

**STATEMENT OF
STEVE L. MURO
UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS**

March 7, 2013

Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to be here today to share with you several recent accomplishments of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). I am accompanied by Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs.

Over the past year we completed our first national Headstone and Marker Review of all 3.2 million gravesites, increased our ability to meet the burial needs of our Nation's Veterans and Servicemembers, enhanced our partnerships with other Federal, state, and tribal providers of burial benefits, expanded communications with our funeral director stakeholders, and implemented an innovative program to provide employment opportunities for homeless Veterans.

NCA's primary mission is to honor our Veterans and Servicemembers, as well as their eligible family members, with final resting places that memorialize their service and sacrifice. We are responsible for managing the largest cemetery system in the United States. Our organization is comprised of 131 VA national cemeteries and 33 soldiers' lots, burial plots, and monuments. More than 3.7 million people, including Veterans of every war and conflict—from the Revolutionary War to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan—are memorialized by burial in VA's national cemeteries. Since 1973, VA has furnished nearly 12 million headstones and markers for the graves of Veterans and other eligible persons around the world.

In Fiscal Year 2012, we conducted over 118,000 interments, processed requests for over 355,000 headstones, markers, and medallions, and provided nearly 719,000 Presidential Memorial Certificates. NCA maintains over 8,600 acres of developed cemetery grounds.

NCA continues to implement the largest expansion of its national cemetery system since the Civil War. At present, approximately 90 percent of the Veteran population—about 20 million Veterans—has access to a burial option in a national, state, or tribal Veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their homes. Just in 2004, only 75 percent of Veterans had such access. This dramatically increased access over just 8 years is the result of a comprehensive strategic planning process that analyzes the best use of resources to reach the greatest number of Veterans, as well as the continued support of the Administration and Congress. We are seeing the results of the policy decision to lower the threshold for establishing a new national cemetery from 170,000 to 80,000 Veterans within a 75 mile radius, which has allowed us to close the gap between the populations served by national cemeteries and those served by state and tribal Veterans cemeteries.

We established six new national cemeteries since 2009 and are in the land-acquisition and planning phases for five additional national cemeteries based on our new policy. We have acquired property for three of the five new national cemeteries near Omaha, Nebraska, Tallahassee, Florida, and Central East Florida. We are moving forward with initiatives to meet the unique needs of Veterans in highly rural and urban areas. We continue to partner with states and tribes to fund construction of Veterans cemeteries in areas where national cemeteries do not meet the full demand. Since 2009, 15 new state and tribal cemeteries have opened. Taken together, these efforts will allow us to attain our strategic target of providing 95 percent of Veterans with a burial option within 75 miles of their home by 2015.

As a complement to the national cemetery system, NCA administers the Veterans Cemetery Grant Service (VCGS). There are currently 88 operational state and tribal cemeteries in 43 states, Guam and Saipan, with six more currently under construction. Since 1978, VCGS has awarded grants totaling more than \$500 million to

establish, expand or improve Veterans cemeteries. In Fiscal Year 2012, these cemeteries conducted over 31,000 burials for Veterans and family members.

New columbarium-only cemeteries will be constructed in five urban locations where the existing national cemetery location has proven to be a barrier to burial and visitation. This new Urban Initiative to alleviate time and distance barriers is being implemented in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco/Oakland/San Jose, Chicago, and Indianapolis.

Most recently, the Rural Burial Initiative was launched that will provide access for 132,000 Veterans who reside in sparsely populated areas where access to a national, state, or tribal Veterans cemetery does not exist. National Veterans Burial Grounds may be located within or adjacent to existing public or private cemeteries and operated by NCA. We are moving forward with implementing the Rural Burial Initiative in eight States: Maine, Wisconsin, North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, Idaho, and Utah. Six of these sites are in states that currently have no VA national cemetery presence and this initiative will now allow VA to expand its ability to provide a burial option to Veterans, Servicemembers, and eligible family members in these states.

NCA continues to leverage its partnerships to increase service for Veterans and their families. NCA provides Government-furnished headstones and markers for all federally-administered cemeteries, except the American Battle Monuments Commission. In Fiscal Year 2012, NCA was honored to provide over 38,000 headstones and markers to other federal and state Veteran cemeteries, including Department of Defense (DoD) cemeteries and Department of Interior's National Park Service (NPS) national cemeteries. NCA's National Training Center and annual conference provide opportunities to share best practices and standards among all agencies. NCA manages a congressionally mandated advisory committee, on which representatives from ABMC, NPS, and Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) are ex officio members. NCA and ANC have formalized a working group to ensure the organizations share information and collaborate on shared goals.

