STATEMENT OF THE

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS (TAPS)

BEFORE THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE & MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

DECEMBER 9, 2014

Hearing: "Timeless Honor: Reviewing Current Operations of our National Cemeteries"

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. Opinions on Current Legislative Issues Facing National Cemeteries
Discusses, H.R. 1957, the Volunteer Veterans for Cemetery Service Act; H.R.2039; H.R.2157; H.R.2209; H.R. 3369, Hmong Veterans' Service Recognition Act; H.R. 3506, the Honor Our Fallen Heroes With Dignity Act of 2013; H.R. 3876, the Burial with Dignity for Heroes Act of 2014; H.R. 4399, the Comprehensive Department of Veterans Affairs Performance Management and Accountability Reform Act of 2014; H.R. 4712, the Veterans National Remembrance Act; S. 2951, the Veterans Dignified Burial Act.

II. Feedback about the VA National Cemetery Administration (NCA)
Our 131 national cemeteries honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans and service members for their country. Discusses recent Office of Inspector General reports about NCA and delays in burial allowance benefits, which are not paid through the NCA, but do impact how families view their treatment by the Department of Veterans Affairs and delay families from settling estates.

III. Arlington National Cemetery
Discusses events at the cemetery, the memento policy at section 60 where the Iraq and Afghanistan war dead are interred, the memento collection project at section 60, and the continued lack of a survivor representative on the Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery.

IV. Recommendations for Improvement

(1) For the National Cemetery Administration at the Department of Veterans Affairs, continue progress on the Rural Veterans Burial Initiative in response to the OIG report.

(2) Ask the Acting VA Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs and the subcommittee to initiate discussions with the Veterans Benefits Administration to improve the payment of burial allowance benefits.

(3) At Arlington National Cemetery, continue to work with TAPS and to publicize the access issues that occur on major holidays so surviving families are aware of logistics concerns.

(4) Continue the surviving family town hall meetings at Arlington National Cemetery twice per year. Continue the compromise with surviving families who want to leave mementos at section 60 that does not impair family grieving, impinge on mourning practices, nor detract from the dignity and solemnity of the cemetery.

(5) Nominate or appoint a surviving family member with a loved one interred at Arlington National Cemetery to the Advisory Committee for Arlington National Cemetery.

We are pleased to have the opportunity to submit this testimony on behalf of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS).

TAPS is the national organization providing compassionate care for the families of America's fallen military heroes. TAPS was founded in 1994 by a group of surviving families following the deaths of their loved ones in a military plane crash. Since then, TAPS has offered comfort and care to more than 50,000 people. The journey through grief following a military death can be isolating and the long-term impact of grief is often not understood in our society today. On average, it takes a person experiencing a traumatic loss five to seven years to reach his or her "new normal."

TAPS has extensive contact with the surviving families of America's fallen military service members, making TAPS uniquely qualified to comment on issues affecting the survivors left behind. Survivors are referred to TAPS through our relationships with the Armed Services, casualty assistance officers, and direct contact.

In 2013, TAPS sadly welcomed 4,039 new people (11 per day) grieving the death of a loved one in military service to America. In 2013, the number of people turning to TAPS for help and support remained 37% above 2011 levels. In 2012, TAPS welcomed 4,807 new survivors (13 per day) grieving the death of a service member or recent veteran. This number represents a 46% increase over the number of new people coming into TAPS in 2011, when TAPS welcomed on average, 7 people per day.

The 24/7 TAPS National Military Survivor Helpline receives on average 955 calls per month, or 31 calls per day. It received 11,463 calls in 2013. Average talk time for the first conversation with a new survivor is 90 minutes. Many new survivors are in a state of distress and need comprehensive support through peer mentoring, connections to grief counseling and supportive programs like TAPS seminars and camps.

On average, 2-3 new people contact TAPS each day requesting help in coping with the death by suicide of a service member or recent veteran. More than 4,000 people grieving a death by suicide receive care and support from TAPS, representing 19% of the TAPS caseload. However, the true number of these families within the TAPS caseload is closer to 30%, because many deaths that are ultimately ruled suicides are initially classified by the military as an unknown cause of death or as under investigation.

