

**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)**  
**Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials**  
**Virtual Meeting Minutes**  
**October 13-14, 2021**  
**11:00 am – 3:30pm**

**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
- James Earp, Committee Member
- Amerophan Callahan, Committee Member
- Paul Adkins, Committee Member
- Thomas Hernandez, Committee Member
- William Kennedy, Committee Member

**Ex-officio Members Present:**

- Cynthia Riddle for Karen Durham-Aguilera, Office of Army Cemeteries
- Gia Wagner, National Park Service
- Tom Sole, American Battle Monument Commission

**Louisiana State Department of Veterans Affairs:**

- Charmagne Scott
- Dustin Guy

**Office of the VA Secretary Attendees:**

- Denis McDonough, Secretary of Veterans Affairs
- Jeffrey Moragne, Director, VA Advisory Committee Management Office
- Jelessa M.H. Burney, Program Specialist, VA Advisory Committee Management Office

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

- Matt Quinn, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
- 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
- Artis Parker, Executive Director, Office of Field Programs
- Eric Powell, Director, Memorial Products 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
- James LaPaglia, Digital Service Chief/VLM Program Manager, OEMI
- Lisa Hollenbeck, Program Manager, NCA Web Services
- Christine B. Hamilton, Designated Federal Officer (DFO), OEMI
- Larry Provost, Alternate DFO and National Outreach Officer, OEMI

**VA Office of Tribal Government Relations (OGTR):**

- David Clay, Office of Intergovernmental Affairs
- Junita Mullen, Center for Minority Veterans

**Public Attendees:**

- Heather Salazar, Congressional Research Service
- Leslie Witter, National Funeral Directors Association
- John Kelley, Private Citizen
- Dr. Davide Paschane, Private Citizen
- Dr. Jacqueline Rychnovsky (Executive Director, Commissioned Officers Association of the United States Public Health Service)

## **Wednesday, October 13, 2021**

The semi-annual meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials (herein referred to as the ACCM or Committee) 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, Mr. Joey Strickland, called the meeting to order at 11:00am. The meeting was opened with a moment of silence for Veterans, Servicemembers, Survivors, and family members.

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

The Chairman provided a brief overview of Committee activities and discussed the agenda for this meeting. He also outlined some the key recommendations and accomplishments since Spring 2019.

The Chairman introduced the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Mr. Matthew Quinn, who in turn, introduced the Secretary of VA, Mr. Denis McDonough. Mr. Quinn pointed out that Secretary McDonough is the 11<sup>th</sup> Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Before coming to VA, Secretary McDonough was the 26<sup>th</sup> White House Chief of Staff, who worked across the cabinet and through the legislature to move the priorities between national security and domestic policy.

### **Remarks to the Committee**

VA Secretary Denis McDonough thanked Mr. Quinn for his kind introduction and he also thanked Chairman Strickland for their leadership on the Committee and as the Secretary of Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs. He noted that Veterans do not see VA as three separate administrations. Veterans only see VA as one entity. Secretary McDonough recognized NCA as being a model for all of [VA] to emulate in terms of advocacy for Veterans, for their family members, caregivers, and providers. He mentioned that NCA has been recognized for excellence in customer service and the Advisory Committee is considered a gold standard in [VA] Advisory Committees.

**Note:** In 2019 and for the seventh consecutive time, NCA was ranked first in customer satisfaction among the nation's top corporations and federal agencies in an independent survey conducted by the CFI Group using the methodology of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI).

Secretary McDonough stated that both the combined expertise of [NCA Staff and Committee Members] and their concern for helping VA best serve Veterans, make a huge difference in optimizing NCA services.

Secretary McDonough is looking for the Committee 's best efforts and actionable recommendations to meet the challenges below:

- Reaching the 5 percent of Veterans who are hardest to reach and who need access to VA benefits.
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- Assisting with the recovery and dignified burial of unclaimed remains of Veterans. Reducing pandemic-related delays in obtaining Veterans' records.
- Developing continued strategies to meet societal burial trends, such as green burials and cremations.
- Determining ways to manage water needs at VA cemeteries in a changing climate.
- Continuing outreach to minority, tribal, LGBTQ+ and women Veterans because everyone deserves compassion and the care NCA provides Veterans and families.

Secretary McDonough also discussed his key priorities for VA. In alignment with the President's mission for caring for all Veterans, VA has developed a vision focused on four key attributes - advocacy, access, outcomes, and excellence.

**Advocacy** – *“VA will be the leading advocate for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. Veterans have made their down payment sometimes in blood and in visible wounds that may affect them the rest of their lives. Their sacrifice has earned them the care and services we provide. We exist to best serve them full stop.”*

**Access** – *“We'll provide timely access to VA resources. World class healthcare, benefits they earned, and most relevant to this group, a final resting place that's a lasting tribute to their selflessness.”*

**Outcomes** – *“Veterans' outcomes have to drive everything we do. We have a proud history in this agency of leadership in data and health informatics, and frankly, the more -- the longer I'm here, the more I recognize that we have the best data science talent in the federal government. All these people I used to work with who used to be at DNI, they came here because this is the place to affect data outcomes. So good data science, good data, good science. Evidence-based decision-making are fundamental to our work at NCA. The COVID vaccination campaign, providing quality healthcare, tracking and managing benefits, and critically, measuring Veterans' and caregivers' experience and satisfaction. So, [NCA] and his team really led the way on what we call iFAMS [Integrated Financial and Acquisition Management System]. It was not easy. They made iFAMS work and we now can take the next turn and expand it to the other administrations based on the experience of NCA.”*

