

STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WITH RESPECT TO

“Arlington National Cemetery – Preserving the Promise”

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Chairman Coffman, Ranking Member Speier, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the 1.7 million men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before this distinguished subcommittee to present our views concerning the future of Arlington National Cemetery.

As the nation’s largest war veterans service organization, the VFW proudly represents more than 300,000 Post-9/11 veterans, and more than 60,000 members of the active duty, National Guard, and Reserves. This is why the future of our nation’s most hallowed ground is a top priority for us.

In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson requested that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) conduct a survey of all existing veterans programs, to include veterans’ burial and cemetery programs administered by both the Department of the Army and VA. A year later, along with the National Veterans Advisory Committee which included VFW representation, they delivered a report to Congress that paved the way for the transfer of 82 of the Army’s 84 cemeteries to VA. The only two that remained under the care of the Army were the Soldier’s Home National Cemetery and Arlington National Cemetery (ANC).

1967 also saw a significant restriction placed on eligibility due to growing concerns that the number of American service members being killed in action during the Vietnam War and rapidly aging WWI veterans would fill ANC to capacity. This new regulation restricted in-ground burials to military personnel who died on active duty, career military retirees, or recipients of the highest military awards, such as the Medal of Honor, the Silver Star or the Purple Heart.

Initially, the VFW vehemently opposed the new eligibility restrictions. In fact, our membership was so outraged that we withdrew from the ANC’s annual Veterans’ Day ceremony that year.

As a membership organization, the VFW is required to represent the views and preferences of our members. In 1967, this meant opposing all proposed eligibility changes.

Today, however, the VFW is able to consider several options to ensure the longevity of ANC. After many meetings with top officials within the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Department of the Army, as well as surveys and roundtables conducted by ANC, there is only one eligibility restriction proposal the VFW supports — restricting eligibility to 24 months of active-duty service. This does not include those killed in action or the dependents of active-duty service members with more than 24 months of service, who must continue to be eligible. Enacting this eligibility restriction would make the in-ground interment policy at ANC commensurate with that of cemeteries within VA's National Cemetery Administration (NCA) and would reduce workload at ANC by approximately 200 burials per year.

While the VFW acknowledges that restricting eligibility to those killed-in-action or Medal of Honor recipients would ensure that ANC remains open in perpetuity, the VFW has an obligation to advocate for and preserve the integrity of the option best suited to do the most good for the most number of veterans. Restricting eligibility to a very small category of veterans is not feasible if the true goal is to provide those who deserve to be laid to rest in America's most hallowed grounds the ability to do so, specifically those who are already making end-of-life plans based on their current eligibility.

To the VFW, it is imperative that the way forward include the acquisition of additional space in some form or another, as land is a finite resource, especially in the Washington, D.C., metro area. This is why the VFW fully supports the proposed southern expansion, which would add an additional 37 to 40 acres to the cemetery and provide approximately 40,000-60,000 new gravesites. When combined with the proposed 24-month eligibility restriction, the life of the ANC would be extended through 2074.

As previously stated, there is no easy answer in terms of what happens after 2074 given the current land shortage in the area. However, there is one property in the area that may offer a solution — The Armed Forces Retirement Home. For the past decade, VFW members have donated time and manpower to assist the residents of the Armed Forces Retirement Home by helping to maintain the property through various service projects. Every year we go out and we see unused space. We see a golf course that is struggling to remain open. We read articles in the local press concerning proposals to develop up to 80 acres of excess space on the property for commercial use, but have seen such requests go unnoticed.

The cemetery at the Armed Forces Retirement Home is arguably one of the most historic and oldest cemeteries in this country, aside from ANC. From 1861 to 1864, the cemetery accepted thousands of soldiers' remains from the Union states, which quickly filled the grounds to capacity. An 1874 report on the cemetery chronicled more than 5,600 interments, including 278 unknown, 125 Confederate prisoners of war, and 117 civilian relatives of the deceased and employees of the retirement home. In 1883, more than nine additional acres were added to the grounds, bringing the cemetery's total size to nearly sixteen acres. Additionally, the cemetery is the final resting place of 21 Medal of Honor recipients.

Given that the southern expansion would reclaim 40 acres at ANC which would provide an additional 40,000-60,000 gravesites, then it follows that reclaiming the 80 acres of surplus land at the Armed Forces Retirement Home would give us an additional 80,000-120,000 gravesites, which would push us well beyond 2074.

Barring that, the other option is to encourage VA to work with other state and federal partners in order to expand the burial space within the NCA's current inventory, along with this committee working with your colleagues on the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs and Appropriations Committees to provide VA with the funding needed to expand their efforts. Given NCA's reluctance to take hold of low-hanging fruit such as the discarded Mare Island Naval Cemetery in the San Francisco Bay area, it seems as though it will take more than just giving them additional funding in order for them to commit to expanding their current inventory.

In the end, the men and women who served this nation honorably, as well as their family members, deserve to be laid to rest in hallowed ground. It may not have been a consideration while they were serving, but it is an honor that they have earned through their blood, sweat, and tears. As a nation, we have an obligation to ensure that they, and their sacrifices, are honored as thoroughly as possible.

Chairman Coffman, Ranking Member Speier, this concludes my testimony. Again, I want to sincerely thank you and the other members of this subcommittee for the opportunity to testify on this important issue, and I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2018, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.