that this process is not a one-size fits and that is why he is trying to set up calls with every tribal nation.

Mr. Hoplight stated that some families want to stay together in family plots. He asked if anyone has considered helping individual cemeteries that are not VA funded. Mr. Matthew Quinn responded that NCA is considering micro-grants for private cemeteries to help them maintain Veteran plots however, the proposal has to go before Congress. NCA is also considering scoping down the size of the grants to tribal cemeteries by assessing the Veteran population for a smaller-scale grant within the traditional tribal cemetery that could be Veteran only. Mr. Matthew Quinn requested input from the Committee on these matters.

Other matters Mr. Matthew Quinn discussed for the future were:

- PACT Act and how it has no impact on NCA at this point other than awareness by Veterans of NCA.
- Improvements needed for Pre-Need Eligibility determinations. The time it takes to determine eligibility for burial services takes up to two months. Ninety-nine percent of the Veterans enrolled in VBA and VHA is eligible for interment in a national cemetery.
- NCA is exploring the process for funeral homes to go online and perform the entire scheduling without having to speak with an operator. Once the meeting is scheduled; the cemetery staff gathers the paperwork and plans to conduct the interment service. There may be opportunities to develop an online scheduling process.
- NCA is beginning to run a "Did You Know" campaign to raise awareness across the nation. NCA is also in partnership with Arlington National Cemetery to share information about NCA cemetery locations during times of need.

### **Briefing on Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) 101**

Mr. Jeffrey Moragne, Director, Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO) briefed the Committee on this mandatory rule. He began by stating that the members have an opportunity to influence the operations, the policy, and the use of resources in their role.

As such, they should understand FACA because it is all about transparency and accountability. He reviewed the components of FACA as it relates to the ACCM.

- Charter. There is a signed Charter that governs the Committee that is renewed every two years.
- The meetings cannot take place unless the Designated Federal Officer (DFO) or Alternate DFO is present in the room.
- Public Meetings. The meetings are open to the public and anyone may attend.
- Balanced membership. The membership should have the required skill sets and experience but also reflect the constituency it serves in terms of demographics.
- Records. Any records or documents prepared for the committee are available to the public.
- Quorum. Meetings must have a quorum of 50 percent plus one to be an official meeting. DFO should ensure the solicitation of new members to maintain full membership.
- Closed meetings. Any requests for closed meetings should be justified and vetted through ACMO and the Office of General Counsel before the meeting. He stated that 99% of meetings are open to the public. The Committee can meet privately as a sub-committee to conduct preparatory work for an open meeting or administrative matters such as planning site visits, training, etc. Meetings can be found in the Federal Register and notices are published for 30 days.
- Members may not speak publicly on behalf of the Committee; however, they may speak about the individual experience as an individual/private citizen.
- He encouraged members to understand their role by reading the Charter, VA Committee Member Handbook

## **Overview of the VA History Program**

Mr. Michael Visconage, Chief Historian, Construction and Facilities Management, and Timothy Nosal, Director, History and Education Programs, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovation provided a briefing on the VA History Program

- The History program is a new business startup for the VA. The VA History Office was established 18 months ago and he focused on the VA History Program establishment and National VA History Center development.
- VA History Office Mission. Establish an overarching program to collect, preserve, and provide access to our history in order to tell the full story of the Department of Veterans Affairs and its predecessor organizations.
- VA History Program. Includes an orchestrated system for gathering and archiving materials from current initiatives that have a high potential for future historical interest.
- VA History Center. Primarily a location where historical materials can be centralized accounted for, and preserved, and where public access is provided to help tell the VA story.



- Dayton VA Campus. Tells the whole VA story; 1867, one of the first three National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. A 500-acre campus to care for Veterans who cannot live on their own. At its peak, it had over 600,000 visitors a year. Significantly the national cemetery was incorporated in this as it has interments that date to Revolutionary War Veterans and has the largest concentrations of U.S. Colored Troops, the first female employee of the VA, Emma Miller, and five Medal of Honor recipients.
- The Dayton partner established a 501(c)(3) foundation board. The goal is to raise money for a final buildout.
- The communications strategy is to build a website [www.va.gov/history](http://www.va.gov/history) where individuals can join and get email updates. There is also a Gov delivery regular email that is sent to 14,000 subscribers.
- Mr. Nosal discussed the NCA history program and several key missions such as:
  - Improve awareness of NCA by telling the story of Veterans by aligning the Veterans Legacy Grants and History Programs by placing it on the Veterans Legacy Memorial site.
  - Grow Interpretive Programs to include site-based programs, brochures, booklets, electronic and virtual exhibits, and Waysides.

Chair Heather Braatz asked if there were any new developments with the Veterans Legacy Program and Mr. Nosal stated that the Veterans Legacy Program now has grant authority. Six grants were awarded in August 2022. A Notice of Funding Opportunity will be sent no later than March 2023.

Mr. Paul Adkins asked if there are plans for a visitors and education center at Riverside National Cemetery. Mr. Nosal stated that the interpretive themes at the National VA Center will be available at Riverside because our cemeteries fit within a larger system. He expressed that an interpretive theme he sees for all locations is a model of continued service, of civil service. We represent the epitome of public service in what we do for our country and the people we serve.

Mr. Eric Brown asked for more information on the site-based interpretive programs. Mr. Nosal stated that the site-based programs include brochures, pamphlets, to tours that consider the cemetery environment.

Chair Heather Braatz asked if the History program has an Instagram account. Mr. Visconage stated, "No, Facebook is the first social media because of the demographic of those interested in the program. Instagram is on the agenda for 2023."

Lastly, Mr. Timothy Nosal pointed out that the VA History program is expanding with VHA VISN 19 hiring its first historians to support the program.

### **Briefing On Choice, Awareness, and Survey of Satisfaction**

Mr. James Geleta, Director, Performance Assessment and Planning Service presented a briefing on NCA's demographics derived from the Survey of Satisfaction, Statistical

## Summary, National Summary of Veterans, Active Duty Servicemembers, Demobilized National Guard and Reserve Members and Family Members.

### Survey of Satisfaction

- Distribution of the survey has been ongoing for 22 years and has evolved from once focusing only on the national cemeteries to now a focus on national cemeteries, next of kin, memorial products, and state and tribal funeral directors. Data from these instruments help NCA assess satisfaction with products and services in addition to progress on strategic performance measures.
- Customers are satisfied with scheduling, and time for placement of headstones and markers and place value in services offered and would recommend NCA to others who are eligible.
- The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) is a survey that is distributed every three years and whereby NCA achieved an index score of 97.