**Excellence**—*“We just have to leverage the diversity and the strength of diversity that defines Veterans, our VA workforce, and the country. We’ll work to ensure every Veteran and visitor feels at home in our facilities and cemeteries”* - Secretary McDonough

Secretary McDonough formally appointed the following new members:

- Amerophan “Ame” Callahan
- Thomas “Tom” Hernandez
- William “Bill” Kennedy
- Paul Adkins
- James Earp

### **Remarks on Vision for NCA**

Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Mr. Matt Quinn, extended his congratulations to the new members. He shared his vision on NCA with Chairman Strickland at the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA) conference in September 2021. Mr. Quinn stated that it's valuable to him to get a sense for the incredible work the Committee has done and will do. He discussed the commitment of the Secretary for National, State, and Tribal Veteran cemeteries. Mr. Quinn is looking forward to meeting the members in person at the Spring 2022 meeting in Washington, DC. Mr. Quinn shared two of his top priorities as the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs:

**Operations** - National Cemeteries are open and continue to perform services during the COVID-19 pandemic. The President mandated for all federal employees to be fully vaccinated by November 22, 2021. NCA is currently working to meet this expectation and to accommodate requests due to medical and religious exceptions.

**Memorialization** – The Veteran Legacy Memorial (VLM) has been expanded to include not only national cemeteries, but 93 state and Tribal Veteran cemeteries. VLM is an online memorialization site, which allows families to post tributes, photos, and historical documents on a deceased, Veteran’s page. The site only includes cemeteries that use NCA’s Burial Operations Support System (BOSS) system for Veteran interments. The inclusion of state and Tribal Veteran cemeteries in VLM is significant for families to honor their loved ones. Mr. Quinn shared his personal experience with interring his father at Montana State Veterans Cemetery, and at the time, not being able to pay a tribute on VLM. Mr. Quinn also discussed his initial visits to Quantico, Alexandria, and Jefferson Barracks national cemeteries. He asked individuals to “Focus on the One Veteran” during their visits to these national shrines. As he walked thru the Jefferson Barracks, he thought about the Veterans interred there, some since 1865. Mr. Quinn stated, *“...I wonder if the family even knows that that Veteran is there. Great-great-uncle, grandfather. And so, it is Veterans Legacy Memorial that allows that individual to continue to be remembered by family members or fellow Veterans in perpetuity.”*

## **Request for Information (Interment of Non – Veteran Guard Members and Reservists in Veteran Cemetery Grant Program cemeteries)**

Mr. Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations, briefed the Committee on the Request for Information (RFI) for Interment of Non-Veteran National Guard Members and Reservists in Veteran Cemetery Grant Program (VCGP) cemeteries. The RFI was posted in the Federal Register on July 30, 2021 as outlined, in part, below:

**SUMMARY:** State and Tribal Veterans cemetery grant applicants that seek to participate in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) must, to qualify for a grant, solely inter and memorialize eligible persons, which includes Veterans and certain family members. Through this request for information, VA seeks comments to help inform VA's understanding of issues affecting States and Tribal Organizations in meeting burial and other needs of their National Guard and Reservist populations with respect to burial in VA grant-funded cemeteries.

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** VA seeks stakeholder input to improve our understanding of issues impacting States and Tribal Organizations (as those terms are defined in 38 CFR 39.2) in serving their National Guard servicemembers and Reservists. The Secretary seeks information on the questions listed below. Commenters do not need to address each question and should focus on those that relate to their expertise or perspectives. To the extent possible, please clearly indicate which questions you address in your response. We are particularly interested in feedback from States and Tribal Organizations that are participating in VCGP or that are contemplating participation. Currently for VCGP purposes, a State or Tribal veterans cemetery must be operated solely for the interment of Veterans, their spouses, surviving spouses, minor children, unmarried adult children who were physically or mentally disabled and incapable of self-support, and eligible parents of certain deceased service members, as set out in section 38 CFR 39.10(a). We seek input on the below questions:

- Should VCGP cemeteries be able to inter non-Veteran members of the Reserve components of the U.S. Armed Forces (including members of the Army and Air National Guard of the United States) who otherwise would not be eligible for burial in a VA national cemetery, as well as their spouses and certain dependents? Why or why not?
- If VCGP cemeteries were permitted to inter these individuals, are there any conditions that should be met or certain ways that VA should administer this extension to the program? For example, should grantees pay costs associated with cemetery development, interment, and memorialization relating to the non-Veteran decedents referenced above? Again, we welcome your feedback on these questions.

**STATUS.** The 30-day public comment period ended on August 30, 2021, with 66 comments submitted from various stakeholders including state and local government officials, Veterans Service Organizations, and the general public.

Mr. Powers noted that generally, the comments were supportive of expanding eligibility for burial benefits to non-Veteran National Guard and Reserve members and their spouses and dependents. Feedback included proposed minimum service time and requisite character of service for the non-Veteran National Guard and Reserve members. Concerns were raised about additional costs associated with the additional interments that might be generated, including headstones, and cemetery maintenance.

