

Our Nation's Hallowed Grounds: Review of America's National Cemetery Funeral Operations for Veterans and Service Members

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Statement of

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For the Record

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

With Respect To

**“Our Nation's Hallowed Grounds: Review of America's National Cemetery
Funeral Operations for Veterans and Servicemembers”**

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Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding this important topic.

Proximity to Burial Options

The VFW supports the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) policy of providing burial options for 95 percent of all veterans within 75 miles of their homes, and applauds NCA's creation of additional burial options to maintain this standard. For example, in 2011 when NCA reduced its threshold of 170,000 veterans within a 75-mile radius with no access to a national or state cemetery to 80,000 veterans, the demand prompted planning for five new cemeteries and the commencement of its urban initiative for veterans in densely populated areas. Two years later, NCA considered rural veterans and created the National Veterans Burial Grounds option for remote, low veteran populated areas with a threshold of fewer than 25,000 veterans within a 75-mile radius that added burial options in eight states.

Since 2015, NCA has opened ten new national cemeteries with cemeteries in Nevada and Utah planned in the next few years. Acquiring adjacent lands to existing cemeteries, building columbaria, and using innovative designs to maximize available space are additional strategies NCA is using to preserve burial benefits. It also manages the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program that enables states, U.S. territories, and tribal governments to build cemeteries in areas unserved by a national cemetery, extending NCA's reach and affording veterans burial alternatives a reasonable distance from their homes. NCA has made considerable progress over the years in striving to realize its 95 percent goal, increasing reasonable access from 65 percent in 1995 to nearly 94 percent (93.7 percent) as of June 2024. The VFW urges NCA to continue expanding burial options in anticipation of accommodating the large Vietnam and Gulf War era cohorts as they age, while maintaining the 75-mile radius standard.

Memorial Affairs Information Technology

The VFW supports NCA's migration to the Memorial Benefits Management System (MBMS) and functionality enhancements. Since its 2019 fielding, MBMS has modernized the business system platform and operational processes that support the delivery of memorial and burial benefits to veterans and their families, digitally connecting several NCA staff functions to ensure accurate and seamless eligibility verification, scheduling, and burial operations¹. Cases have gradually migrated from the legacy Burial Operations Support System. In fiscal year (FY) 2021, NCA processed approximately 68.5 percent of cases in MBMS, but by FY 2023 MBMS-processed cases exceeded 90 percent. MBMS will aid NCA's digital modernization efforts and enable better process analysis through a suite of dashboards to support effective management of its 158 national cemeteries². The VFW anticipates these analytical tools will enhance the quality of support NCA provides veterans. Ideally, resultant IT upgrades would enable an integrated system that could share data between the Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Benefits Administration, and NCA, and also process claims more efficiently and accurately for veterans and survivors.

Caisson Support at Arlington National Cemetery

The indefinite suspension of military caisson support at Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) denies this burial benefit to eligible veterans. However, the VFW understands that ANC must prioritize the health of these working horses. We welcome the continued oversight of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs as exemplified in Chairman Bost's and Ranking Member Moran's August 6, 2024, letter to Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth regarding this suspension³. We urge ANC to efficiently and effectively rehabilitate its horse soldiers and resume this benefit as soon as practicable.