TAPS provides peer-based emotional support, grief and trauma resources, grief seminars and retreats for adults, Good Grief Camps for children, online and in-person care groups, casework assistance, connections to community-based care, and a 24/7 resource and information helpline for all who have been affected by a death in the Armed Forces. Services are provided to families at no cost to them. In a year, TAPS has 32 contacts with each survivor, through the TAPS magazine, invitations to events, anniversary cards, and other communications.

We do all of this without financial support from the Department of Defense. TAPS is funded by the generosity of the American people.

We appreciate deeply the invitation from the subcommittee, and we would like to submit the following statement on the management of our national cemeteries.

I. Opinions on Current Legislative Issues Facing National Cemeteries

The subcommittee has requested our opinion on recent legislative matters concerning the administration of the National Cemetery Administration and Arlington National Cemetery.

Regarding **H.R. 1957**, the Volunteer Veterans for Cemetery Service Act, which would authorize the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to accept voluntary services from veterans and veterans service organizations at national cemeteries. TAPS appreciates this legislation's intent to provide improved

educational programs that would include veterans sharing with visitors the cemetery the stories of their military service.

Regarding **H.R.2039**, to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to furnish headstones and markers for certain deceased veterans buried in veterans' cemeteries of Indian tribes. TAPS has no objection.

Regarding **H.R.2157**, to authorize the ground burial at Arlington National Cemetery of members of the United States Army who served honorably in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier platoon, Third Infantry Regiment (Old Guard), United States Army. TAPS has no objection and believes this would be an honorable way to recognize the service of these dedicated troops. Many members of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier platoon also volunteer in their free time as mentors for the TAPS Good Grief Camp.

Regarding **H.R.2209,** which directs the Secretary of the Army to establish a chain of command for Army national military cemeteries, including a military commander of the Army National Military Cemeteries to replace the current civilian director upon the termination of the tenure of such director. TAPS has no reason to believe a civilian director is a hindrance to the operations of a cemetery. It is preferred that the person who serves as director of the Army National Military Cemeteries be a person who has extensive training, education and experience in cemetery management, especially with older cemetery properties.

Regarding **H.R. 3369**, Hmong Veterans' Service Recognition Act, which authorizes burial in any open national cemetery under the control of the National Cemetery Administration of the remains of any individual: (1) who was naturalized pursuant to the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000 and who resided in the United States at the time of death; or (2) who the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) determines served with a special guerrilla unit or irregular forces operating from a base in Laos in support of the U.S. Armed Forces between February 28, 1961, and May 7, 1975, and who, at the time of death, resided in the United States and was a U.S. citizen or an alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence. TAPS has no objection.

Regarding **H.R. 3506,** the Honor Our Fallen Heroes With Dignity Act of 2013, which directs the Secretary of the Army to permit visitors to leave on any gravesite or government-furnished marker located in section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery any item that: (1) does not present a safety or health concern, (2) is not permanently affixed to such marker, and (3) does not interfere with the normal operations and maintenance procedures of the Cemetery. This act also requires the History Office of Arlington National Cemetery: (1) to collect, catalog, and store any other items left on a gravesite, headstone, or marker in section 60; and (2) at the end of each calendar month, to collect, catalog, and store all items left on gravesites, headstones, and government-furnished markers. This legislation would continue the memento collection pilot program beyond the current end date, which will be sometime in 2015. TAPS has no objection but believes the legislation would benefit from clarification to ensure the dignity of the cemetery is maintained. Currently, a compromise between the families and the administration permits small laminated photos and handcrafted items to remain at gravesites in section 60.

Regarding **H.R. 3876**, the Burial with Dignity for Heroes Act of 2014, which directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) to carry out a program to make grants to eligible entities to provide for the cost of burials for homeless veterans who: (1) are eligible to be buried in national cemeteries, and (2) the Secretary determines have no next-of-kin. TAPS has no objection and believes this would be a very appropriate way to honor the service of these veterans who do not have next of kin available.

