

**STATEMENT OF  
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UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS,  
NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**June 7, 2018**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to be here today to provide the views of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) on the maintenance, construction, and expansion of cemeteries managed by the VA, including VA's plans to provide burial access for eligible Veterans within 75 miles of the Veterans' home. I would also like to provide you with information about other VA memorialization programs, which help demonstrate our Nation's appreciation for the sacrifices made by Veterans and their families. I appreciate the presence of Mr. Matz, representing the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), a strong partner with VA in these same efforts. I defer to him to provide information about ABMC's similar efforts. I am also honored by the presence of our key Veteran service organization partners, who provide such critical support to us and the Veteran community.

First, let me tell you how proud and honored I am to serve America's Veterans and their families as the sixth Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs at the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). NCA is a world-class organization with a long-standing commitment to caring for Veterans and their families in perpetuity at our 135 VA national cemeteries in operation. Every day we have the honor and privilege to fulfill President Lincoln's promise, to care for those who shall have borne the battle.

Earlier this year, I shared my vision with NCA's staff and outlined my priorities as Under Secretary. These priorities are based on my own guiding principles, and align not only with VA's core mission and NCA's Long Range Plan, but also with the subjects of this hearing. As I speak to you today, I will touch on these principles of "Preserving the Legacy," by which I hope we can ensure that "no Veteran ever dies"; of "Providing

Access; and Choosing VA” by building on NCA’s strategic goal to provide reasonable access to a burial option in a national or VA-funded state or tribal Veteran’s cemetery to 95 percent of U.S. Veterans; and finally of “Partnering to Serve Veterans,” as shown by NCA’s strong history and bright future of working with communities and organizations to raise the national profile and importance of the American civic tradition of honoring Veterans through memorialization.

NCA is dedicated to preserving the memory of our Nation’s Veterans. In our 135 national cemeteries, we provide perpetual care for eligible Veterans, Servicemembers, Reservists and family members in 3.6 million gravesites. Our cemeteries include 9,138 developed acres.

One of NCA’s strategic goals is to provide reasonable access (access within 75 miles of a Veteran’s residence) to a burial option in a national or VA-funded state or tribal Veteran’s cemetery to 95 percent of U.S. Veterans. NCA strives to achieve this goal, in part, by establishing new national cemeteries and expanding or replacing existing national cemeteries. We also partner with state and tribal organizations through our Veterans Cemetery Grants Program.

NCA determines the need to open a new national cemetery based on whether 80,000 or more Veterans reside within a 75-mile service area of a proposed cemetery location, and who do not already have reasonable access to burial in a VA national or VA-funded state or tribal Veterans cemetery. Under these criteria, which were approved by Congress in fiscal year (FY) 2011, NCA determined a need to establish five new national cemeteries. In 2015, we opened two of these cemeteries in Florida at Cape Canaveral and Tallahassee. On August 5, 2016, we dedicated Omaha National Cemetery and on May 25th, we dedicated our 136th national cemetery in southern Colorado that will serve over 95,000 Veterans and their families. We anticipate a construction award in this fiscal year for a new national cemetery in western New York.

NCA also recognizes the need to provide new or enhanced burial access in certain rural and urban locations. Under the rural initiative, NCA will establish new national cemeteries in states that do not have an open national cemetery and have areas where fewer than 25,000 Veterans reside within a 75-mile service area of a proposed cemetery site. These Veterans do not already have reasonable access to a

VA national cemetery in another state or a VA-funded state or tribal Veterans cemetery that offers a casketed or cremation first interment option. NCA opened its first rural cemetery at Yellowstone National Cemetery in Montana in 2014. Progress is underway for rural national cemeteries in seven other locations: Twin Falls, Idaho; Fargo, North Dakota; Rhinelander, Wisconsin; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Elko, Nevada; Cedar City, Utah; and Machias, Maine.

NCA's urban initiatives are planned for St. Albans, New York; West Los Angeles, California; Alameda, California; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Chicago, Illinois. At these sites, NCA plans to establish new columbaria-only national cemeteries to enhance service in urban areas where distance and travel time from the center of the city (urban core) to an existing national cemetery present barriers to visitation and contribute to lower usage rates than national cemeteries in other large, urban areas.

NCA also expands existing national cemeteries to maintain current burial access options. We appreciate the recent passage of the Black Hills National Cemetery Boundary Expansion Act, which will allow NCA to obtain land from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) that is adjacent to our existing national cemetery.