NCA works closely with funeral directors and private cemeteries, two other significant stakeholder groups. Funeral directors are often the spokespersons for the

Veteran or next of kin and assist in the delivery of NCA services through the coordination of committal services and interments. Funeral directors may also help families in applying for headstones, markers, and other memorial benefits. NCA partners with private cemeteries by furnishing headstones and markers for Veterans' gravesites in these private cemeteries. In January of this year, NCA announced the availability of a new online funeral directors resource kit that may be used by funeral directors nationwide when helping Veterans and their families make burial arrangements in VA national cemeteries.

Veterans Service Organizations are key stakeholders and partners in the VA mission. These organizations act as a voice for Veterans and their families, and as advocates for their needs and expectations. At many national cemeteries, they are important partners in providing support for military funeral honors, and we value the services they provide to our Veterans.

NCA continues its extraordinary record of customer service. This has been underscored by results achieved through external and internal survey instruments. NCA received the highest score—94 out of 100 possible—in the 2010 American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) sponsored by the University of Michigan. This is the fourth time NCA participated and the fourth time it received the top rating in the Nation. NCA was recognized by ACSI for a decade of superlative performance. NCA continues to achieve high levels of client satisfaction as measured by our annual surveys of Veterans or their next of kin who recently selected a national cemetery for the interment of a loved one, and the funeral directors who provided assistance at their time of need. NCA's 2012 client satisfaction survey results show that 99 percent of respondents rate the appearance of national cemeteries as excellent and 96 percent rate the quality of service as excellent. Ninety-nine percent of respondents would recommend a national cemetery to other Veteran families.

NCA's committed, Veteran-centric workforce is the main reason we are able to provide a world-class level of customer service. We continue to maintain our commitment to hiring Veterans. Currently, Veterans comprise over 74 percent of our workforce. Since 2009, we have hired over 400 returning Iraq and Afghanistan

Veterans. In addition, 82 percent of our contracts in Fiscal Year 2012 were awarded to Veteran-owned and Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned small businesses.

NCA achieves such high-levels of customer satisfaction because we constantly examine our operational processes to ensure efficient and accurate benefit delivery. For example, NCA continues to improve benefit delivery processes in order to reduce the number of inaccurate or damaged headstones and markers delivered to the gravesite. In Fiscal Year 2012, 95 percent of all headstones and markers were delivered undamaged and correctly inscribed; inscription data for 99 percent of headstones and markers ordered by national cemeteries were accurate and complete, and nearly 719,000 requests for Presidential Memorial Certificates were processed. These certificates bear the President's signature and convey to the family of the Veteran the gratitude of the Nation for the Veteran's service. To convey this gratitude, it is essential that the certificate be accurately inscribed. The accuracy rate for inscription of Presidential Memorial Certificates provided by VA is consistently 99 percent or better.

In 2009, NCA assumed responsibility for processing First Notices of Death to terminate compensation benefits to deceased Veterans. This now allows for the timely notification to next-of-kin of potential survivor benefits. Since taking on this responsibility, NCA has advised families of the burial benefits available to them, assisted in averting overpayments of some \$142 million in benefit payments and, thereby, helped survivors avoid possible collection actions.

We are looking to the future needs of our Veterans. This year, we plan to survey Veterans about their preferences on emerging burial practices, including 'green' burial techniques that may be appropriate and feasible for planning purposes. The completed study will provide information and analysis for leadership consideration of potential new burial options.

NCA's Homeless Veterans Apprenticeship Program, established in 2012, supports the Department's strategic priority of ending Veteran homelessness by 2015. The Apprenticeship is a 1-year paid employment training program for Veterans who are homeless or at risk for homelessness. This program has created paid employment positions as Cemetery Caretakers for 21 homeless Veterans who are enrolled in VA's

Homeless Veterans Supported Employment programs around the country. Apprentices who successfully complete 12 months of competency-based training will be offered permanent full time employment at a national cemetery. Successful participants will receive a Certificate of Competency which can also be used to support employment applications in the private sector. The program will be completed at the end of this fiscal year and we will be able to better evaluate its success rate as the first class graduates in October 2013.

In addition to these recent accomplishments, NCA completed its first system-wide comprehensive review of the entire inventory of gravesites within the national cemetery system. It was self-initiated with a goal to ensure each headstone and marker was in its proper location. It was the first-time in the 150-year history of national cemeteries that such a review was undertaken.

This ambitious and thorough review took many dedicated hours of our employees' time and multiple steps to validate the data. NCA leaders played a critical role in validating findings and conducted statistically-valid sampling of each national cemetery to increase assurance in the accuracy of the reported data. The review confirmed that the vast majority of work completed during recent "raise and realign" renovation projects was accomplished accurately and according to contract. The information gained was invaluable in validating current operations and ensuring we have a clear path forward to ensuring a sustainment plan is in place to enhance our management practices.