### **National Cemetery Scheduling Office and Pre-Need Eligibility Determinations**

Mr. Artis Parker, Executive Director, Office of Field Programs, provided a status update on the National Cemetery Scheduling Office (NCSO) and Pre-Need Eligibility Determinations. He mentioned that a lot of the achievements were a result of Mrs. Ame Callahan's leadership. Mrs. Callahan was the Executive Director of the Office of Field Programs prior to retiring.

The NSCO primarily supports VA national cemeteries, but it also supports State and Tribal Veteran cemeteries. The office is located in St. Louis, Missouri and is considered the "Gateway to NCA" because most of the interments are scheduled thru this office. The NSCO opened in 2007. Prior to its inception, eligibility determinations were processed by cemetery employees. Although this approach was successful for many years, it really lacked standardization across cemeteries.

Currently, the scheduling office agents receive formalized, standardized training to ensure that methodologies and processes are consistent across the board. The office is open 362 days out of the year except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day. The hours of operation are from 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. Central Standard Time, and align with NCA's goal number one, which is to increase access to burial benefits for Veterans and eligible family members. At this time, there are 111 full-time, permanent employees in scheduling division and the eligibility verification division. Mr. Parker outlined the responsibilities of the two divisions as shown below:

#### **Scheduling Division**

- National contact center responsible for delivering exceptional customer service to support Veterans and their eligible dependents for burial and memorial services in a VA National Cemetery.
- Agents are responsible for the review of military records to determine qualifying military service at the time of the call. Documents are provided by the caller or obtained from VA systems. Once military service is verified, the agent schedules the interment(s) at the preferred national cemetery.
- Agents serve as the initial point of contact for the Veteran or their representative for scheduling a burial. **Note:** For time of need, most customers are being assisted by funeral homes and funeral directors.



- Agents perform various analytical activities related to the interment of qualified Veterans, their spouses, and dependent children.
- Agents perform extensive public contact by telephone requiring advanced listening skills and a high level of empathy for the Veteran or their family members during their time of grieving or emotional crisis.

### **Eligibility Verification Division**

- Escalation point when military service cannot be verified, possible capital crime, designation of eligibility needed, or higher level records review is required.
- When eligibility cannot be determined by documentation readily available, requests military service records on behalf of Veterans, their families and those acting on their behalf to make an eligibility determination.
- Agents deny claimant applications when the determination is not eligible. Agents provide claimant information for due process rights if claimant wishes to appeal the decision.
- Agents coordinate with Veterans Benefits Administration for review and adjudication of Other Than Honorable (OTH) military discharge cases.
- Assists other stakeholders (to include, but not limited to, national, state and Tribal cemeteries and other entities) with obtaining documentation to complete key burial and memorialization tasks.
- Agents serves as the program administrator for unclaimed Veteran requests and for the review and approval of Casket and Urn reimbursement requests provided to certain unclaimed Veterans.

Mr. Parker explained the Pre-Need Eligibility Determination process. He stated that prior to NCA establishing the pre-need program, NCA only looked at and reviewed claims at the time of need. NCA realized the need to align with what was happening in the private sector and the need to inform customers about their eligibility prior to their time of need. Veterans, spouses, retirees, National Guard, and reservists are encouraged to apply. However, they are not required to apply for pre-need.

## Pre-Need Eligibility Determinations

- Established to allow Veterans and their dependents the ability to verify eligibility for burial in VA National Cemeteries in advance of their time of need.
- Anyone can apply. LGBTQ+ members are a recent category of folks that really is ideal candidates for pre-need. And this is the LGBTQ+ members who are now waiting correction for upgrades of DD-214 .
- **VA Form 40-10007** - Application for Pre-Need Determination of Eligibility for Burial in a VA National Cemetery.
- Application submission-Mail; Fax; Electronic – [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)
- Applicants receive a packet containing: final determination letter, benefits pamphlet and letter, and emblems of belief.

## NSCO FY21 Results

- All employees now capable of working remotely
- Streamlined onboarding employee system accesses (to quickly hire)
- Formalized Public Service Announcement training program to increase productivity (to quickly train)
- Support VA outreach activities: Veteran Experience Action Center (VEAC) and Faith-based groups to reach out to a wide range of diverse customers
- **Scheduling Results**
  - Total Calls Accepted (319,854)
  - Total Calls Answered (247,686)
  - Total Cases Established (163,241)
- **Post-Call Survey Results**
  - Ease/Simplicity (91.9)
  - Efficiency/Speed (79.4)
  - Quality (91.1)
  - Employee Helpfulness (89.0)
  - Satisfaction (90.1)
  - Confidence Trust (92.5)
- **Eligibility Results**
  - Pre-Need Applications (49,691)
  - Applications Processed within 120 days (93.94%)
  - Time of Need Cases (21,250)
  - Unclaimed Veteran Cases (7,151)

Mr. Parker noted that the NSCO relies upon the assistance from the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC). During the pandemic, NSCO experienced a lot of challenges with obtaining military records from NPRC. Despite those challenges, the team was able to process over 93 percent of those pre-need applications within 120 days.

