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**BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**“Our Nation’s Hallowed Grounds: Review of America’s National Cemetery Funeral
Operations for Veterans and Servicemembers”**

November 13, 2024

Good morning, Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. Accompanying me are Richard Chandler, NCA Deputy Under Secretary for Management and Robert Orifici, Executive Director for Benefits and Memorial Services, Office of Information and Technology (OIT). Throughout the 118th session, we appreciate the interest and engagements we have had with your staff and the Committee’s commitment to the Nation’s Veterans.

Since the enactment of the National Cemeteries Act in 1973, the dedicated staff of NCA have provided Veterans and their families with the benefits that they have earned and deserve with world-class customer service. Per our mission statement, NCA honors eligible Veterans, active duty Service members, and eligible family members with final resting places in national shrines and with lasting tributes that commemorate their service and sacrifice to the Nation. This truly is our Nation’s most hallowed ground. Each day, the men and women of NCA strive to fulfill this mission, and their efforts continue to be extraordinary. I am grateful and humbled by their efforts.

Last year, we recognized our 50th Anniversary, and in that half-century, NCA has become a model of exceptional customer service. In 2022, NCA matched our previous score of 97—the highest score ever measured by the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI)—and the 7th consecutive time NCA has been ranked 1st in customer satisfaction among the Nation’s top companies and Federal agencies. NCA’s own customer satisfaction survey, sent to nearly 40,000 next-of-kin and 12,500 funeral directors, supports ACSI’s numbers, with 99% of respondents agreeing that cemetery appearance was excellent; 97% agreeing the service was excellent; and 99% indicating they would recommend NCA to Veteran families in their time of need.

Today, I would like to provide you with a broad overview of our key programs. This includes our progress towards ensuring Veterans have reasonable access to a burial option within 75 miles of their home and our Veterans’ Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP). Additionally, I will provide insight into our goals for the future—from our

continued focus on ensuring access to burial and memorialization benefits for Veterans and families, increasing everyone's awareness of these benefits, and finally, our efforts to keep modernizing NCA.

Over the past half century, NCA has increased cemetery access for Veterans by expanding from 103 national cemeteries in 1973 to 155 national cemeteries today. Nearly 4.1 million Veterans, from the Revolutionary War to the present, are interred in national cemeteries. In total, there are 5.4 million Veterans and their family members buried within our hallowed grounds. Annually, we welcome more than 1.5 million visitors.

While every eligible Veteran may be interred at any one of VA's open national cemeteries and a significant majority of the 122 VA grant-funded Veterans cemeteries, VA realizes that close proximity to a cemetery is an important consideration for Veterans and family members in choosing a VA-funded cemetery for their final resting place. For this reason, NCA is committed to providing 95% of the Veteran population with access to burial in a national or state Veterans cemetery within 75 miles of the Veteran's place of residence. Currently, NCA provides a dignified burial option to more than 94% of Veterans within 75 miles of where they live in the United States. However, our goal is 95%, and we continue to examine where and how to expand to provide a burial option to the remaining unserved Veterans.

NCA follows a structured process for cemetery expansion and establishment. NCA Directive 3001, titled Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Establishment, Expansion, and Replacement, details those procedures.

This directive establishes the policy for determining the need to establish new national cemeteries, expand or replace existing national cemeteries, allow existing and depleting national cemeteries to close, or to reopen closed cemeteries. Additionally, it provides statutory references, establishes mandatory policy for the establishment, expansion, and replacement of VA national cemeteries, as well as detailed decision criteria for expanding, replacing, or closing an existing national cemetery.

In the last 10 years, we have embarked on the largest expansion of the national cemetery system since the Civil War. We opened 14 national cemeteries, including urban and rural cemeteries, planned under our fiscal year (FY) 2011 and 2013 establishment policies. On November 9, 2024, we dedicated a new urban cemetery—Saint Albans National Cemetery—and two new rural national cemeteries are projected to open in FY 2026. Together, these new cemeteries will provide approximately 16,500 new Veterans with reasonable burial access. In FY 2024, we added over 180,500 interment sites, which means that more Veterans and their families can continue to be served in their local communities. We are also in the final stages of land acquisition for an urban cemetery in Chicago, IL with a projected completion in FY 2026, and still another urban cemetery in California, in the San Francisco Bay area. is expected, pending an environmental analysis of the land. We estimate that by FY 2026, over 3.8

million Veterans and their families will be provided convenient access to our national cemeteries.

We could not meet our 95% target without our strong partnerships and collaboration with states, territories, and tribal organizations. In 1978, VA started providing grants to states and territories (including Guam, Saipan, and Puerto Rico) for the establishment, expansion, and improvement of Veteran cemeteries through VCGP. This authority was later expanded to allow for grants to tribal authorities. VCGP cemeteries are also subject to the same NCA Operational Standards and Measures as other national cemeteries, and an NCA review team assesses their performance and customer satisfaction.