Our discussion of final resting places for Veterans would not be complete without including the valuable partnerships we have established with the state and tribal organizations through our Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP). In 2018, we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of the program. VCGP was established in 1978 to complement service provided by VA's national cemeteries. The program assists states, territories and tribal governments in providing gravesites for Veterans in those areas where NCA cannot fully satisfy their burial needs. Grants may be used to establish, expand or improve Veterans cemeteries that are owned and operated by a state, territory or tribal government or to assist the states or tribal communities with issues of operation and maintenance.

VCGP has awarded over \$766 million in grants since 1978, funding 109 state and tribal cemeteries in 47 states, Guam and Saipan, and 11 operational tribal cemeteries. In FY 2017, these cemeteries provided 38,219 burials.

All of these initiatives are designed, as I mentioned, to meet NCA's strategic goal of providing reasonable access to 95 percent of eligible Veterans. We are currently at

92 percent, and when we attain our strategic goal, we know there are others—those that I call the “hardest 5 percent”—who still would be outside our reasonable access standard. We continue to look for ways to reach them as well, and are open to working with you to find innovative approaches to do that.

Of course, NCA leads the way in providing a variety of world class burial and memorial benefits for Veterans and their families. But beyond providing perpetual care in our national cemeteries, NCA is working on several exciting initiatives that will ensure lasting tributes to the sacrifices made by Veterans and their families.

NCA is striving to embrace technology by making significant improvements to our digital landscape to better serve the Veterans and their families. For example, in September 2017, we launched a new NCA mobile site. This mobile redesign has easy-to-understand language, intuitive file paths, a sleek design, and a user-friendly interface. Some of the improvements to the mobile site and to the overall user experience include integration with popular maps; the ability to link to or display a cemetery map; and integration with the new cemetery lookup feature.

Also in 2017, VA inaugurated the Veterans Legacy Program (VLP), a series of unique partnerships between VA and academic institutions, which engage university students to research Veterans’ stories, make their stories accessible to the public, and teach K-12 students what they learned about Veterans. While similar in their mission to memorialize Veterans through student engagement, each of the partnerships reflects the unique characteristics of the local communities. VA will expand these partnerships in the future. To date, Legacy programs have engaged 38 university professors and 64 K-12 teachers. The programs have impacted approximately 750 undergraduates and 6,400 K-12 students. Legacy programs have produced 42 lesson plans for K-12 teachers, 119 Veteran biographies, and 6 Veterans cemetery walking tours, all based on research conducted on-site in national cemeteries by students. To maximize programmatic flexibility, the Legacy program is seeking grant authority through an FY 2019 legislative proposal, as grants are Federal award instruments that most universities use. The award and distribution process for grants provides a valuable tool that will allow NCA to manage programs and stakeholders in a more responsive and efficient manner.

The Legacy program partnered with the American Battle Monuments Commission on the Understanding Sacrifice program of teacher education. Teachers from all over the country participated in this program to learn about the Pacific Theater of World War II and to do research on hometown heroes of that war who are interred in NCA and ABMC cemeteries. ABMC and VLP will continue their partnership in a new program in FY 2018.

VLP and the Library of Congress worked with the Department of the Army to host cadet-interns from the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. They spent their first 3 days in Washington, DC, learning the basics of Veteran research, and then they went to Fort Snelling National Cemetery and Santa Fe National Cemetery, where they worked on researching Veterans in those cemeteries.

Complementing Legacy research and engagement efforts, VA took the first steps of a major transformation of public digital engagement in Veteran memorialization. VA is creating an interactive website, which we expect to be operational in 2019, that will enable virtual memorialization of the millions of Veterans buried at VA national cemeteries. When fully implemented, the platform will allow online visitors to pay their respects and will permit researchers, students, and professionals to share information about more than 3.2 million Veterans memorialized by NCA. Most importantly, it will allow families to upload materials related to a Veteran's service, such as letters, pictures, and videos, to be shared with the public. Visitors to a gravesite will be able to use their smartphones or other devices to "scan" a Veteran's headstone and access the uploaded information, thereby creating an interactive memorial experience.

All of these efforts will help ensure that "no Veteran ever dies." This may seem an odd statement, but let me explain. It has been said that we all die two deaths. The first, a physical one, and the second, the last time someone speaks our name. As Under Secretary, I am dedicated to ensuring that the names of our Veterans laid to rest in our VA national cemeteries, and those Veterans buried in state and tribal Veterans cemeteries around the country, are never forgotten for their service to our Nation. As long as we remember and continue to speak their names and share their stories, they are never truly gone. This is my commitment—and that of all NCA team members—to the families and friends of loved ones now not with us.

This concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. We would be happy now to entertain any questions you or the other members of the Subcommittee may have.