Mr. Parker also briefed on the timeline for continued enhancement of capabilities and maintenance of processing applications (e.g., integrations, minor improvements, production support, etc.) while leveraging common workflows.

### **Future Technology Enhancements**

- **FY21 (*Time of Need (ToN) scheduling*)**  
CaMEO: Case Management Eligibility & Outreach
- **FY22 - FY23 (*Regulations, initial interments, eligibility*)**  
CeRRT: Cemetery regulations, reports, testing  
EOAS: Eligibility Office Automation System
- **FY22 - FY23 (*Pre-Need and ToN eligibility determinations via VA.gov, plaque and urn requests*)**  
Self-Service Lite (online processing)
- **FY23 – FY24 (*Finalized interment scheduling, cemetery workflow*)**  
CeRRT: cemetery regulations, reports, testing
- **FY23 – FY25 (*Headstones & Markers; Presidential Memorial Certificates*)**  
AMAS: Automated Monument Application System  
PMC: Presidential Memorial Certificate
- **FY24 – FY25 (*Complete Self-Service*)**  
Self-Service (online processing)
- **FY25 (*Data migration and decommission of legacy system*)**  
BOSS: Burial Operations Support System

### **Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP)**

Mr. George Eisenbach, Jr., is the Director of VCGP. He was unable to attend due to another engagement. Mr. Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations, provided updates on the program, as follows:

- \$910M in grants awarded since VCGP was created in 1980
- 119 cemeteries that increase Veteran access to final resting places:
  - 44 states
  - 13 tribes
  - 3 territories

- Grant Distribution and prioritization governed by regulation (Part 39, 38 CFR)
  - VCGP Project Managers advise and conduct due diligence to ensure projects are IAW the CFR.
  - States and tribes administer the bidding and contract in agreement with local statutes/rules.
- Budget from congress has been \$45M every year since 2012
- Grant pays for 100% of construction costs for:
  - Expansion (phased)
  - Cemetery Establishment (new cemeteries)
  - Improvement
  - Operation and Maintenance

### **VCGP FY Grant Snapshot**

#### **FY21 Grant Awards**

11 cemeteries were funded for expansion, projected cost - \$40.86 Million  
1 cemetery established (Redwood Falls State Cemetery in Minnesota), projected cost - \$11.20 Million  
Total for 12 cemeteries funded at \$52.06 Million

#### **FY22 Grant Opportunities**

NCA awarded 12 grant opportunities for expansion in FY22, just at the end of September 30, 2021 at \$45.06 Million.

Mr. Powers reviewed the cemeteries with construction projects. Projects usually complete within 1-2 years since land acquisition and design are complete prior to grant approval. He noted that although the funds were obligated in FY2019 for Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Veterans **Cemetery (Saipan)**, the cemetery is still construction. In some cases, construction projects are more difficult than others.

#### **VCGP Successes**

- 47 cemeteries established since 2008 (incl. 13 Tribal Veterans Cemeteries)
- To date, no burial option pauses/shutdowns
- VAOIG Recommended written policy for prioritization of projects. New comprehensive SOP used to construct the FY22 Priority List
- Quarterly Conference Calls conducted four times throughout the year with State and Tribal personnel

#### **VCGP Challenges**

As the program matures, expansion applications grow in number and cost. This constrains establishment, improvement, and O&M grants as VCGP's annual grant appropriation has not grown (remains \$45M)

## Open Discussion

Chairman Strickland began open discussion with remarks from member, Ed Saunders. Mr. Saunders presented on his review of headstone installation during severe or cold weather. Mr. Saunders mentioned that in northern frontier, especially Wyoming and Montana, winter lasts for nine months. The weather can get absolutely severe, and that brings challenging conditions on how to operate these cemeteries.

## Background

- National Cemetery Administration requires headstone installation no-later-than **ten calendar days** from headstone receipt at national cemeteries.
- Winter brings challenging conditions to national cemeteries in America's northern tier and Alaska.
- Severe weather (e.g., hurricanes, tornados, flooding, etc) possible at other national cemeteries.
- Gray-granite upright headstones weigh over 200 pounds.
- Cold weather safety for workers.

## Discussion

- Pre-excavation problematic in cold weather climates.
- For preplaced crypts, headstone rests on crypt lid.
- For inground cremains, required horizontal spacing exists between pre-excavation (32-36 inches) for cremains urn and (22 inches) for headstone.
- Freeze and thaw cycle affects headstone alignment.
- Storm and flood self-evident based on severity.
- Local conditions prevail on a case-by-case basis.

## Recommendation

The ACCM consider a recommendation to the VA undersecretary for memorial affairs, to allow national cemetery superintendents or managers, based on exigent and/or prevailing weather conditions, and on a case-by-case basis, to extend mandatory headstone placement time not-to exceed seventeen days from date of headstone receipt.

After thorough discussion, five of twelve members dissented from the majority to move forward with recommendation for VA consideration. On day two of the meeting, the full committee decided not to move forward since NCA policy already allows cemeteries 60 days to install a headstone after receipt. NCA grants exceptions to cemeteries who are unable to install headstones within this timeframe due to inclement weather or other conditions.

## **Public Comments**

Ms. Leslie Witter, Senior Vice President of Advocacy, National Funeral Directors Association, stated that the meeting was very interesting and informative. She mentioned that VA Staff would be attending the annual NFDA conference the next day. She would be talking to a lot of people on the ground and will share the great work from the Committee.