Out of 3.2 million gravesites, a total of 778 errors were found. These errors included 632 gravesites which were identified as mismarked and 131 gravesites that were discovered to be unmarked, and up to 15 sets of remains that NCA determined may require reburial. A mismarked grave is one that is marked with a headstone or marker that was intended for another grave. An unmarked grave is one with a recorded interment which has no headstone or marker. Generally, an unmarked grave occurs when a headstone is damaged or removed but not replaced; or was intended to be set, but never set for a variety of reasons, for example, not ordered or not delivered. While no error is acceptable, the total number of errors—less than 800 out of 3.2 million in a

system that was begun during the Civil War—provides confidence of the management practices in place. For those areas that we determined weaknesses were present, solutions are being implemented.

As I committed to doing, we provided our oversight committees with updates every 60 days on the status of the review. Throughout the process, the next of kin were our priority. I appreciate the oversight provided by the full Committee and this Subcommittee on this issue that allowed the families to remain everyone's top concern.

We conducted comprehensive notifications of congressional oversight committees and local congressional members. For each error found, cemetery directors called the next-of-kin on record and followed up with certified letters where we were unable to reach a family member. Corrective actions were done in consultation with the families.

NCA's entire self-initiated review concluded on December 31, 2012. The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) also completed an audit of Phase I of the review. On February 7, 2013, OIG issued the "Audit of Internal Gravesite Review of Headstone and Marker Placements." NCA concurred with the findings of the OIG audit of the headstone and marker review, and has already adopted many of the recommendations. OIG found that NCA's Burial Operations Support System and our records of interment were sufficiently reliable for this audit. NCA's experience during the headstone and marker review was similar; when mismarked or unmarked graves were discovered, NCA was able to determine what corrections needed to be made by examining our records of interment and comparing them to our gravesite layout plans.

During its audit, the OIG provided a management advisory letter in July 2012 and NCA began implementing recommendations immediately, which included an independent review of each cemetery. NCA strengthened the Phase II gravesite review procedures based on experience in implementing the Phase I headstone and marker review. NCA directed Memorial Service Network executive leaders to conduct independent gravesite reviews at every national cemetery and soldiers' lot administered by VA using statistically-valid sampling of gravesites or complete 're-audits.' These

independent reviews increased assurance in the accuracy of both the Phase I and Phase II headstone and marker reviews conducted by the cemetery directors.

As part of NCA's goal to ensure the accountability of remains, NCA leadership has implemented a number of actions to ensure future sustainment:

- **Additional Reviews.** NCA leaders will conduct additional full audit reviews at 17 facilities to achieve reasonable assurance that all gravesites are accurately marked at those facilities.
- **Accountability Procedures.** Among the updated April 2011 procedures are steps designed to alert interment crew members to the potential for misaligned markers, either at the interment site or in an adjacent row.
- **Contractual Requirements.** To minimize errors associated with "raise and realign" projects, contracts for renovation projects require the headstones and markers to remain at the gravesite.
- **Quality Improvement Initiatives.** In October 2012, NCA integrated a gravesite validation step in a quality improvement process, which requires reviewers to confirm that all markers match the arrangement on the gravesite layout map.
- **Contracting Officer Representatives.** To help ensure compliance with contractual requirements, NCA is hiring certified contracting officer representatives at each Memorial Service Network office to oversee future gravesite renovation projects, additional reviews, and to assist in integrating new technologies (GIS/GPS) that NCA will leverage in the future.

To further enhance the accountability of remains, NCA leadership will proceed with the following actions:

- **Mapping Certification.** NCA will establish a certification procedure and reporting process ensuring gravesite layout maps are routinely updated, accurate, and provided to the cemeteries.
- **Leveraging Information Technology.** To ensure that future headstone and marker reviews are comprehensive, NCA must leverage information technology to access VA's extensive historical records of interment to automate checks of the match

between a gravesite, its marker, the record of interment for that gravesite, and the overall gravesite layout plan for that cemetery. The Memorial Affairs Redesign (MAR) will allow NCA to electronically map a gravesite to the record of interment and the layout map for the cemetery. The MAR mapping solution will include a Geo-Spatial Information System (GIS) interface that will layer the interment data, burial maps, and cemetery engineering drawings into a single view allowing a real time comprehensive review and analysis of the interment workflow process.

I am committed to ensuring we move forward on all fronts facing our organization. We will implement the actions outlined in the sustainment plan that resulted from our headstone and marker review. We will continue to expand access to burial options for our Veterans. We have and will continue to make progress in opening up the 18 new NCA facilities over the next several years and reach more Veterans who are currently unserved with a burial option.

Our National Training Center in St. Louis, Missouri, will continue to offer critical competency-based training for our employees. This allows us to ensure there will be a new generation of cemetery practitioners that are ready to continue the operation and management of our system of National Shrines.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.