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**TESTIMONY  
OF THE  
NATIONAL FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION**

**BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL  
AFFAIRS**

**JULY 10, 2024**

Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) regarding legislation vital to our nation's veterans.

I am Lesley Witter, Senior Vice President of Advocacy for NFDA, representing nearly 20,000 licensed funeral directors and embalmers across the nation. It is a profound privilege for funeral directors to serve veterans and their families with utmost care and respect. NFDA, with its extensive national network of over 10,000 funeral homes, remains steadfast in our commitment to ensuring that every veteran receives a dignified final tribute, honoring their dedicated service to our country.

As the leading funeral service organization in the United States and globally, NFDA advocates tirelessly for veterans and their families, collaborating closely with Congress, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), and others. We strive to uphold the solemn promise of providing every deceased veteran the care, honor, and dignity they rightfully deserve.

Mr. Chairman, NFDA extends gratitude to you and your fellow veterans in Congress for your service to our nation, both on Capitol Hill and in the armed forces. We commend the Committee for its ongoing efforts to ensure veterans receive the benefits they have earned through their service and sacrifice. Today, as the Committee deliberates on 18 bills addressing critical issues affecting veterans, NFDA appreciates the opportunity to provide our perspective on matters related to funeral and burial benefits.

Thank you once again for this opportunity to testify and for your dedication to our veterans. We look forward to continuing our collaborative efforts to honor those who have served our country so bravely.

We enthusiastically support your legislation, H.R. 6507, known as the "Mark Our Place Act," which authorizes the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to furnish or replace a headstone, marker, or medallion for the grave of any eligible Medal of Honor recipient, regardless of their dates of service in the Armed Forces. This legislation is crucial to ensuring that every veteran receives the proper memorialization they deserve.

Similarly, NFDA supports Representative Reschenthaler's H.R. 7729, the "Dennis and Lois Krisfalusy Act," which seeks to amend Title 38, United States Code to expand eligibility for headstones, markers, and burial receptacles under the purview of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to include certain individuals who passed away before November 11, 1998.

Furthermore, NFDA endorses Representative Zinke's H.R. 8792, the "Flowers for Fallen Heroes Act of 2024," designed to establish a program for ordering flowers at gravesites overseen by the American Battle Monuments Commission. This legislation aims to ensure that over 200,000 Americans who perished in WWI or WWII are respectfully memorialized at an ABMC site in perpetuity.

Additionally, NFDA supports the “Veterans’ Burial Improvement Act of 2024,” particularly its provisions making certain burial benefits permanent for spouses and children of armed forces members who die while on active duty. We also endorse the provision enabling the Secretary to cover additional costs, exceeding the standard transportation allowance, for transporting a veteran from the place of death to a designated cemetery.

These legislative initiatives are crucial steps toward ensuring that our veterans and their families receive the utmost respect and recognition for their sacrifices to our nation. NFDA is proud to support these efforts and remains committed to advocating for the dignified treatment of our nation’s heroes.

Mr. Chairman, NFDA wholeheartedly supports the “Preserving Veterans’ Legacy Act of 2024.” We extend our gratitude to Representatives John James, Chris Deluzio, Morgan Luttrell, Jack Bergman, and Don Davis—all veterans themselves—for introducing this critical legislation. The Act addresses a current limitation that restricts the Department of Veterans’ Affairs’ National Cemetery Administration (NCA) from burying families together beyond October 1, 2024. This sunset provision is particularly burdensome for families who wish to honor their loved ones’ service by being interred together.

Furthermore, this legislation grants permanent authority to the NCA to inter eligible spouses and dependent children in VA National Cemeteries. Importantly, it also allows the NCA to provide a group burial marker for veterans buried in mass graves, instead of individual headstones. We recognize the necessity of this provision, as it grants the VA discretion in appropriately memorializing individuals in such situations.

It is a sad truth that funeral homes nationwide confront a surprising challenge: many are currently holding the cremated remains of unclaimed individuals, including veterans. Funeral directors advocate passionately for every unclaimed individual to receive a dignified funeral and burial. We commend the ongoing efforts of the VA and VSOs in this regard and stand ready to collaborate closely with them to identify veterans’ remains that remain unclaimed, ensuring they receive the full honors they deserve.

Having collaborated closely with the VA and NCA, we understand the challenges posed by gravesites containing commingled remains or multiple individual graves. The current limitations prevent the provision of a single headstone for each individual in these circumstances. We firmly support this legislation, which empowers the VA to furnish a group burial headstone or marker for eligible decedents, while ensuring that every effort is made to acknowledge each individual by name whenever feasible.

NFDA stands committed to advocating for the dignified treatment of our veterans and their families, and we urge the Committee’s support for the “Preserving Veterans’ Legacy Act of 2024.” Thank you for considering our perspective on this crucial matter.

In preparation for this Hearing, I had the privilege of speaking with NFDA President, Douglas R. "Dutch" Nie II, CFSP, CCO, CMFP, Owner, President/CEO of Nie Family Funeral Home and Cremation Service in Ann Arbor, Michigan, who shared his remarkable journey.

Dutch grew up above the family funeral home, where he began working after school and during summers, handling tasks like lawn mowing, car washing, assisting with funeral processions, and attending visitations. After graduating from high school, Dutch enlisted in the Air Force, serving as a military policeman for eight years before returning to the funeral service profession.

Reflecting on his dual roles as a funeral director and a veteran, Dutch expressed the profound impact of overseeing burials, which deeply affects both him and the families of the deceased. His experience is heightened when entering National Cemeteries, where flag-lined entrances prompt reflection on the service of those being laid to rest. Witnessing military honors serves as a poignant reminder of the earned burial rights that should forever be honored.

Mr. Chairman, funeral directors nationwide firmly uphold the principle that decisions made by grieving families should not compromise a veteran's rightful entitlement to burial in a veteran's cemetery. While we commend the VA's efforts to offer burial options through commemorative plaques and urns for veterans whose cremated remains are not interred, NFDA has raised concerns about a provision in section 2207 of P.L. 116-315. This provision risks confusing the purchase of merchandise with a veteran's fundamental right to burial in a national cemetery. NFDA has underscored to the VA our concern that a grieving spouse might unintentionally jeopardize the veteran's eligibility for ground burial by opting for an urn benefit from the VA. This contrasts starkly with privately purchasing an urn, which does not impact burial rights.

As Chairman Mike Bost of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee aptly stated, "Our nation owes our veterans a debt that can never fully be repaid, and ensuring they have the dignified final resting place they have earned is a fundamental duty." In line with this principle, NFDA supports legislative adjustments that allow families to reimburse the VA for an urn provided by them, thereby safeguarding continued eligibility for interment alongside their spouse in a VA or national cemetery.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, on behalf of the National Funeral Directors Association, I want to reaffirm our unwavering commitment to honoring our nation's veterans and their families. Funeral directors across the country are dedicated to fulfilling this solemn duty with respect and compassion.

In closing, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of the National Funeral Directors Association and our membership of 20,000 funeral directors and embalmers. I hope that my testimony has provided valuable insights, and I am happy to address any questions you may have.

Thank you.