## **Closing Remarks**

Chairman Strickland commended the members and VA Staff for a great meeting and discussion. He stated that the vision provided to the Committee by Secretary McDonough is encouraging. He is pleased that NCA receives very, low criticism regarding operations and interments. The Chairman mentioned there is going to be a lot of emphasis placed on the burial needs of the hardest five percent in rural areas. The Chairman opened the floor for final comments from members and then motioned to adjourn the meeting.

Chairman Strickland closed the meeting at approximately 3:24pm.

## **Thursday, October 14, 2021**

The semi-annual meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials (herein referred to as the ACCM or Committee) 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, Mr. Joey Strickland, called the meeting to order at 11:00am. The meeting was opened with a moment of silence for Veterans, Servicemembers, Survivors, and family members. Christine Hamilton, Designated Federal Officer, provided the rules of engagement and confirmed that all members were in attendance.

The Chairman provided a brief recap of the prior day's meeting. Secretary Denis McDonough sharing his vision with the Committee and complimented them on their past recommendations. Chairman Strickland stated that he is impressed with the humility of Secretary McDonough and that he cares for Veterans and people who are in need. During the Secretary's two-day visit to Baton Rouge, New Orleans, he listened to the concerns of federal and state employees. The Committee also heard from the Under Secretary of Memorial Affairs, Mr. Matthew Quinn. The Chairman stated that he liked his vision for our Veterans and for the future support of the Hardest Five Percent - rural Veterans and Native American and Alaskan Veterans. The Chairman also mentioned that he had concerns about moving forward with the recommendation proposed by member, Ed Saunders, to extend the timeframe of headstone installation during increment weather conditions at cemeteries. Chairman Strickland then introduced the first speaker of the day, Mr. Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations.

### **Tribal/National Cemetery Mentorship Program**

Mr. Powers provided a status update on the Tribal/National Cemetery Mentorship Program. He began his discussion with background information about the Committee's past visit to San Carlos Tribal Veteran's Cemetery in Arizona. Based upon the findings of that visit, NCA formed an Integrated Project Team (IPT) to make to make recommendations to the former Under Secretary Randy Reeves. There were 13 recommendations, some of which were significant. One of the recommendations was to reassign the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) directly under the Office of Field Programs and Cemetery Operations. Another recommendation was to form a Peer Mentor Training Program to help the tribal cemeteries who have unique needs and to take care of the cemeteries that they run. Part 39 of the 38 Code of Federal Regulations provides the rules for VA funding to state and Tribal Veteran cemeteries under VCGP. The funding can be used to establish, expand, and improve cemeteries. As such, the regulation allows for quality reviews of those cemeteries on a triennial basis, to ensure that the cemeteries are meeting the required standards. Under the Tribal/National Cemetery Mentorship Program, a NCA cemetery director and their staff are assigned to

a Tribal cemetery. NCA held a meeting with Chairman Joey Strickland to discuss tribal issues in general, and a meeting with member, Ed Saunders, to discuss some of the issues he found during his visits to Tribal Veteran cemeteries. NCA also spoke to all of the NCA peer employees and had a training session for them. Next, more detailed discussions were held with each cemetery about how to develop a relationship with the Tribal cemetery.

**Goal:** NCA supports Tribes enabling them to meet Compliance Review Program (CRP) standards and improve other outcomes for Veterans

### **Keys to Sustainable Success**

- Initial training for NCA leaders
- NCA leaders must understand the purpose of the Peer/Mentorship program (including its limits) and how it complements the NCA CRP.
- Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs (DUS FP) & Central Office (CO) and VCGP ensure:
  - Periodic assessments of program including annual VACO review of each tribal status and peer/mentorship relationship
  - Resources are projected and provided
  - Accession of new tribal cemeteries into program when appropriate

NCA is looking at implementing the phased-approach below. However, Covid 19 has prevented a formal implementation of this program.

### **Assignment and Train the Trainer Phase:**

- Districts receive initial guidance briefing from DUS for FP and CO and Guest (June 25<sup>th</sup> 2020)
- Districts assign peer/mentor cemeteries to each tribe (July 2020)
- Initial In-Brief of NCA p/m cemeteries DUSFP & CO with Guest (September 1st 2020)
- DUSFP & CO brief to NCA p/m cemeteries along with NMCA brief on sustainable p/m models (October 19th 2020)
- VCGP and CRP brief each cemetery director on history and current assessments of tribal cemetery. Office of Tribal Government Relations brief on tribal relations and communications. Training begun.

### **Initial Assessment Phase (FY21-22):**

- Receive invitation from tribe for a site visit. COVID Delayed.
- Visit and walk-through self-assessment (CRP standards) with tribal cemetery management, assess/discuss requirements (including NCA enablers) for success.
- Identify needs and confirm the p/m approach
- Brief DUSFP & CO and district director after the visit.



**Sustainment Phase (FY21 and beyond):**

- Develop sustainable p/m relationship
- p/m cemeteries offer training and site visits consistent with sustainable tribal training models
- p/m cemeteries monitor results of tribal CRP assessments
- Make adjustments as needed.