### Response to the Committee's Questions

1. How many eligible Veterans are selecting national cemeteries each year?  
Based on 2021 data, about 15% of eligible Veterans will choose interment in a national cemetery. NCA provides reasonable access, which is 75 miles from the Veterans' homes, to 93.8% of all Veterans. There are no more major concentrations of unserved Veterans across the country. NCA has the rural initiative, and state and tribal cemeteries to increase access to the burial benefit.
2. What are the demographics of the people who are choosing the national cemetery? White, 87%, African American, 10%, Asian, 2.5%, and 6% self-identify as Hispanic. Mr. James Geleta presented a graph depicting an increase in cremation burial over a casket. Cremation accounts for more than half of the interment process in national cemeteries.
3. How many Veterans and their family members are aware of their burial benefits?  
Over 75% of respondents to the survey reported awareness. There are many ways the information is shared and it is a broad target. Mr. Devine may be able to aid with analysis.
4. How many people do not know that cemeteries exist or that their loved one could be placed in a national cemetery? That is hard to measure in the absence of data. Mr. Geleta referred to the October 2010 National Survey of Veterans. The report asked the question, "How many people are aware of the benefits, the opportunity for interment." The response was 41% were aware of the possibility of burial in the national cemeteries. This was basic awareness and did not know a lot of details. This data dates back to 2010 and there has been discussion of an update to this national survey.

Mr. James Geleta also highlighted data that showed 15% of respondents to the survey indicated their spouse was buried in a national cemetery. Of those respondents who indicated their spouse was not buried in a national cemetery, almost half, 46% were

aware that their spouse could have been buried in a VA national or state Veteran cemetery.

Chair Heather Braatz asked if the VA has plans to distribute an updated survey on a grand scale (such as the 2010 survey). Mr. Geleta stated there are plans for the survey but not any time soon. She further mentioned that her father, a World War II Veteran, could be buried in a national cemetery but the family was just offered the burial flag. She stated that increasing awareness and increasing the ability for our allies to educate the families that we can provide what options are available to them.

### **Update on Commemorative Plaque and Urn Benefit**

Artis Parker, Executive Director, Field Programs provided an update on the plaque and urn benefit which provides headstones and markers for the unmarked graves of eligible Veterans and their dependents. He spoke about Public Law 116-315, the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020, which authorizes the VA to provide two additional memorial products, an urn, and a commemorative plaque for cremated remains not interred in a national cemetery.

The selection of either the plaque or the urn precludes the Veteran from later interment in a VA national cemetery or receiving a government headstone or marker anywhere.

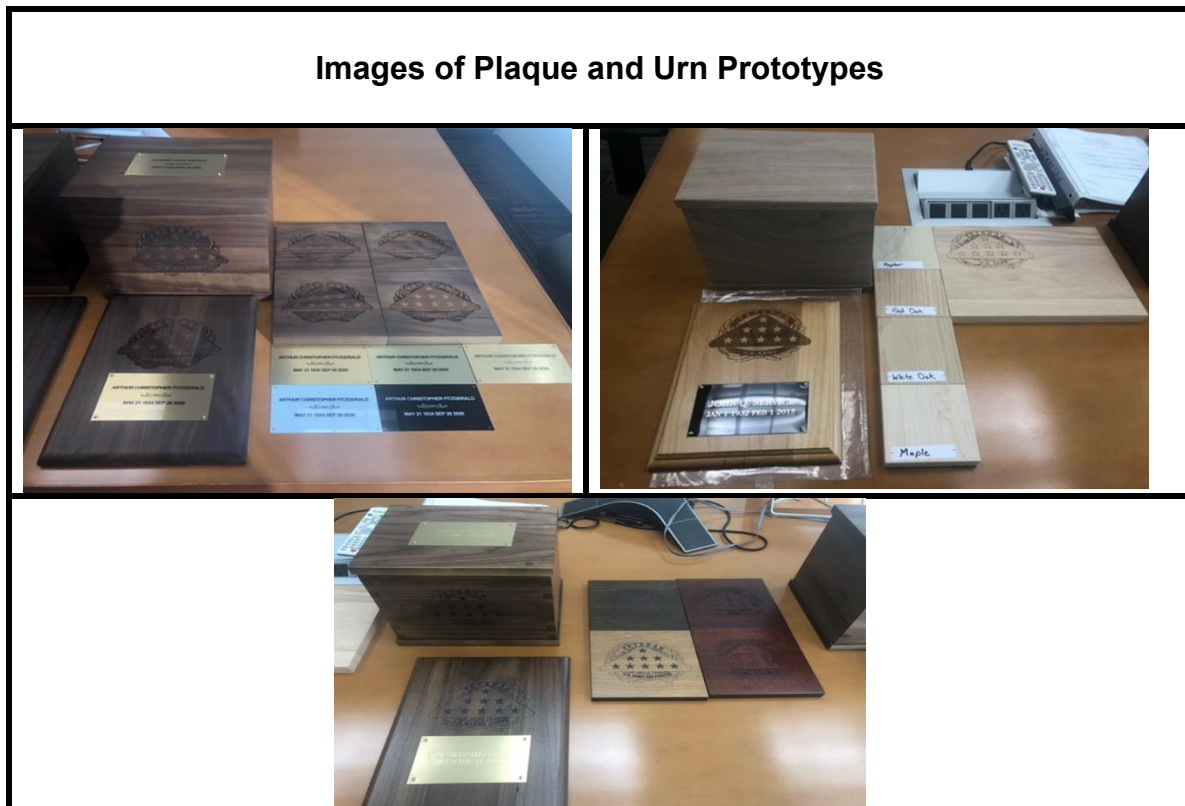
### Background

In June 2021, NCA charged the Committee to assign a subcommittee to assist Memorial Products Service in the product designs for the Commemorative Plaque and Urn. The Committee first concurred with some basic concepts, which included the detachable bronze folded flag insignia that is similar to NCA's medallion, so that families could alternatively use the folded flag like a medallion or in any other manner of their choice.