Regarding **H.R. 4399**, the Comprehensive Department of Veterans Affairs Performance Management and Accountability Reform Act of 2014, which would raise standards for Senior Selective Service employees at the Department of Veterans Affairs, TAPS has no objection.

Regarding **H.R. 4712**, the Veterans National Remembrance Act, which directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA), in selecting a location for the establishment of a new national cemetery, to: (1) give priority to a state that does not have a national cemetery and that has the largest population of veterans among states without such a cemetery, and (2) ensure that such location is within 10 miles of a significant amount of the population to be served by such cemetery during the 25 years following its establishment. Permits the Secretary, after establishing two national cemeteries, to waive the requirement of giving priority to a state that does not have a national cemetery if such waiver will allow the Secretary to establish a cemetery that will serve a larger population of veterans. TAPS has no objection.

Regarding **S. 2951**, the Veterans Dignified Burial Act, which directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA): (1) upon confirming the veteran status of a deceased veteran in the custody of a local medical examiner, funeral director, county service group, or other similar entity, to request from such entity the specific date of the scheduled interment of such veteran; and (2) during each 30-day period following such request, to repeat the request until such entity confirms that such veteran has been interred. Requires the Secretary, by January 31 of each year, to submit to the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees a report on deceased veterans who were interred after the 30-day period following the date on which the Secretary made such request. Requires the report to include: (1) the number of deceased veterans who were not interred in such 30-day period during the prior year, (2) the number of such deceased veterans who are not interred as of the date of the report, and (3) the entity with custody of each such deceased veteran. TAPS has no objection. TAPS supports the timely interment of our veterans and would hope that a similar companion bill is introduced in the House of Representatives.

II. Feedback about the VA National Cemetery Administration (NCA)

Our 131 national cemeteries honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans and service members for their country. Since our founding in 1994, TAPS has worked cooperatively with the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The national cemetery system and its 131 cemeteries is the ultimate metaphor for the TAPS model of honoring the service and sacrifice of all those who died while serving in the Armed Forces, regardless of where or how they died.

The shrine status of our national cemeteries is deeply appreciated by survivors and reflects the care and devotion of our nation to honoring those who serve and sacrifice for our freedoms. TAPS appreciates the stewardship of our national cemeteries undertaken by the National Cemetery Administration and its commitment to serving veterans and their families.

Over the last year, surviving families have read the same news reports and heard the same concerns that all of us have heard, about mismanagement at the Department of Veterans Affairs. We are encouraged by the fact that VA Secretary Robert McDonald and his staff have made a point of asking for survivors to be included in some discussions, and have included messaging around improved support for survivors.

We were concerned by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General report, “Administrative Investigation Prohibited Personnel Practice and Preferential Treatment National Cemetery Administration VA Central Office.” This report details inappropriate behavior by the former head of the National Cemetery Administration. While this channeled attention and resources away from the operation of national cemeteries, it does not appear this situation significantly impacted national cemetery operations.

We were also concerned by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General report, “Audit of NCA’s Rural Veterans Burial Initiative.” The authors found that the National Cemetery Administration’s Rural

Initiative does not adequately identify the number and percentage of veterans residing in rural areas who do not have reasonable access to a burial option. The authors found that NCA could not adequately identify the number and percentage of unserved veterans who reside in rural areas because it uses a methodology that identifies veterans residing within a 75-mile radius of a National, VA-funded State or tribal organization veterans' cemetery and does not classify veterans as rural, urban, or any other designation. In addition, NCA lacked a specific performance measurement that evaluated NCA's progress towards increasing service to rural veterans.

As a result, NCA cannot evaluate the level of service provided to veterans and their families residing in rural areas throughout the eight targeted states and the entire Nation. Without this veteran population information, NCA cannot adequately report to Congress, and other stakeholders, its performance on serving rural veterans.