Mr. Powers referenced the read-ahead handout provided to the Committee. The Mr. Terry Corkins, Director of Black Hills National Cemetery, responded to a request from the All Nations Veterans Tribal Cemetery director, to conduct training. In this case the tribe, which does have employees, went to Black Hills National Cemetery to conduct the training.

Member, Ame Callahan gave examples of how Fort Snelling National Cemetery accommodated the family requests for a special provision or religious beliefs. The cemetery director can use discretion to make these accommodations. She mentioned that this information is contained in NCA Notice 2018-01 [Protecting the Religious Beliefs of Veterans, Families, and Visitors at VA National Cemeteries](#)

Member, Kathleen Moakler, stated that she found the after-action report at Black Hills to be most informative. She thinks that this information should be included in the training for new members. Chairman Strickland hopes that there will be sharing of information between the ACCM and the Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs.

**American Indian and Alaskan Native Veteran Workgroup Update**

In June 2021, VA Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs charged the Committee to look at conditions affecting AIAN Veterans' decisions, to use or not use, Tribal Veteran cemeteries funded by VA. Chairman Joey Strickland is researching the Choctaw Tribes; Mr. Edward Saunders is looking at western Tribes and Mr. Michael Hoplight is researching eastern Tribes. ACCM report is due Spring 2022.

**Background**

- American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) Veterans are America's largest minority for military service.
- Native American Veterans Cemetery Act of 2006
- VA-grant cemeteries
- Presently thirteen AIAN VA-grant tribal veterans cemeteries, another planned (Alaska).
- Limited use of these cemeteries.
- USMA concerns about Alaska Native veterans in remote and isolated Alaskan villages.

The AIAN workgroup is contacting tribal representatives, researching expectations (Tribal versus VA), reviewing prevailing circumstances: culture/religion and distances on reservations (American West), and looking at Tribal support and funding. Chairman Strickland shared his personal experience as member of the Choctaw Tribe. He also explained some of the burial traditions and reasons why there may be under usage. The workgroup hopes to coordinate effort with newly formed VA Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs. Mr. Saunders shared his personal observations based upon his discussions with western Tribes and Yellowstone National Cemetery. Mr. Hoplight pointed out that this has been a difficult mission for him. He stated that Tribal Veterans are confused about VA benefits and burial in Canada. The Tribes has distrust due to prior governmental issues. He informed the Tribes did not look at discussion with him as any other way than Government to Government even when he explained that the Advisory Committee's objective to just gain information from the Tribes about usage. The Tribes were interested in the medallions for the headstones. Mrs. Moakler asked if the families who reimburses the families for burial in Tribal cemeteries. Mrs. Heather Salazar mentioned in the chat that Veteran Benefits Administration has a burial and plot allowance for reimbursement of burial for Veterans. Mr. Tom Hernandez mentioned the main problems are culture and distance. He stated that NCA may want to look at ways to take family members into cemeteries without bringing their physical bodies into the cemetery [such as by inscribing family member monuments].

### **Commemorative Urn/Plaque Workgroup update**

In June 2021, the Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs charged the Committee to review the product design for the new commemorative Urn/Plaque under HR 7105. The workgroup consisted of Heather Braatz (lead), Kathleen Moakler, Donn Weaver, and Floyd Watson, Jr. The workgroup recommended:

#### **Urn Design**

The following design considerations have been recommended by the subcommittee:

- **Shape:** The basic shape is cube or cuboid.
- **Size/Dimensions:** A standard, full-size (not keepsake), single-occupancy adult urn with an interior capacity of approximately 240 cubic inches at minimum.
- **Material:** A darker wood, such as cherry, in a glossy or satin finish. The material used should be able to be x-rayed and safe to be transported by airplane.
- **Construction:** An upper ledge along the top and/or lower molding along the bottom of the urn is preferred to avoid slippage and improve ease of handling/carrying. The bottom of the urn should be a wooden plate affixed with screws to allow for easy opening and closing of the urn. A ribbon "pull tab" affixed to the bottom plate should be considered to assist in ease of opening the urn and accessing the interior.

## Commemorative Plaque

The following design considerations have been recommended by the subcommittee:

- **Medallion:** The medallion should appear on the front-facing side of the urn, to the left of the engraving.
- **Engraving:** The engraving should appear on the front-facing side of the urn. Some space should be left below the engraving to allow room for personalization. The engravement should include the following at minimum:
  - Top line (larger font size): Name of the deceased
  - Second line (smaller than/centered below name): Date of birth
  - Third line (smaller than/centered below name): Date of death
- **Font:** Arial standard line weight should be used to match the folded-flag medallion. A gold or similarly light-colored font fill on the engraving for high contrast and improved readability.