### Progress Update

- A solicitation for the detachable folded flag insignia was sent on June 30, 2022, but received no bids as the requirements were too restrictive.
- NCA modified the requirements to remove the detachable bronze folded flag insignia – replaced it with laser-etched folded flag insignia.
- Re-solicitation was sent and potential vendors had until September 30 to submit their bids. NCA received three responses.
- NCA is conducting its technical review of submissions and anticipates awarding the contract no later than November 3, 2022.
- In preparation for requests, NCA is finalizing the form for plaque and urn (VA Form 40-1330UP). NCA staff are also working with the Information Technology department to ensure that there are alerts in the system to prevent a duplicate of benefits.

- The goal is to publish the regulation and make the products available no later than January 5, 2023.



Mr. Michael Hoplight asked how NCA plans to communicate the benefit to Veterans. Mr. Artis Parker stated that NCA's internet site, social media, Veteran community, Veteran Service Organizations and funeral industry partners will assist with publicizing the benefits.

Chair Heather Braatz stated that this legislation had a two-year implementation that may have liability for forfeiting the opportunity for a Veteran to be placed in a national cemetery. Mr. Parker responded that NCA developed the applications for the benefit and developed an instructional page that informs the next of kin that by accepting the commemorative plaque or urn, they forfeit burial in certain national cemeteries and issuance of a government headstone. There will also be additional notification of this forfeiture on the urn seal before the next of kin uses it.

Ms. Ame Callahan asked if NCA has implemented a solution that informs all family members by requiring multiple signatures on the application. If the Veteran receives the plaque and urn benefit, the spouse is still eligible for burial in a national cemetery. Mr. Matthew Quinn stated that NCA is going to have to communicate the parameters of the benefit. Mr. Glenn Powers stated that NCA worked very hard on the form and it requires only one signature. He stated that to issue the benefit, the applicant has to

have the cremains and certify that they are the person authorized to make the decision for the family. Applicants will be notified that while receipt of the benefit prevents the burial benefit in a national cemetery, it does not preclude burial in a state cemetery however, the policy prevents NCA from providing a headstone or marker to mark the grave of the Veteran.

For eligibility criteria, NCA does an incredible job and there is no lag for determination at the time of need. A reduction in the lag in pre-need eligibility notifications is needed to match time-of-need eligibility notifications more closely.

## **Overview/Update on Veterans Cemetery Grants Program**

Mr. Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations introduced Mr. James Earp, Deputy Director of the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program provided a briefing to the Committee in response to specific questions it asked to be answered during the meeting.

### Response to Committee's Questions

1. How does NCA prioritize the allocation of grants? The committee is aware of the emphasis on each priority group; however, they are interested in the criteria used to prioritize the projects. For example, does NCA use pre-need statistics to determine priorities on Expansion projects?
  - a. Prioritization within priority groups: 38 CFR, Part 39 Subpart A § 39.3. Within Priority Group 1 priority is established for a project that must be funded that fiscal year to avoid disruption in burial services.
  - b. Within Priority Groups 1, 2, and 3, the highest priority will be given to projects in geographical locations with the greatest number of veterans who will benefit from the project as determined by the VA.
  - c. NCA's prioritization includes Veteran Population (VETPOP) data.
2. How does NCA address unanticipated costs and spikes associated with awarded projects during the work? Have there been any significant issues related to an awarded project that has now increased in cost due to the current economic conditions?
  - a. 38 CFR, Part 39, § 39.50 (a) The amount of an Establishment, Expansion, and Improvement Project grant awarded under this subpart may not exceed 100 percent of the total cost of the project but may be less than the total cost of the project.
  - b. 38 CFR, Part 39, § 39.50 (b)(5) A contingency allowance not to exceed five percent of the total cost of a project that involves new construction or eight percent of the total cost of an improvement project that does not involve new construction.
  - c. Unforeseen Conditions are unanticipated or unexpected circumstances or situations that affect the final price and/or completion time of the contract or project.

- d. Unforeseen Risks e.g., an unexpected increase in material costs not paid with the contingency allowance and is the responsibility of the contractor.
- 3. Has any thought been given to removing the “Establishment” project type from the priority list and making it a stand-alone category or program? The Establishment project type requires more robust administrative and logistical efforts, including research and costs, but is listed among the other competitive grant opportunities. The funds required for an Establishment project place limitations on the other priority groups (e.g., for example, no Improvement projects were awarded in FY21).
  - a. NCA is contemplating updates to the Priority Groups to place priority on establishments that meet strategic goals for Veterans served. Establishments that do not serve VA access or other goals will move to the lowest priority allowing grant funds to reach improvement and “O&M” projects.
  - b. De-prioritize expansions that are not needed at this time (formerly PG 3) to allow grant funds to reach improvement and “O&M” projects.
  - c. Create a new priority group for “new burial options” at existing cemeteries.
- 4. Provide an overview of the process for turning over the cemetery post Establishment when construction is completed. The overview should include any training requirements mandated by NCA (if any exist). If not, address this during the briefing.
  - a. A grant-funded project is the responsibility of the State, Tribal, or Territory during and after the construction. It is the grantee’s responsibility to establish the policies and practices to ensure that at completion the grant-funded Veterans Cemetery operates within compliance and standards of operations and presentation.
  - b. NCA Training Center, provides onsite training in administrative subjects that include user training in Burial Operations Support System (BOSS), Cemetery Representative, and technical training for Cemetery Caretakers that include Cemetery Foreman course, equipment operators course, and much more to build the proficiency of the Veterans Cemetery employees.
  - c. Often, new cemetery staffs train at a nearby existing national cemetery
  - d. Training “grants” for cemetery staff will be available on completion of a regulation.
- 5. Provide an update on the VAOIG’s Recommendation 5 to require all state and tribal cemeteries to submit certified condition and operations performance assessments annually. Per the report, NCA Concurred-in-Principle.
  - a. NCA agreed in principle to the OIG recommendation but decided not to require such reports.
  - b. NCA considers its “triennial review” of grant-funded cemeteries, known as the Compliance Review Program, to be the best way to conduct an accurate, standardized assessment.
  - c. NCA’s cemeteries conduct annual “self-assessments” as a best practice.

- d. As an alternative, NCA proposed changing the VA Form 40-0241 (Annual Data Report) to learn each year, if States/Tribes voluntarily performed such a self-assessment using the most up-to-date standards.
- e. Implementation of this question is delayed by other critical improvements needed in the VA FORM 40-0241, (e.g., burial equity act data).

### **Overview of National Cemetery Scheduling Office/Eligibility**

The Committee received a briefing about the National Cemetery Scheduling Office (NCSO) from Director, Jay Dalrymple.