Since the State of Maryland received the first grant for the Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery, VA has provided grants to support 122 cemeteries in 47 states and 3 territories. VCGP grant awards made in 2023 put the program over the \$1 billion mark. In FY 2024, VCGP obligated \$44,553,338, while making 14 grant awards to 11 states to expand or improve their cemeteries. To ensure this funding is used most effectively, we encourage states and tribal authorities to place VA grant-funded cemeteries in locations where Veterans otherwise do not have reasonable access to a burial option.

In addition to our VCGP partners, NCA continues to work closely with those groups that have a similar mission, including strong partnerships with the American Battle Monuments Commission, the Office of Army Cemeteries, and the National Park Service. Together, we provide a network of cemeteries that honor the service and sacrifice of the Nation's heroes.

Access to NCA benefits goes beyond burial in national cemeteries. We also provide memorial benefits such as headstones and markers, niche covers for columbaria, medallions, and Presidential Memorial Certificates for eligible Veterans and family members whether they are buried in a national cemetery or private cemetery. In the last 50 years, NCA has furnished more than 15 million headstones and markers world-wide to national, state, tribal, and private cemeteries and delivered 16 million Presidential Memorial Certificates to the loved ones of deceased Veterans.

It is not only our priority to focus on what we can provide, but to honor those to whom we provide burial and benefits. While VA's burial and memorialization benefits were originally available only to Veterans and active duty Service members, through the years, we are proud that eligibility now includes spouses and certain other family members, including some parents.

This past year, NCA also increased education and outreach to help raise more awareness of the burial and memorialization benefits it administers. VA partnered internally to develop integrated communications around a Veteran's journey toward the end of their life and has been speaking to non-profit organizations and other industry partners about the importance of planning ahead, especially through applying for NCA's

pre-need eligibility determination program. Talking about end-of-life planning is never easy, but it is essential. VA developed an End-of-Life public service announcement, created a new landing page website (www.va.gov/plan-ahead) with links to all our related benefits, and continues to share an integrated overview briefing for survivors and external stakeholders like those involved in hospice and palliative care.

NCA has offered pre-need eligibility determinations since 2016. Applying for this program means that Veterans or their loved one can find out now if they are eligible for burial in a national cemetery. This service helps family members and Veterans with end-of-life planning and understanding their burial benefits and is also consistent with private sector practices. More than 330,000 pre-need determinations have been completed to date, and because of our increased education and outreach, we saw a 47% increase in pre-need applications this past fiscal year—a record number.

We also want families to understand that these benefits are not only for the Veteran. The availability of burial and memorialization for spouses and certain family members can save families money and stress. Knowing that a Veteran and their spouse can be buried together in a national cemetery can bring a great deal of comfort to families.

We have undertaken a concerted effort to reach out to our tribal partners as well, to increase awareness and use of VA grant-funded cemeteries on tribal lands. NCA has been meeting with the leaders of the 14 tribes that have established Veterans Cemeteries to address challenges and potential solutions regarding use of their grant-funded cemeteries. As a result of these engagements, in October 2024, NCA changed the standards for assessment of these cemeteries, permitting unique cultural expressions at the gravesite, if the tribes desire. We believe this will increase utilization by tribal members.

Furthermore, NCA is preparing our cemeteries to meet the changing needs and preferences of Veterans and their families in the 21st Century. For example, by the end of 2024, we will begin piloting green burial sections at our Pikes Peak National Cemetery in Colorado Springs, Colorado; Sacramento Valley National Cemetery in Dixon, California; and Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell, Florida. Green burial is an environmentally sensitive burial alternative in which bodies are buried in biodegradable containers, such as a shroud or wicker and without the use of embalming chemicals. Additionally, NCA will accept for interment both cremated remains and non-embalmed casketed remains in biodegradable receptacles. We will apply the certain conditions to interments in the green burial sections and may alter these conditions to address emerging needs identified during the pilot.

Consistent with green burial practices, NCA will maintain the appearance of a green burial section in a manner that differs from other sections within our national cemeteries. Most notably, the green burial sections will have a natural appearance, using native plants and grass throughout the section, and the gravesites within those sections will have a unique marker that is complementary to the natural environment

within the section. Our green burial pilots will allow NCA to gather critical information to inform customer expectations and communications and define operational procedures for further implementation of green burial sections elsewhere in the system.