Kathleen Moakler mentioned that their turnaround would not have been possible without the professionalism and funeral industry expertise of Mrs. Heather Braatz. Mr. Donn Weaver mentioned that the workgroup considered on every option. Given the diversity of the workgroup, he believes that they have a positive recommendation to send forward for consideration. James Earp asked about production of the urns/plaque. Mrs. Braatz explained that the benefit will be available in 2023. The family member or Funeral Director will fill out application (similar to burial flag or medallion) for Veterans who are not interred or inurned in a VA national, state, or county cemetery. The Veteran can be buried at Arlington or National Park Service but cannot receive a headstone or marker in addition to an Urn or Plaque. Mr. Powers clarified that he envisions that when the application is received, the product will be delivered quickly from a centralized location. The administration of this benefit is still being worked out. Ame Callahan asked if the brass plate will be delivered separately but retracted since she felt it was getting into the weeds. Donn Weaver reiterated that the urn/plaque fills the need for families and appreciated Mr. Powers comment about a possible challenge for a family trying to decide what to do with the urn in the future. Joey Strickland asked about the medallion. Mr. Powers clarified that the medallion can be affixed to the private headstone or marker. The medallion on the commemorative plaque will be detachable. John Kelley (private citizen) asked about the size of person that will fit in the urn. Mr. Braatz clarified the cremated remains process. The calcified remains are processed down. A 200 to 300 person can fit in a 200-240 cubic in. urn. Floyd Watson stated that it was a very good workgroup to work on and he learned a lot. The committee voted to move forward with the recommendation to NCA.

## **Outreach and Communications Workgroup Update**

Mrs. Kathleen Moakler and Mr. Floyd Watson, Jr. make up the Outreach and Communications workgroup. Mrs. Moakler provided background of outreach and her visit to the Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations and encouraged members to be aware of OEMI activities. She also encouraged members to review social media sites and fact sheets on VA.gov and to provide OEMI feedback on what they see. Mr. Watson stated that use social media is a good way to communicate benefit information. Joey Strickland stated that he gets most of his information from YouTube. Bill Kennedy that the Friends of Yellowstone National Cemetery has a FaceBook page and it is another avenue that reaches a lot of Veterans. Mrs. Moakler acknowledged that support committees play an important role in communicating to families. She stated that the VA page contain official information, where people can go to obtain the correct information. Paul Adkins mentioned that the Riverside National Cemetery Support Committee developed a workbook and other tools to educate families on their website. He offered to send Mrs. Moakler and Mr. Watson copies of this information. Mrs. Braatz commended OEMI for developing a social media presence so quickly, especially during the pandemic. Mrs. Braatz asked if there are any plans to revisit the Outreach Ambassador Program. Mrs. Moakler stated that this wasn't under their workgroup's purview. Mrs. Callahan mentioned the VA Planning Your Legacy Booklet that was developed by Veterans Benefits Administration and NCA. The booklet contains information about VA burial/survivor benefits and pages for Veterans to indicate their final plans and important information

[https://www.cem.va.gov/cem/docs/factsheets/Planning\\_Legacy\\_Booklet.pdf](https://www.cem.va.gov/cem/docs/factsheets/Planning_Legacy_Booklet.pdf)

The committee voted to accept the working group's report.

## **Tim Nosal, Deputy Director, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations**

### **Outreach and Memorialization Efforts briefing**

Mr. Tim Nosal, Deputy Director of the Office of Outreach and Memorial Innovations (OEMI) thanked Mrs. Moakler and Mr. Watson for their efforts. He noted that Mrs. Moakler spent a day with OEMI to review materials and receive briefings on OEMI efforts. Mr. Nosal explained OEMI structure and responsibilities, as follows:

#### **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

OEMI leveraged social media, virtual meetings, video and digital publications, historical interpretations, and other ways to communicate to the public. Mr. Nosal also outlined OEMI achievements in FY21, as follows:

### **FY21 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
- New cemeteries dedicated in FY 21 – Cheyenne National Cemetery (October), Western New York (November) and Morovis National Cemetery (December)
- The push to place NCA Content in VSO and Trade Org publications continues to meet with great success - stories on NCA's benefits and VLM ran in more than 10 publications in FY21 with a reach of more than 3 Million readers.
- **VLM** - After two years in the making, VLM became fully interactive in FY2021 with a newly designed site and the ability for users to upload photos, biographies, documents, word clouds, and timelines.
  - During FY21, VLM increased content from 6,286 contributions (Tributes only) to more than 22,000 contributions (all content types), an increase of 350%.
  - Time to resolve simple customer support issues remained steady at 2 business days (goal). Time to resolve complex customer support issues decreased from 55+ business days to 50 business days (no goal, but still a 10% improvement)
  - In early FY22, VLM expanded to include 114 or the 121 VCGP cemeteries with nearly 496,000 new VLM pages
- **Memorial May** - NCA continued to collaborate with Carry the Load (CTL) in their "Memorial Month" Relays. Due to COVID, 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.

- **Video production** - OEMI developed several video products including the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of 9/11 (featured by the Secretary), *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
- **Historical interpretation** – History developed two new waysides (E-POW's and Houston Riots) and develop a booklet on WWII foreign burials in VA's National Cemeteries (Allied and Enemy POW)
- **Participation in tradeshow, VSO conventions and professional conferences** – Despite COVID, OEMI participated in 35 virtual and in-person programs reaching an estimated 13,200 participants.
- **20th Anniversary of 9/11** –On Sept. 10, 62 National Cemeteries worked with Carry the Load to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of 9/11 through a National Day of Service. More than 2,600 volunteers preregistered for the Day of Service which was covered in over 100 media outlets.