Chair Heather Braatz briefly discussed her time spent at the call center with Mr. Jerry Sowders the day prior. She commended Mr. Dalrymple and his team for the work they do taking care of families at the point where their grief is most raw.

Mr. Dalrymple focused on success, challenges, and going forward into the fiscal year 2023. The NCSO consists of 64 employees. In 2021, a cross-functional team was added as well as a state and tribal team to process eligibility for headstones and markers. The NCSO is the initial point of contact for Veterans, and their personal representative to schedule a burial service in any of the national cemeteries across the United States. The office staff also determines eligibility for burial, pre-need eligibility, unclaimed Veterans tracking through to final disposition, and casket and urn reimbursement program.

#### Successes

- In 2022, the scheduling team answered 278,000 calls compared to the busiest year 2021 where they set a record of 320,000 calls
- Volume went down but calls answered increased by 30,000
- Average speed of answer is three minutes compared to seven last year
- 159,000 cases were established for burials in all national cemeteries. Of this number 28,400 were escalated to the eligibility division
- Budget: Reduced overtime costs by 60%
- Performance: Average Speed of Answer – 3:07 (Metric < 5:00)

#### Challenges

- Staff attrition and tenure. Sixty-seven percent of staff have less than two years of tenure.
- Technology and system capability issues. The new Memorial Benefits Management System (MBMS) program rolled out in 2019 had a lot of stops and starts. As of January 2022, 87% of all cases are established in MBMS while the remainder is in the legacy systems. The Eligibility Office Automation System (EOAS) is used for pre-need eligibility.
- Training and continuous learning remain a challenge due to call center volume.

- The National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) closed during the pandemic making it challenging to process pre-need eligibility applications.

Mr. Jay Dalrymple stated that effective November 7, 2022, the hours on Saturday are from 8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. central time and closed on Sunday. The NCSO will also close for three additional holidays: Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Labor Day. This change is an efficient use of staffing resources, improves hiring, retention rates, and employee morale, and aligns resources for busier times of the year.

In the fiscal year 2023, the NCSO will focus on updates in technology with Interactive Voice Response (IVR), MBMS, and support requirements with commemorative plaques and urns and eligibility verification efforts. The addition of a “Frequently Asked” Feature will help callers distinguish between Arlington National Center, the Veterans Benefits Administration’s burial benefit, and the National Cemetery burial benefit.

Chair Heather Braatz asked if there are plans to scale up the staff with the new changes. Mr. Dalrymple stated that he’s requested resources for three employees. In addition, the cross-functional team is on board to provide support as well. Next, she asked if the Skill Bridge program is available for spouses. He stated, “No, however, there is the spousal hiring authority.”

Ms. Ame Callahan asked how much IVR will take the load off of the call agent. Mr. Jay Dalrymple stated that it could take 50,000 calls from the agents.

Chair Heather Braatz commended Mr. Jay Dalrymple and his team for the work they accomplish each day on behalf of Veterans.

### **Public Comment**

Chair Heather Braatz opened the meeting to public comment. There were no written comments submitted or from attendees. She acknowledged committee members Mr. William Kennedy and Ms. Candace Wheeler attended the meeting virtually. Mr. William Kennedy stated that it is important to have a liaison at the tribal cemeteries to improve communication. Mr. Kennedy recalled his attempts to reach the Chairman of the Crow tribe with little success.

Also, during this time, Mr. Michael Visconage shared a video titled, VBA History in Focus: 100 Objects - Portrait of a Revolutionary War Veteran which can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4k5ZAtWONc>.

### **Open Discussion**

Chair Heather Braatz opened the floor to the committee members for discussion or insights from the day. Ms. Candace Wheeler introduced herself and spoke about her role as the Director of Government and Legislative Affairs at the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors.



Ms. Gia Wagner from the National Park Service, Andersonville National Cemetery, and Ex-Officio for the committee introduced herself to the committee virtually.

Mr. Mark Belinsky, from the Military Officers Association of America, stated that there is an emerging challenge that Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) is reaching capacity and there is a proposal to reduce eligibility. He mentioned that one of the proposed solutions in a reporting requirement to Congress is a joint Department of Defense (DOD) and VA enterprise where an existing VA-run national cemetery or two would be designated as the next location that would afford full military honors with a ceremony and troops. He asked if Under Secretary Matthew Quinn had given any insight on this topic for the future.

Chair Heather Braatz thanked Mr. Belinsky for his comments. Ms. Katherine Durham-Aguilera was not present and is the subject matter expert for the question.

The meeting adjourned at 3:00 p.m. Central time.

**Thursday, November 3, 2023**

**Call to Order, Pledge of Allegiance, Moment of Silence**

Chair Heather Braatz welcomed members back for the second day of proceedings. Mr. Alvin Duncan led the committee in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Chair Heather Braatz called for a moment of silence for the service members serving overseas and in America, for their families, their survivors, and those who sit in wait for them.

**Administrative Announcements, Remarks, and Recap**

Faith Hopkins provided administrative announcements. Chair Braatz stated there were great presentations on the day before. She mentioned the meeting is an opportunity to listen and learn and present actionable SMART recommendations for the Secretary of VA to be able to make meaningful changes for our nation's Veterans and their surviving family members.

**Overview of Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery Complex (JBNC)**

Mr. Donald Owens, Assistant Director discussed the maintenance and operations at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery Complex (JBNC).

- JBNC's first burial took place in 1826 at the time it was a post cemetery.
- This cemetery is the fourth busiest NCA.
- The cemetery is 401 acres of which 347 are developed.
- All burial options are available at JBNC
- There are 207,851 interments; 24,000 in-ground burials, 7,070 columbaria, and total gravesites used is 177,619.
- Budget for JBNC in FY21 was 6.9 million dollars with 57 full-time employees.

Mr. Glenn Powers discussed the Cares project and the desire to fully utilize it for additional burials.

- Jefferson City, Springfield, and Mound National Cemeteries are part of the JBNC complex.
- JBNC has a restoration project, chapel rehabilitation, and expansion efforts in progress
- The VA Medical Center donated 11 acres of land to JBNC which will aid with mitigating gravesite depletion.
- In 2018 the VA purchased 33.64 acres of city parkland that will be revised in 1-11 years across various burial types.