We concur with the recommendation of the report authors, who recommended the Acting Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs establish a methodology to identify the number and percentage of served and unserved rural veterans, publish a national map showing the areas and number of served and unserved rural veterans, and establish performance goals for the percentage of rural and urban veterans served. The Acting Undersecretary concurred with the recommendations and submitted acceptable corrective action plans.

TAPS caseworkers continue to support surviving families who need assistance in making arrangements to inter a loved one who died while serving in the Armed Forces or while in veteran status. We assist families with questions about proving eligibility to be buried in a national cemetery, requesting medallions from the VA which can be used to signify a veteran's gravesite in a private cemetery, filing paperwork to request a marker change in a national cemetery, and filing paperwork for burial benefits.

While we realize that the NCA is not responsible for the payment of burial allowances by the Veterans Benefits Administration, this is an issue which we would like to highlight for the subcommittee. VA burial allowances are partial reimbursements of an eligible Veteran's burial and funeral costs. When the cause of death is not service related, the reimbursements are generally described as two payments: (1) a burial and funeral expense allowance, and (2) a plot or interment allowance.

Even though burial allowances, ranging from $300-$2,000, are not managed by the NCA, when excessive delays in payment of these allowances happen, they often sour the experience of the family. The perception of the surviving family is that these agencies are connected. And delays in payment can delay the closure of a decedent's estate and delay the family in being able to move forward following the death.

Each pending burial claim represents a family that is waiting for their VA burial benefits. Looking at the VA's Monday Morning Work Load reports on a quarterly basis, the number of pending burial allowance claims is currently below what it was five years ago and great progress has been made this year to reduce the number of pending VA burial benefit claims. The volume of pending claims appeared to peak at just under 67,000 pending claims in 2012 and began to decline in 2013. That decline has accelerated in 2014 with the volume of pending burial claims cut by more than half this year.

12/01/14 – 17,181 pending claims
10/06/14 – 18,970 pending claims
07/07/14 – 20,336 pending claims
04/07/14 – 38,488 pending claims
01/04/14 – 45,225 pending claims

12/31/13 – 44,997 pending claims
09/30/13 - 45,671 pending claims
07/01/13 - 51,078 pending claims
04/01/13 - 62,094 pending claims

12/31/12 - 63,979 pending claims
10/01/12 - 63,126 pending claims
07/02/12 - 66,754 pending claims
04/02/12 - 65,835 pending claims
01/03/12 - 59,204 pending claims

10/03/11 - 49,819 pending claims
07/05/11 - 49,819 pending claims
04/04/11 - 37,976 pending claims
01/03/11 - 28,115 pending claims

10/04/10 - 26,609 pending claims
07/06/10 - 26,854 pending claims
04/05/10 - 27,198 pending claims
01/04/10 - 22,710 pending claims

The delay in benefits reflects on the entire VA, not just the Veterans Benefits Administration. TAPS also appreciates the subcommittee's interest in this matter. While we realize the burial allowance benefit does not rest within his jurisdiction for his agency, TAPS would appreciate it if Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Ronald E. Walters, could inquire with the Veterans Benefits Administration about this situation and ask what could be done to lower the volume of pending claims even further.

III. Arlington National Cemetery

It has been a significant year for Arlington National Cemetery, with the celebration of the cemetery's 150th anniversary. We appreciate the attention to history that has been part of the celebration and the way it has helped the public better understand the sacrifices our military service members and veterans make for our country. The cemetery continues to make progress, is working toward expansion, and we feel this track record of progress is helping surviving families move forward beyond the scandals and revelations of 2010.

TAPS has worked proactively with surviving families and the administration of Arlington National Cemetery for many years. During the scandal which shook the confidence and faith of the American people in the cemetery, we hosted a public forum in 2010 for families to meet the new superintendent and executive director of the Army Cemeteries Program. We also supported families grappling with issues connected to the mismanagement at the cemetery during the 2010 scandal, including two families who dis-interred their loved ones to determine if they were buried in the correct locations. We are relieved to be beyond those difficult days and to see improved management and financial oversight in place.