### **James LaPaglia, Digital Service Chief, Veterans Legacy Memorial briefing**

Mr. James LaPaglia provided an update on VLM. Thus far, there are 114 of 121 cemeteries in VLM and over 23,000 submissions, which includes tributes, photos, biographies, historical documents. VLM has been expanded to include State, Tribal, and Territorial Veteran cemeteries. Mr. LaPaglia displayed a list of cemeteries which were added. There are 28 cemeteries that do not use BOSS (NCA interment system) and therefore, are not in VLM. Chairman Strickland asked why these cemeteries do not use BOSS. Mr. LaPaglia stated that it's the cemeteries choice to use BOSS. If and when they decide to use BOSS, the Veteran pages will be populated in VLM. James LaPaglia went on to demonstrate VLM and showed a touching tribute a daughter left for her dad. Chairman Strickland commended Mr. LaPaglia and stated that he appreciates being apart of VLM on a state level. Mr. LaPaglia stated that he will reach out to Member, James Earp about a story father and son interment. Mr. Earp stated that he is reaching out to the public to bring awareness about the program. Dr. David Paschane (public guest) asked if VLM will include the Tribal Seal. James LaPaglia confirmed that for Tribal cemeteries the Tribal symbol will be displayed. For Veterans interred in State Veteran cemeteries, the state seal will be shown on the VLM page at <https://www.vlm.cem.va.gov/>.

### **Continuation of AIAN Workgroup charge:**

The Chair assigned member, Mr. James Earp to the American Indian and Alaskan Native Veteran (AIAN) Workgroup to assist with the charge to review cultural issues impacting the lack of usage of Tribal Veteran cemeteries. Mr. Earp will also lead cross-collaboration efforts with the Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs. The AIAN Workgroup will provide a full report to the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs in the Spring 2022 meeting.

### **Recommendation:**

**The Committee recommends that NCA accepts the suggested recommendations for the Commemorative Plaque and Urn, as specified below:**

#### **Urn Design**

The following design considerations have been recommended by the subcommittee:

**Shape:** The basic shape is cube or cuboid.

**Size/Dimensions:** A standard, full-size (not keepsake), single-occupancy adult urn with an interior capacity of approximately 240 cubic inches at minimum.

**Material:** A darker wood, such as cherry, in a glossy or satin finish. The material used should be able to be x-rayed and safe to be transported by airplane.

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#### **Commemorative Plaque**

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**Medallion:** The medallion should appear on the front-facing side of the urn, to the left of the engraving.

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- Top line (larger font size): Name of the deceased
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- Third line (smaller than/centered below name): Date of death

**Font:** Arial standard line weight should be used to match the folded-flag medallion. A gold or similarly light-colored font fill on the engraving for high contrast and improved readability.

### Public Comments:

1. **Heather Salazar (Congressional Research Service)** mentioned that Congress is looking to include ROTC in the equity burial bill for eligibility for non-Veteran guardsmen and reservists. This will create additional costs and challenges related to implementation efforts.
2. **Dr. David Paschane (public guest)** asked VA to consider the mental health of the Native American youth in the community. He believes that there is a psychological impact on the youth and their ability to recognize themselves and their family members; and to see their hope for the future thru the service of Veterans. He is asking that the committee considers the psychological impact of youth in future discussions about burial for Tribal Veterans. He also recommends a lean expert (Dr. Eric Hammel or someone who knows Indian Law) to help investigate the needs of Tribes so that we can be aware and responsive to those communities.
3. **Dr. Jacqueline Rychnovsky (Executive Director, Commissioned Officers Association of the USPHS)** submitted written comments regarding the Request for medallion claim form. She also spoke before the Committee and stated that her comment is related to the VA Form 40-1330M, Claim for Government Medallion for Placement in a Private Cemetery. Block 11 asks the applicant to note their Branch of Service. In Box 11, two branches of uniformed services for the federal government are not listed. The Army, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Merchant Marine, Navy, Air Force, and WWII Army Air Forces are the only named options in box 11. Uniformed or retired members of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) Commissioned Corps and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Corps are forced to choose the "other" box when they apply. Because the USPHS and NOAA are not listed as choices, some officers feel they are not eligible to apply for this benefit. Since 2018, COA has requested that the USPHS be added to this form. COA again request that the VA Form 40-1330M be revised to include USPHS and NOAA Corps be added to Box 11. The Chair has asked NCA to follow-up on this comment.

### Committee Final Comments:

1. **Heather Braatz** thanked NCA for notification to Funeral Directors about the direct upload.
2. **James Earp** asked if NCA is utilizing the American Rescue Plan Act to offset costs related to COVID 19. Glenn Powers will follow-up on this question.
3. **Chairman Joey Strickland, Kathleen Moakler, and Ed Saunders** thanked the DFO, Christine Hamilton, for her efforts to support the Committee.

### USMA Final Remarks:

**Mr. Matt Quinn** stated that is incredibly important that the committee is here to support NCA. He is looking forward to seeing the recommendation, working with the Committee, and meeting the members in person for the next meeting in the Spring 2022. The Chairman thanked USMA Quinn for his support. Mr. Quinn thanked the committee for their willingness to serve Veterans and to help NCA be a better organization.



**Chair Closing Remarks:**

The Chairman stated that he always learns something new in every meeting [about VA]. He thanked the members for their service. The meeting was adjourned at approximately 4:03pm.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joey Strickland". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "J".

Joey Strickland  
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).