Mr. Glenn Powers also discussed NCA's strategic goals that align with the projects taking place at Jefferson Barracks NC, types of headstones and markers, cremations, pre-placed crypts, and longevity of the cemetery. Chair Heather Braatz explained to the committee how pre-placed crypts are laid and positioned. Mr. Michael Hoplight asked

about the distance between gravesites in the older sections of the cemetery. Mr. Donald Owens stated that it depends based on the size of the grave and its location.

Mr. Michael Hoplight asked for the spacing in square feet around every gravesite in expansion areas with pre-placed crypts. Mr. Donald Owens stated that is about 32 square feet but the distance between the crypts is four to six inches.

Chair Heather Braatz asked if the Chapel was being used or a historic building. Mr. Owens stated that it is a historic building that was in use before however, it is scheduled for renovation.

### **Overview of the National Training Center (NTC)**

Ms. Jillian Angelo, Deputy Director, presented on the NTC. Areas discussed were:

- The training center was established in 2004 in St. Louis, MO
- The facility has three classrooms and shared conference space and reference library and three breakout rooms
- The capacity of the facility is 150 people (pre-COVID-19)
- Program offerings include field and administrative staff
- Personnel from Arlington, the National Park Service, American Battle Monuments Commission, and State and Tribal cemetery colleagues are invited to attend training
- Instructors for the courses are subject matter experts from NCA

Chair Heather Braatz asked if there was training for employees interacting with the families at the NCSO. Ms. Jillian Angelo stated that there is a grief and compassion module as part of the cemetery representative training since those individuals engage directly with families at the cemetery. There is an instructional systems specialist who previously worked at the NCSO who helps design training for that group. She asked Mr. Artis Parker if there is any dedicated grief or compassion training for Scheduling Office employees. He stated that he has authorized Mr. Jay Dalrymple to use resources to develop an internal training person to coordinate training that meets individual needs and criteria. He thanked Ms. Heather Braatz for sharing her experience at the call center.

Mr. Glenn Powers mentioned that the plaque and urn benefit gave NCA authority within the law to pay for training for states and tribes. NCA invites its partners to attend training as we emerge from COVID-19 more slots will be available for the in-person training offerings. While NCA has the authorization to pay for the training it has to be regulated and go through the notice and comment process for implementation. Mr. Powers hopes this will help a state cemetery that doesn't have the funds available for training.

Mr. Alvin Duncan thanked Ms. Angelo Jillian and her staff because his cemetery staff in Kentucky uses the training center which has been a great resource for employees. After returning from break, the Committee was asked to review the ACCM Charter by the Chair. The meeting was called back to order to welcome Mitzi Marsh, Regional Director, Veterans Benefits Administration.

### **Briefing on Veteran Benefits Administration**

Ms. Marsh opened her comments by stating that she will discuss the St. Louis Regional Office. She mentioned that there is a very good relationship with NCA and has had a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in place for many years to provide the character of discharge determinations for Veterans with less than honorable discharge as well as pre-need eligibility determinations. Ms. Marsh explained the indigent Veterans and unclaimed remains a process. Each state must properly dispose of the remains of indigent Veterans, including those in state care, hospitals, VA medical centers, care homes, penitentiaries, and local jails and homeless shelters.

Unclaimed Veteran remains are defined as Veterans who have not been claimed by relatives and/or friends, who do not have sufficient resources available in their estate to cover the burial and funeral expenses, and whose burial is not the responsibility of any federal, state, or local agency. There are 56 regional offices, and St. Louis is the largest with over 1,200 employees. Each regional office has at least one Unclaimed Veterans Remains Coordinator who conducts outreach and processing requests for funeral arrangements of unclaimed remains to include validation of Veteran status for a deceased person alleged to be a Veteran.

In the state of Missouri for FY21 there were zero unclaimed remains and for FY22, there were five.

- For FY21, VBA processed 120 pre-need characters of discharge determinations.
- VBA processed 1,524 death character of discharge determinations with an average of .54 days to complete. The requirement is to decide within 24 hours, therefore, meeting the target.
- In FY22, VBA processed 260 pre-need characters of discharges and 1,414 deaths of the character of discharges for average days to complete of .75.

Chair Heather Braatz stated that unclaimed Veterans are held with the utmost care, dignity, reverence, and respect. She asked, for VBA, how does the Veteran when alive come to know about their burial benefit? Ms. Marsh replied, "Through outreach, town hall meetings, and quarterly meetings. Ms. Marsh stated that VBA, VHA, and NCA participate in the quarterly town hall meetings. There is also the VA website that has all of the benefits information, and the call centers in VBA that take calls full-time."

Chair Heather Braatz stated there are a lot of access issues for homeless Veterans who are unable to view a webinar or attend a virtual event – the information has to be brought to them in places such as homeless shelters or assistance from the clergy. Ms. Mitzi Marsh stated that there is a full-time Homeless Veterans Coordinator who works with churches, homeless shelters, prisons, and jails to outreach to Veterans. In addition, she mentioned that VHA has a large homeless program as well.

Chair Heather Braatz asked how Indigent Veterans Coordinators approach outreach to medical examiners, coroners, and funeral directors. Ms. Mitzi Marsh stated that the coordinator's list is on the website and if they have questions, they can call the coordinator. Chair Heather Braatz stated that more active outreach would be helpful, as very few medical examiners, coroners, and funeral directors are aware that the IVURC role exists, so they would not know to look them up online. She further stated that there are challenges in terms of county and state regulations for handling unclaimed remains. Additionally, there are different rules for both Veterans and civilians. The absence of a federal regulation that states a definitive process on how to handle unclaimed Veteran remains may have varying workflows per jurisdiction. Chair Heather Braatz asked if VBA has a plan to get more medical examiners' contact information for the coordinators. Ms. Mitzi Marsh stated that there are limited resources but will share Ms. Heather Braatz concerns with VBA's leadership. She stated there is a challenge to educate the thousands and thousands of funeral directors. Chair Heather Braatz stated that there are 19,800 licenses in the United States. Ms. Mitzi Marsh stated that she is not sure if VA should hold a conference for funeral directors but she wants to be a part of the solution.

Ms. Karen Durham-Aguilera stated that Arlington National Cemetery staff attends the National Funeral Directors Association, American Legion, and Veterans of Foreign Wars events and has a display to share information with attendees. She suggested that is an easy way to work within inter agencies to share information about unclaimed remains. She also asked if the staff investigates the character of discharge for every Veteran that has a less than honorable discharge. Ms. Mitzi Marsh responded in the affirmative.