Challenges Visiting Arlington National Cemetery for Surviving Families on Major Holidays
TAPS has received complaints from families concerning problems visiting Arlington National Cemetery on major holidays, such as Memorial Day or Veteran's Day. Some of these problems occur because families are traveling from out of town, do not live in the Washington, D.C. area, and are not aware of the security logistics involved in major dignitaries going into and out of the cemetery for official ceremonies. Or they are not aware of the logistics involved in a major event like Wreaths Across America, when a family is not able to drive onto the grounds with a valid family pass, due to the logistics involved with the arrival and distribution of the wreaths. A visit by the President or Vice President often means a security lockdown on the bridge entrance to the cemetery and any people just outside the gates are turned away.

A surviving father contacted TAPS after Memorial Day when he and his wife rode their motorcycles to Arlington National Cemetery to visit their son's gravesite. Unfortunately, because of when they arrived during a security lockdown, they were turned away by the guards at the gate. The father wrote:

> "I can't adequately express how horrible it was to see my wife on her motorcycle pleading with the guard through her tears asking to visit our son. It was heartbreaking and outside my realm of belief. We never thought we wouldn't be allowed to visit our son's gravesite. Particularly on the day set aside by our nation to honor and remember those who gave all. Angry and disappointed beyond words we pulled onto the exit we were told to use.
>
> I understand the need to protect the President. But, there were other families who were already inside the cemetery visiting their loved ones when the guards started directing traffic away. Honestly, we were stunned. We will go back another day, another time, but it is our sincere hope that no parent, spouse, or sibling will ever be told they can't visit their fallen hero."

Because of these concerns, TAPS staff met in July with Arlington National Cemetery staff to discuss how we might assist with distributing event and logistics information to survivors in advance of major holidays, so these difficult situations could be avoided. We felt that by providing detailed information to families about these events in advance, we might help lessen the likelihood of families being turned away at the gate and avoid some of the pain and difficulty situations like this pose. Families could then plan their visits to the cemetery knowing the logistical challenges they might face.

For example, we have distributed information to families about the Wreaths Across America event on December 13, 2014. This is a logistically complex event and survivors with valid Arlington National Cemetery passes for their vehicles will not be permitted to drive into the cemetery on December 13, 2014, as they normally would, until after 3pm. We also provide a TAPS presence at section 60 during the wreath event to offer grief support for families as needed. TAPS seeks to continue to cooperate with the cemetery administration to provide support for grieving families who are in the cemetery on these special holidays.

The Practice of Leaving Mementos at Section 60

At this time last year, a dispute erupted between the cemetery administration and a group of grieving military families with loved ones interred in section 60, where the Iraq and Afghanistan active duty burials occur. In late July and August 2013, cemetery staff removed mementos and items left at the gravesites by families, many of which had been there for extended periods of time. Admittedly, many of these items violated the floral policy of the cemetery. The "enforcement" of the floral policy in section 60 represented a significant departure from the status quo, as the cemetery had permitted families for four years a degree of latitude in what they left at gravesites, and typically only removed items that were deemed "unsightly."

TAPS participated in an emotional family town hall meeting in October 2014 with the Arlington National Cemetery administrative leadership team, where we provided support for survivors. The families were very upset about the removal of mementos in section 60 and were saddened to see the section stripped bare. At the same time, the superintendent and his staff expressed concern about the appearance of the section and their concerns about safety and decorum.

It should be noted that the families themselves have a variety of opinions about what is appropriate to leave at gravesites and that the leaving of items at gravesites is a custom that goes back centuries and is influenced by personal beliefs, religious practice and family custom. Some people leave mementos not because they are "stuck" in their grief, but rather because they are trying to incorporate their late loved one into their new life after the loss. Rather than viewing the practice of leaving mementos at gravesites as a way for people to be held back in their grief, many families talk about how leaving an item helps them live a normal life.