Establishing green burials is just one example of how NCA continues to look for ways to improve the accountability of our internal processes and the services we deliver to our customers. NCA routinely uses geographic information system (GIS), global positioning satellite (GPS) integration, the Burial Operations Support System (BOSS), and the Memorial Benefits Management System (MBMS) which, when combined, provides a verification and review process for all interment, burial marker, and associated recordkeeping activities. This greatly improves NCA's ability to permanently and perpetually account for all interred remains. NCA's GIS/GPS program supports several key priorities, including modernizing systems, focusing internal resources more efficiently, and maintaining the trust of Veterans and stakeholders.

Another key priority is our transition to MBMS, which represents a significant modernization in delivering memorial benefits to Veterans and their families. NCA and OIT collaboratively designed MBMS to replace legacy BOSS with the goal of streamlining eligibility determinations and scheduling for burials at national cemeteries. By modernizing operational processes and improving data collection, MBMS improves the claims process for Veterans and facilitates easier access to their earned benefits.

A key advantage of MBMS is its focus on reducing administrative burdens often associated with memorial benefits claim processes. The MBMS platform implements automated workflows for scheduling and eligibility determinations. Over the last 3 years, establishing cases has shifted significantly from legacy BOSS to MBMS. In FY 2021, 31% of cases were established in MBMS, and in FY 2024, usage increased to over 93% of cases being established in MBMS. The greater efficiencies in MBMS ensure that Veterans and their families receive more timely and accurate support during critical times.

The BOSS Enterprise, of which legacy BOSS is a component, is expected to be decommissioned by FY 2028, integrating all operations into the MBMS platform. This integration will establish a consolidated, unified system for streamlined Veteran memorial benefit delivery. Continued MBMS development and optimization will ensure all Veterans and their families can navigate the memorial benefits process with ease and confidence.

Another of our innovations is the online Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) website. Launched in 2019, VLM's website is the Nation's first digital platform dedicated entirely to the memory of Veterans. The site is fully interactive, and users can submit tributes (comments), images, biographies, word clouds, milestones, and historical documents. User engagement with VLM is increasing, and in FY 2024, 5,055,198 VLM pages were created. NCA moderators review all submissions to ensure content appropriately honors Veterans.

In 2023, VLM was expanded to include over 5 million records from Veterans interred in private cemeteries, 26 Department of Defense-managed cemeteries including portions of Arlington National Cemetery and 16 Army post cemeteries, 5 Navy cemeteries and 4 Air Force cemeteries. In total, VLM includes almost 10 million pages for Veterans.

We continue to explore options for improving the VLM user experience and seek additional opportunities to search for Veterans and make the content submission process easier. In the future, we plan to further expand VLM to include pages for living Veterans who are found eligible for burial and memorial benefits through the pre-need determination process. These Veterans will be able to upload content for their own pages in advance of their time of need.

In addition to individual Veteran memorial pages, the Veterans Legacy Grant Program (VLGP) provides grant funding to conduct cemetery research and produce educational tools that encourage students, teachers, and members of the public to immerse themselves in the rich historical resources of our Veterans cemeteries and secure the legacy of Veterans interred there. We proudly note that many of the students conducting research using VLGP grant funds, and the Veterans they researched, came from underrepresented communities, including Hispanic, Native American, African American, and Asian American communities, as well as rural communities and women in the military. When possible, we link this content into existing VLM pages and share these amazing stories with the public.

NCA continues to explore the application of technology and the potential for automation. Over the past year, we have partnered with the Veterans Benefits Administration to leverage existing technology to review and approve complete pre-need applications within hours of receipt for Veterans with certain previously established VA benefits that qualify them for burial in a national cemetery. This automation, along with previous staffing and process improvements, allows NCA to adjudicate even manually reviewed applications in a matter of days, compared to several weeks just a few years ago. We continue to look at improving this process and will be exporting this solution to other NCA benefits, such as Presidential Memorial Certificates and applications for headstones, markers, and medallions later this year.

Hundreds of thousands of Veterans and their families choose VA and NCA burial and memorialization benefits every year. As the estimated percentage of Veterans and their families who have chosen NCA for interment in a national or state grant-funded cemetery or for a Government furnished headstone, marker, or medallion continues to grow, I believe that all Veterans should, and more Veterans will, choose NCA for their end-of-life needs. I am committed to sharing our message to increase this utilization.

VA appreciates Congress' support and especially the Members of this Committee to ensure that NCA can continue providing world-class service to Veterans, Service members, and their survivors in a caring and compassionate manner that honors their

service. I want to express my personal appreciation for your continued support of our Veterans, their families, and survivors.

I also want to acknowledge our Veterans Service Organization partners, who do so much to advocate on behalf of Veterans and survivors, as well as other stakeholders, such as funeral directors and State Departments of Veterans' Affairs, who work with us to execute our noble mission.

Conclusion

Chairman Luttrell and Ranking Member Pappas, this concludes my testimony. I am happy to respond to any questions you or the Subcommittee may have.