Mr. Eric Brown asked about the Other Than Honorable (OTH) determination and the process VBA uses to make the discharge determination because his understanding was that anytime there was an OTH that it was sent back to the branch of service for adjudication. Ms. Mitzi Marsh clarified that the VBA staff makes the determination and not the Department of Defense.

Ms. Ame Callahan asked if VBA is still involved with the Transition Assistance Program (TAPS) with the DOD. Ms. Mitzi Marsh stated that VBA is no longer involved in TAPS and the Department of Defense manages it. Soldiers must sit through the program and she believes they discuss the soldier's benefits. She stated that VBA manages a

program called, VA Solid Start Program. Employees from the Call Centers contact Veterans discharged within a year to tell them about their benefits.

Mr. Michael Hoplight asked if VBA staff have contacts at the Coroner's office so that when a Veteran is identified they notify VBA. He also asked if Native American Veterans remains returned to their nation. Ms. Mitzi Marsh stated that she contacted the United States Tribal Council in Washington, D.C. for this answer. She stated that VBA staff will do their best to work with Tribal Council if they request the remains be returned to the respective nation.

Mr. Hoplight asked if VBA staff attempt to contact the families of deceased homeless Veterans for closure. Ms. Mitzi Marsh stated that the Indigent Veteran Coordinators first determine Veteran status and attempt to contact the family and ask if they want to claim the remains.

Chair Heather Braatz reiterated that although the number of deceased persons in the Coroner's office is small, there should be a way for them to contact the Indigent Veterans Coordinator to verify eligibility. Identifying the Veteran is a critical part of the process and it requires outreach to the county-level medical examiners, coroners, and funeral homes to ensure they receive their burial benefit. Chair Heather Braatz acknowledged that outreach will take resources and a lot of concerted effort.

Ms. Mitzi Marsh interjected to provide the answer from the Tribal Council on the return of native American remains to their nation. The response stated, "If there was a service member or Veteran interred in a cemetery and there was interest in having the Veteran returned home to their tribal homelands, she is not aware of an existing VA policy for this process. An act was passed in 1990, to relocate remains to the native homeland, however, it would likely involve an assessment of how the individual came to be buried in a VA-operating cemetery. If NCA wanted to create a formal policy, the United States Tribal Council and Office of General Counsel are available to discuss the creation of a policy. VA also has a Tribal Consultation Policy which would be invoked and involve consulting with tribal governments on the creation and formulation of a policy."

Mr. Paul Adkins stated that an advantage to the process is when the Veterans are identified, their name can be found in the Nationwide Gravesite Locator and their family has closure.

Ms. Karen Durham-Aguilera stated that she could share the program that Arlington National Cemetery is currently working with to return ancestral children who passed away in the Indian Industrial School at Carlisle Barracks, Army War College.

Mr. Glenn Powers mentioned the work he is doing on the Integrated Project Team (IPT) with VBA and VHA for unclaimed Veterans remains. He stated that effective January

2023, a transportation allowance is available for funeral directors who transport indigent Veterans to the nearest national, state, or tribal cemetery. The application has to be prepared by the individual paying for the transportation. He expressed that this information is critical for preventing the Veteran not receiving his or her burial benefit.

Chair Heather Braatz stated there is the opportunity for training coroners, medical examiners, and funeral home directors as well as cross-collaboration between the different branches of the VA.

## **Work Group Briefings and Recommendations**

### Funeral Director and Missing In America Project Work Group

Chair Heather Braatz began a discussion about the recommendations that were voted on by the Committee during the June 15-16 meeting in Washington, D.C. The recommendations from the June and November meetings will be combined and submitted for consideration by the VA.

Chair Heather Braatz presented on the Funeral Director and Missing in America Project (MIAP) Work Group, established at the Committee's Fall 2021 meeting to review the Office of Inspector General (OIG) report on unclaimed Veterans' remains and to explore ways to increase communication for funeral service professionals. At Fort Sill, a funeral director selected an outer burial container for an unclaimed Veteran typically used to encase a casket when it flies on a plane. NCA has existing guidelines for appropriate burial containers and an existing program for the final disposition of unclaimed Veteran remains. A funeral home or family can apply for reimbursement for a casket or urn.

By law, VA has to ensure that deceased Veterans without any next of kin, surviving family, or with an estranged family that has not taken claim of that Veteran's remains to receive dignified and reverent burials by providing information about burial benefits to funeral homes and other entities that are likely to have custody of these deceased Veterans. NCA's burial programs serve a diverse and varied group of stakeholders, primarily the direct beneficiaries of burial benefits like Veterans and their eligible family members. Other important stakeholders include Veteran's Services Organizations (VSOs) and funeral directors, who are directly involved in facilitating burials at VA national and state cemeteries and are often the only persons responsible for the remains of unclaimed Veterans. It is therefore imperative to make sure that these funeral directors and funeral homes are good allies to NCA and are serving Veterans with the utmost reverence and dignity at the time of their final rest.

The objective is to increase the percentage of Veterans and eligible family members that choose to be interred in a national, state, or tribal Veterans cemetery and utilized memorial burial benefits. The strategic goal is to enhance awareness of the burial and

memorial benefits. Additionally, the objective is to improve processes for timely eligibility determinations.

Recommendations from the June 14-15, 2022, meeting:

- NCA should provide funeral homes, and other stakeholders, who participate in the Unclaimed Veterans Remains Program a Certificate for Exceptional Service to Unclaimed/Unassisted Veterans.
- NCA should explore ways to partner with Veterans Service Officers in the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) in outreach efforts to increase awareness about burial benefits and NCA offerings on a local level.
- NCA should invite funeral directors to learn about Veterans' burial benefits by establishing a Funeral Director Continuing Education (CE) program by which Cemetery Directors, Veterans Service Officers, and other presenters can deliver training and materials to local funeral directors.