Hearing the concerns of the families, Superintendent Patrick Hallinan indicated his willingness to work with the families and offered a compromise, allowing them to leave small laminated photos and handcrafted items at the gravesites in section 60 during the non-growing season (when the lawns are mowed less frequently) until they become unsightly or present a hazard to the mowing and trimming process.

The families very much appreciated this offer and volunteered to standardize their photos to a particular size if necessary. The families also offered and have followed through on working to educate each other about the cemetery policies and to encourage others to comply with the policies. The families are very grateful for this compromise and appreciate Superintendent Hallinan's support.

An additional town hall meeting between families and the administration was held in April 2014. As a follow up to that meeting on April 9th, the cemetery communicated via email to families that Superintendent Hallinan decided to approve the families' request to continue the compromise allowing small laminated photos and handcrafted items at the gravesites in section 60 through the mowing season as a pilot. The administration also indicated its appreciation of the "collective support rendered to eliminate the placement of items in the trees and shrubbery as well as the general cooperation with the current policy over the winter months."

It is the hope of the families that this compromise permitting small laminated photos and handcrafted items will be continued into the future and from our discussions with the cemetery administration, it appears that will be the case for the immediate future. The families are actively trying to support the cemetery in maintaining the section in a way that honors our service members and their sacrifices. This included assisting in the wreath cleanup in February and talking one-on-one with families in the section throughout the year. The families are very grateful to be permitted to leave small laminated photos and handcrafted items at the gravesites in section 60.

Family/Administration Town Hall Meetings

We believe these meetings have assisted surviving military families and the administration in communicating more effectively and contributed to better understanding between both parties. Rather than being at odds, the families and the administration are partnering to accommodate each other's needs and working together to ensure the cemetery is maintained at a high standard. We encourage the cemetery administration to schedule town hall meetings with survivors at least twice per year and to publicize the meetings in advance so families can attend.

Section 60 Pilot Memento Collection Project

Since 2009, the Army has operated a section 60 memento history collection project within the cemetery as a pilot program. This program was created to collect some of the historically interesting and unusual items in the cemetery from gravesites of those who died by hostile act in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The pilot section 60 memento program emerged after media reports surfaced revealing that cemetery staff were throwing away not only the mementos, but also military medals left on gravesites by battle buddies. The public, and many survivors, had long assumed that the mementos left at section 60, were collected, in a manner similar to what occurs at the Vietnam Wall (where a collection occurs under the auspices of the National Park Service). There was a public outcry in response to media reports, which led to the creation of the pilot program.

In October 2014, the Advisory Committee for Arlington National Cemetery unanimously recommended to the Secretary of the Army to end the Section 60 Mementos Pilot Program no later than December 31, 2014 or upon the withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan. The Committee unanimously voted to recommend that the items collected and retained as part of the Section 60 Mementos Pilot Program be declared and treated as a historical memorial collection.

In February 2014, the Secretary of the Army endorsed their recommendation saying:

> "I endorse the recommendation to establish a specified end date to the collection of mementos in Section 60 which capture the unique sacrifice of our families and service members in the Global War on Terrorism. I have directed the implementation of a policy to ensure continued preservation of the uniqueness of Section 60, a first interment section where the majority of service members killed in current contingencies are interred, while also ensuring the dignity and decorum which is worthy of our Nation's most treasured shrine. Specifically, I concur with the Committee's recommendations for the Army to end the current Section 60 Mementos collection program no later than December 31, 2014 or upon withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan and to designate all items previously collected and retained as a historical memorial collection."

Our understanding is that the pilot memento collection project will end sometime after hostilities cease. It should be noted that if this is the case, the previous policy removing and disposing of items that are not small laminated photos and handcrafted items, will commence again.

Survivor Representative Needed on the Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery
As we testified in April 2013 and October 2013, the community of surviving families was saddened greatly by the death from cancer of Janet Manion in April 2012. Mrs. Manion was a gold star mother who served on the Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery. Her son is buried at section 60 and she also resides with him. Mrs. Manion was the only surviving family member of a service member buried at Arlington National Cemetery on the committee. More than two years after her death, no survivor has been named to replace her.

