



*The National Association of State Directors
of Veterans Affairs, Inc.*

November 8, 2024

Statement for the Record for HVAC DAMA Subcommittee Hearing November 13, 2024

NASDVA appreciates the National Cemetery Administration's (NCA) collaborative partnership with States, Territories and Tribal governments through the Veterans Cemetery Grant Program (VCGP). VCGP provides support and assistance to obtain a grant to establish, expand, or improve a Veterans cemetery that strive to meet VA's national "shrine" standards that are or will be owned and operated by these agencies. VCGP funded cemeteries are a vital part of expanding burial access for our nation's patriots and their families, and in particular, supporting the primary NCA goal of providing burial services to more than **95% of all Veterans within a 75-mile radius of their home county.**

The Program Manager Sergeant Major James Earp, USA Retired, is a dedicated professional that is key to the execution of the VCGP program. He keeps the Cemetery Directors informed and provides clear guidance to the participating governmental entities. Since establishment of the program in 1978, VA has awarded more than \$1 Billion in grants to establish, expand, improve, operate and maintain 122 Veterans cemeteries in 46 States, 14 Tribal trust lands veterans cemeteries, and 3 Territorial cemeteries in Puerto Rico, Guam, and Saipan. Two new cemeteries are currently under construction in Lubbock, TX and Grand Island, NE.

The VCGP complements NCA's 156 national VA-managed cemeteries for veterans and their families to have access to a final resting place comparable to a VA national cemetery. The compassionate and dignified burials performed serve as the final benefit for ones honorable service to our great nation. In **FY2024**, grant funded cemeteries provided **42,720** interments, which is **24%** of the total NCA and VCGP burials.

The annual Priority List is effective on October 1st based on the pre-applications submitted by July 1st and are established into four groups:

Priority Group 1 - Projects needed to avoid disruption in burial service that would otherwise occur at existing veterans cemeteries within 4 years of the date of the preapplication. Includes expansion projects as well as certain improvement projects (if required to continue interment operations).

Priority Group 2 - Projects for the establishment of new veterans cemeteries.

Priority Group 3 – Expansion projects at existing veterans cemeteries when a disruption in burial service due to the exhaustion of existing gravesites is not expected to occur within 4 years of the date of the preapplication.

Priority Group 4 - Improvement projects for cemetery landscaping or infrastructure, such as building expansion and upgrades to roads and irrigation systems, that are not directly related to the development of new gravesites. Operation and Maintenance Projects that address NCA's national shrine standards of appearance are included in this group.

The recently published **FY2025** Priority List reflects Priority Group 1 (expansion and improvement) projects that total more than \$137 million, and likewise, the Priority Group 2 (establishment) projects also total more than \$117 million. The FY2025 budget proposal for the VCGP is only \$60 million. This amount is insufficient; it only allows NCA to address part of Priority Group 1 and no remaining funds to establish new cemeteries and support the States with needed improvements and maintenance projects. Without the establishments, NCA will have difficulty in meeting its 95% coverage goal, particularly for gap and rural areas. It is vitally important to keep the existing backlog of VCGP projects at a manageable level. It is difficult for States to acquire the land for a new cemetery and get new projects codified in the budget deliberations. Likewise, it is hard to justify continued support for a project while remaining on VA's Priority Group 2 list year-after-year waiting to receive a federal grant. There are more submissions each year from the existing aging cemeteries for Priority Group 1, which reduces available funds for new (establishment) cemeteries. NASDVA strongly recommends increased funding support for the **VCGP to \$120 million**, so new cemeteries can be funded.

NASDVA also recommends that in the **FY2025** budget that Congress support the annual increase of the **plot allowance to \$978** and provide **plot allowance for family members**. The President's budget submission proposes legislation that would have VA providing this benefit, *"Expand plot allowance for certain individuals eligible for interment in a national cemetery: The proposal would amend 38 U.S.C. § 2303 to provide plot or interment allowances to VA grant funded State and Tribal Veterans' cemeteries for interments of certain individuals eligible for interment in national cemeteries. This proposal aligns eligibility for the plot allowance in grant funded cemeteries with eligibility criteria for interment in national cemeteries."*

This proposal for additional eligibility for plot allowance funds will help offset the higher operational costs being experienced across all VCGP funded cemeteries. Also, it would allow the States to avoid charging eligible family members and maintain parity with National Cemeteries where family members are not charged burial fees. Currently, States are in a position where they have to charge the equivalent plot allowance or an established fee for the veteran's spouse or eligible family member. This fixes the inequity between the federal and state systems.

The Burial Equity for Guards and Reserves Act was incorporated as Division CC of Public Law 117-103 (The Consolidated Appropriations Act for FY2022). The VA Office of General Counsel determined that the law allows VCGP funded cemeteries to inter certain "non-veteran" individuals, however, it does not compel such interments. The consequence for States, Territories, and Tribal governments who elect to inter the a "non-veteran" is that they must bear the costs of the headstone or columbarium niche cover. Since VA will provide no plot allowance payments to help cover the cost of the interment. States will have to appropriate additional funds. Again, it creates an inequitable situation with the Veterans vs Non-Veterans who receive full memorial benefits interred in the same cemetery. Even though the numbers are small for those without federal active duty and thus qualify as "Veterans," it is desirable for State governments to provide the interment. The local appreciation and respect is strong for the National Guard and Reserve members who respond to natural disasters in the community. The average citizen is unaware of differences in eligibility and simply view them as military members worthy of the same memorial honors.

In summary, NASDVA strongly recommends the following in the FY2025 budget for the VCGP:

- Increase the **VCGP** funding from \$60M to **\$120M**.
- Support the annual Plot Allowance increase to **\$978**.
- Authorize **Plot Allowance** for eligible family members, as proposed in the President's budget.

Respectfully,

John Scocos

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