Recommendations from the November 2-3, 2022, meeting:

- VA should create promotional materials to help raise awareness about Veteran burial benefits provided by VBA and NCA for use at Funeral Homes. For example, NCA could develop a poster that states, "Did you know you and your spouse may be eligible to be buried in a Veterans Cemetery? Ask us how!".
- The Veterans Benefits Administration and National Cemetery Administration should work with County Medical Examiner Office Indigent Burial Program Coordinators, County Coroners, and Funeral Directors to develop a "how to" workflow to help coordinate the final disposition of unclaimed Veteran remains (e.g., poster, flyer, videos).
- The Veterans Benefits Administration's Indigent Veterans Unclaimed Remains Coordinators (IVURCs) should proactively increase outreach, education, and contact on an annual basis to the County Coroners and Medical Examiner Office and their Indigent Remains Program Coordinators, as well as the County Veterans Service Officers (VSOs) to help raise awareness about unclaimed and indigent Veteran burial benefits.
- The Veterans Benefits Administration's Office of Outreach Transition and Economic Development (OTED) Office should provide a briefing to the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials (ACCM) on the progress of the Indigent Veterans Unclaimed Remains Coordinators (IVURCs) program during a Fall 2023 ACCM Business Meeting.

Outreach Work Group

Mr. Floyd Watson, Jr., led the discussion on the Outreach work group's findings and recommendations. The ACCM recommended the establishment of a working group to



provide recommendations regarding communications and outreach to Veterans and family members about the burial benefits in national cemeteries to increase the rate of utilization. The recommendations align with VA strategic efforts for Veterans and eligible family members will have increased access to burial benefits. The objective is to address the burial needs of unserved Veterans so that more Veterans and eligible family members will use VA burial and memorial benefits.

The work group found that despite the current outreach efforts by the National Cemetery Administration, usage remains low for the national cemeteries; the burial benefit is a very difficult subject to approach with Veterans (especially the younger group of Veterans) and it is unclear if NCA leverages social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. to communicate to younger Veterans.

Recommendation 1: NCA and the Veterans Experience Office should conduct a focus group or survey of Veterans about their awareness of NCA's social media presence was removed for further research which may include a briefing from the Arlington National Cemetery's social media team at a future meeting in 2023.

Mr. Timothy Nosal, OEMI stated that NCA's followers on Facebook are already aware of the burial benefit and that information is posted along with other notable burial information. Chair Heather Braatz commented that we want to be smart about our audience and intent behind social media content. Mr. Thomas Hernandez suggested that the recommendation should include ANC as the focus group to gain further insight into NCA's social media. Chair Heather Braatz suggested waiting for a briefing from that team.

Recommendation 2: NCA should add a question asking, "How did you learn about burial benefits at the National Cemetery?" Ms. Ame Callahan suggested the removal of this recommendation because the question is currently in the annual NCA Survey of Satisfaction as stated in the briefing by Mr. James Geleta.

Recommendation 3: NCA should reach out to obtain an outreach assistant from a rural cemetery support group is on hold until further research. Ms. Ame Callahan stated that the objective of this recommendation is to have individuals assigned in the community to discuss VA benefits.

Recommendation 4: NCA should provide training to the rural cemetery support groups so they will be able to assist in providing outreach to Veterans and family members who live in rural areas, was removed per Ms. Ame Callahan's comment that it is similar to the recommendation three and requires additional research.

Recommendation 5: NCA should reach out and partner with national associations of financial advisors, Certified Public Accountants, estate planners, probate and trust

attorneys, hospice and palliative care healthcare professionals whose agents routinely have face-to-face meetings with Veterans and spouses to increase awareness of and improve education about and promote utilization of VA burial benefits using the NCA website link video: [https://www.cem.va.gov/burial\\_benefits/index.asp](https://www.cem.va.gov/burial_benefits/index.asp) was voted for consensus by the committee.

A complete list of the final recommendations is under the *Committee Recommendations* section of this document.

### VA Grant Funded Cemeteries Work Group

Mr. Eric Brown briefed on the work group's findings and recommendations. The Committee recommended the establishment of a working group to provide improvement recommendations for National, State, and Tribal Cemeteries. The recommendations align with VA strategic efforts for Veterans and eligible family members will have increased access to burial benefits. The objective is to address the burial needs of unserved Veterans so that more Veterans and eligible family members will use VA burial and memorial benefits.

The workgroup identified and provided several recommendations for improvement in addressing issues from States and Tribal Cemeteries:

- The need to establish an operational baseline to identify issues and interests for the States and Tribal Cemeteries
- The need for training opportunities and resources for the States and Tribal Cemeteries
- The need to identify subject matter experts from NCA to assist state and tribal cemeteries personnel
- The need to identify opportunities to increase support to the all-volunteer honors teams, which are quickly dwindling due to aging members and a lack of new member interest

Based on its findings, the workgroup submitted seven recommendations.

Recommendation 1: NCA should consider developing and distributing detailed surveys to **state** cemeteries covering all aspects of burial and memorial operations to identify support gaps and establish baseline data. The results of these surveys will assist NCA in identifying areas in greatest need of support.

Recommendation 2: NCA should consider developing and distributing detailed surveys to **tribal** cemeteries covering all aspects of burial and memorial operations to identify support gaps and establish baseline data. The results of these surveys will assist NCA in identifying areas in greatest need of support.

Recommendation 3: NCA should consider creating remote (web-based) operational training for state cemetery staff. Producing and providing these resources, using virtual technologies, would ensure state and tribal cemeteries are well postured for optimal success. Reference: Per the recommendations contained in the VAOIG report (#20-00176-125) dated June 24, 2021.

Recommendation 4: NCA should consider creating remote (web based) operational training for tribal cemetery staff. Producing and providing these resources, using virtual technologies, would ensure state and tribal cemeteries are well postured for optimal success. Reference: Per the recommendations contained in the VAOIG report (#20-00176-125) dated June 24, 2021.

Recommendation 5: NCA should consider creating and distributing a list of dedicated state and tribal liaisons (i.e., personnel from Eligibility, Capital Crime, Headstones and Markers, Scheduling, Burial Operations, and Ground Maintenance) to promote consistency of burial benefits distribution and improve compliance oversight. Liaisons would serve to promote the interests of Veterans and their families while advising state and tribal cemeteries and/or burial grounds on quality and compliance standards.

Recommendation 6: NCA should consider convening state and tribal work groups, with participants volunteering time to formulate strategies to ensure parity and consistent distribution of benefits. Workgroups would also serve to collectively communicate issues or requests for additional support.

Recommendation 7: NCA should work to identify opportunities to increase support to the all-volunteer honors teams, which are quickly dwindling due to aging members and a lack of new member interest. NCA should work with the VA Center for Development and Civic Engagement to communicate the needs to the Veterans Services Organizations.