The current members of the committee have exceptional military and veterans service credentials, but none are identified as a surviving family member. This important stakeholder population – the families that are grieving their loved ones - is impacted by decisions made by the advisory committee and could contribute in a positive way to the decisions this committee makes. It is our understanding that a group of candidates are being considered and we hope that the selection process will be completed soon.

IV. Recommendations for Improvement

(1) For the National Cemetery Administration at the Department of Veterans Affairs, continue progress on the Rural Veterans Burial Initiative in response to the OIG report.

(2) Ask the Acting VA Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs and the subcommittee to initiate discussions with the Veterans Benefits Administration to improve the payment of burial allowance benefits.

(3) At Arlington National Cemetery, continue to work with TAPS and to publicize the access issues that occur on major holidays so surviving families are aware of logistics concerns.

(4) Continue the surviving family town hall meetings at Arlington National Cemetery twice per year. Continue the compromise with surviving families who want to leave mementos at section 60 that does not impair family grieving, impinge on mourning practices, nor detract from the dignity and solemnity of the cemetery.

(5) Nominate or appoint a surviving family member with a loved one interred at Arlington National Cemetery to the Advisory Committee for Arlington National Cemetery.

Curriculum Vitae – Ami Neiberger-Miller

Ami Neiberger-Miller is the part-time director of outreach and education at TAPS. Her work with TAPS includes working with the news media, designing strategic outreach campaigns, advising surviving families on media relations, speaking to organizations about TAPS, conducting online outreach to raise awareness with core audiences, writing press releases and other materials, and forging partnerships that build support for TAPS and surviving families.

Because she is a surviving family member, Neiberger-Miller brings a unique perspective to her role with TAPS. Her 22-year-old brother, U.S. Army Specialist Christopher Neiberger, was killed in action on August 6, 2007 by a roadside bomb while serving with the U.S. Army in Baghdad, Iraq. Her brother is buried in section 60 at Arlington National Cemetery among hundreds of others who gave the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq or Afghanistan. Her father-in-law, Marine Corps Captain (retired) Norman Vann Miller, who died in 2003 of natural causes, is buried in section 66 at Arlington National Cemetery. '

In her role as a staff member with TAPS, Neiberger-Miller has supported many surviving families of our fallen military and veterans in communicating with Arlington National Cemetery, organized and supported meetings between surviving families and administrative officials, assisted a family in applying for a burial waiver with the National Cemetery Administration, supported TAPS casework programs assisting surviving families in communicating with administrators, and represented TAPS at meetings with the National Cemetery Administration and Arlington National Cemetery.

Neiberger-Miller works frequently with journalists on stories related to survivors of our fallen military, issues impacting survivors, suicide and mental health care in the military, veteran's benefits, and post-traumatic stress disorder. She has been interviewed by CNN, MS-NBC, CBS Sunday Morning, ABC World News, National Public Radio, the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Associated Press and other media outlets. She appears in the HBO documentary "Section 60: Arlington National Cemetery" and is interviewed in the recently published book, "Section 60 Arlington National Cemetery: Where War Comes Homes."

Neiberger-Miller has devoted more than 15 years of her career to helping organizations improve how they communicate and work with the media. She specializes in helping nonprofit organizations like TAPS, improve their public relations strategies and outreach, with expertise in helping groups that support trauma survivors.

Neiberger-Miller has spoken at events sponsored by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University and the Carter Center. She has spoken on communications for nonprofits at American University, George Washington University, Marymount University, the Public Relations Society of America – National Capital chapter and Public Relations Society of America - Maryland chapter.

She holds bachelor's and master of arts degrees in history from the University of Florida and is accredited in public relations.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Neither Ami Neiberger-Miller, nor the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), have received any Federal grant or contract, relevant to the subject matter of this testimony, during the current or previous two fiscal years.