The Committee came to a consensus on five recommendations for this work group which is under the *Committee Recommendations* section of this document. Recommendations one and two were combined into one as they stated the same verbiage for entities, state, and tribal. Recommendations three and four were combined and modified to include virtual training in general regardless of agency affiliation. Ms. Ame Callahan noted that recommendation number five is actively being completed by NCA staff and should be removed. The Committee modified recommendation number six, changing the words, “work group” to “focus group” which serves to collectively communicate issues or requests for additional support. The Committee agreed to table recommendation number seven for further discussion at a future meeting. Mr. Eric Brown reiterated that this is an important topic that should not be forgotten.

## **Committee Recommendations**

After discussion, amendments, and deletions, the ACCM recommends the following to NCA:

### From June 14-15, 2022, Meeting:

- NCA continue to conduct interviews with tribal leaders and the advisory committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs to better determine the needs of VA grant funded tribal cemeteries.
- NCA continue to provide support to tribal cemeteries with a focus on acknowledgement of traditional practices and cultural sensitivity to increase utilization by the tribal membership.
- NCA to develop customizable Funeral Director Continuing Education Training Program tools to be provided to National, State, and Tribal Veterans Cemeteries, to use as they are able. The Training Program tools are intended to increase awareness, enhance the knowledge of our funeral service professionals, and encourage funeral homes to better support American Veterans and their families.
- NCA continue to expand on the success of the Veterans Legacy Program to increase the number of grantees and enhance the awareness of the legacy of our veterans.
- NCA continue to expand on the success of the Veterans Legacy Memorial to include all eligible deceased veterans.

### From November 2-3, 2022, Meeting:

- NCA should provide funeral homes, and other stakeholders, who participate in the Unclaimed Veterans Remains Program a Certificate for Exceptional Service to Unclaimed/Unassisted Veterans.
- NCA should explore ways to partner with Veterans Service Officers in the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) in outreach efforts to increase awareness about burial benefits and NCA offerings on a local level.
- NCA should invite funeral directors to learn about Veterans burial benefits by establishing a Funeral Director Continuing Education (CE) program by which Cemetery Directors, Veterans Service Officers, and other presenters can deliver training and materials to local funeral directors.
- VA should create promotional materials to help raise awareness about Veteran burial benefits provided by VBA and NCA for use at Funeral Homes. For example, NCA could develop a poster that states, "Did you know you and your spouse may be eligible to be buried in a Veterans Cemetery? Ask us how!".
- The Veterans Benefits Administration's Indigent Veterans Unclaimed Remains Coordinators (IVURCs) should proactively increase outreach, education, and contact on an annual basis to the County Coroners and Medical Examiner Office and their Indigent Remains Program Coordinators, as well as the County

Veterans Service Officers (VSOs) to help raise awareness about unclaimed and indigent Veteran burial benefits.

- The Veterans Benefits Administration's Office of Outreach Transition and Economic Development (OTED) Office should provide a briefing to the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials (ACCM) on the progress of the Indigent Veterans Unclaimed Remains Coordinators (IVURCs) program during a Fall 2023 ACCM Business Meeting.
- The Veterans Benefits Association and National Cemetery Administration should work with County Medical Examiner Office Indigent Burial Program Coordinators, County Coroners, and Funeral Directors to develop a "how to" workflow to help coordinate the final disposition of unclaimed Veteran remains (e.g., poster, flyer, videos).
- NCA should reach out and partner with the National Associations of Financial Advisors, Certified Public Accountants, estate planners, probate and trust attorneys, hospice and palliative healthcare professionals, whose agents routinely have face-to-face meetings with Veterans and spouses, to increase awareness of, improve education about, and promote utilization of VA burial benefits using the NCA website link video:  
[https://www.cem.va.gov/burial\\_benefits/index.asp](https://www.cem.va.gov/burial_benefits/index.asp).
- NCA should consider developing detailed surveys for state and tribal cemetery leadership covering all aspects of burial and memorial operations to identify support gaps and establish baseline data. The results of these surveys will assist NCA in identifying areas in greatest need of support.
- NCA should create remote (web-based) operational training for Veteran cemetery staff; producing and providing these resources, using virtual technologies, would ensure Veteran Cemeteries are well-postured for optimal success.
- NCA should consider convening state and tribal focus groups, with participants volunteering time to formulate strategies to ensure parity and consistent distribution of benefits. Focus groups would also serve to collectively communicate issues or requests for additional support.

### **Subcommittee Assignments**

Chair Heather Braatz stated that the work groups are called subcommittees going forward based on guidance from Mr. Jeffery Moragne. For the VA Grant Funded Cemeteries subcommittee, Mr. Eric Brown is the lead and Ms. Ame Callahan, Mr. William Kennedy, and Mr. Alvin Duncan will work on this subcommittee. The committee is charged with working with FACA for cross-committee collaboration, performing needs assessments, surveys, and partnering with subject matter experts to determine the cultural needs for ritual memorialization and utilization for the tribal cemeteries after the research is completed.

The Funeral Director and Unclaimed Missing In America Project subcommittee consists of Mr. Thomas Hernandez as the lead, Mr. James Rudolph, Mr. Michael Hoplight, and Ms. Candace Wheeler. The charges for this subcommittee are to focus on providing the necessary education and outreach to medical examiners, coroners, and contracted funeral homes working the unclaimed indigent remains and then partnering with the Missing in America Project.

Mr. Floyd Watson continues as the lead for the Outreach subcommittee, Ms. Gina Farrisee, Mr. Jared Peatman, and Mr. Paul Adkins are members of this group. The charge is to work with subject matter experts in OEMI to discuss different marketing strategies to advertise the burial benefit.

### **Public Comment**

There were no public comments.

### **Closing Remarks and Adjournment**

Chair Heather Braatz expressed gratitude to the entire Committee for the attention and service that they have dedicated to the nation's heroes and the NCA. She also praised the work of Ms. Hopkins and Mr. Addressi for keeping the Committee on track and covering logistical concerns. She closed her remarks by stating that it has been an honor and privilege to serve on the committee and to serve Veterans. She stated she will carry on the mission of the Committee in her work as a funeral service educator and teacher and is available if anyone needs her. The meeting was adjourned at 3:00 p.m.

The committee was led on a tour of Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery by Mr. Sonny Peppers and Mr. Glenn Powers.



Heather Braatz  
Committee Chair

**Note:** The complete transcription of the verbatim discussion may be available upon request. Questions may be forwarded to [vaadvisorycmte@va.gov](mailto:vaadvisorycmte@va.gov).