



Informs ■ Educates ■ Advocates

TESTIMONY
OF THE
NATIONAL FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION

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

June 25, 2026

Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member McGarvey, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of legislation that addresses three practical end-of-life challenges for veterans and their families: identifying unclaimed veterans, ensuring meaningful access to national cemetery burial in Hawai'i, and assisting the organizations that carry out this work in communities across the country. I am Lesley Witter, Senior Vice President of Advocacy for the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), representing nearly 20,000 licensed funeral directors and embalmers nationwide who see firsthand how public policy affects veterans and their families.

Funeral directors serve families in every community at one of life's most difficult moments. They coordinate funeral and burial services, assist with benefit claims, help secure military honors and grave markers, and work with the Department of Veterans Affairs, veterans' service organizations, and the Department of Defense to help ensure veterans receive the dignity, recognition and final honors they earned through service.

Funeral professionals work directly with veterans' families, public agencies, and community partners, giving them a practical understanding of where existing systems work well, where barriers remain, and where targeted legislative action can make a meaningful difference. For that reason, NFDA supports the *Locating Our Unclaimed Veterans Act*, the *Hawai'i National Cemetery Act*, and the *Unclaimed Veterans' Legacy Grant Program Act*. These bills address different challenges, but they are united by a common principle: no veteran should be forgotten, no family should be denied meaningful access to earned benefits, and every veteran deserves a dignified final resting place.

NFDA supports these bills because they address three connected challenges facing veterans and their families at the end of life:

- **H.R. 9006, the Locating Our Unclaimed Veterans Act** – improves identification of unclaimed veterans and helps locate next of kin.
- **H.R. 6921, the Hawai'i National Cemetery Act** – expands long-term access to national cemetery burial options for veterans and eligible family members in Hawai'i.
- **H.R. 9321, the Unclaimed Veterans' Legacy Grant Program Act** – assists organizations that conduct the research, outreach, and coordination necessary to honor unclaimed veterans.

Together, these bills improve identification, access, and community capacity, helping ensure veterans receive the dignity, recognition, and burial benefits earned through service.

NFDA SUPPORT FOR H.R. 9006, THE LOCATING OUR UNCLAIMED VETERANS ACT:

The first step in honoring a veteran is knowing who they are and, whenever possible, locating the family members who should be part of final arrangements. NFDA strongly supports the *Locating Our Unclaimed Veterans Act* because it would improve the systems needed to identify unclaimed remains, verify military service, and locate next of kin.

When a veteran's remains are unclaimed or unidentified, funeral directors are often among the first professionals involved. Prompt coordination is critical to verify military service, locate next of kin, and ensure the veteran receives appropriate recognition and a respectful final resting place. Coordination remains equally important when remains have gone unclaimed for an extended period, as opportunities to identify and honor that veteran can become more difficult over time.

Without a centralized system, efforts to identify remains and locate next of kin can be delayed or incomplete. This legislation would establish a centralized Department of Veterans Affairs system to receive, store, and evaluate information related to unclaimed remains. That approach reflects how these cases arise in practice: coroners, state agencies, and funeral homes often hold separate pieces of information that, when coordinated, can help identify veterans and notify families in a timely manner. For families, timeliness can determine whether they are able to participate in final arrangements, receive closure, and ensure a loved one's service is properly recognized.

Funeral directors and funeral homes frequently donate services for unclaimed veterans. In many communities, providers collaborate to hold public services, and state funeral directors associations help organize larger ceremonies to honor multiple veterans at once. These efforts reflect a deep professional commitment to making sure veterans are remembered, even when no family is present to claim the remains.

As NFDA President Daniel J. Ford, CFSP, CCSP, of Alderson-Ford Funeral Home in Cheshire, Connecticut, has observed:

“Standing beside the remains of an unclaimed veteran is a powerful reminder that our obligation to those who served does not end when their military service ends. Even when no family is present, funeral directors are honored to help ensure these heroes are not forgotten. In that moment, we become the family that stands with them and says, ‘Your service mattered, and you will not be forgotten.’”

This commitment is reflected in communities across the country. Since 2008, funeral directors in Connecticut have worked with veterans' organizations and state agencies to

locate, verify, and honor veterans whose remains might otherwise go unidentified or unclaimed.

In October 2024, the Connecticut Funeral Directors Association partnered with the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs to conduct a military honors ceremony for three Army veterans whose cremated remains had gone unclaimed for years. After identifying the veterans and making efforts to locate surviving family members, funeral directors helped ensure they received full military honors and burial at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown, CT.

By improving identification efforts and helping locate families, the *Locating Our Unclaimed Veterans Act* would strengthen the first and most essential step in honoring unclaimed veterans. NFDA respectfully urges passage of this legislation.

Once a veteran is identified and service is verified, the next question is whether the family can realistically use the burial benefits that service earned.

NFDA SUPPORT FOR H.R. 6921, THE HAWAI'I NATIONAL CEMETERY ACT:

NFDA supports the *Hawai'i National Cemetery Act* because it addresses a practical and significant gap in access to national cemetery burial options for veterans and eligible family members in Hawai'i.

For funeral directors, burial access is not an abstract policy issue. It directly affects the options available to families at the time arrangements must be made. While Hawai'i is served by the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (the Punchbowl) and state veterans cemeteries, access to a national cemetery option for future interments is increasingly limited. The Punchbowl, though a revered and historic site, is nearing capacity for traditional in-ground burials due to its limited size and steep volcanic terrain. Hawai'i's geographic isolation makes this challenge fundamentally different from most states, where multiple veterans cemetery options may be accessible within a reasonable distance.

Establishing a second national cemetery in Hawai'i would provide a practical, long-term solution by expanding burial capacity for Hawai'i's growing veteran population and preserving access to in-ground burial options for future generations.

A new cemetery would also improve geographic access across the islands by reducing travel burdens and costs that can limit participation in burial and memorial services. At the same time, it would help preserve the long-term integrity of the Punchbowl by relieving pressure on a site whose historic significance and physical constraints make expansion difficult. Data from NFDA's 2024 survey underscores these challenges:

NFDA 2024 Survey Finding	Result
Families responsible for transportation costs beyond VA burial benefit	81.1%
Distance prevented burial in a veterans cemetery	46.3%

Taken together, these findings show that geography and access barriers can directly influence burial decisions, even when families prefer a veterans cemetery.

Respondents also noted:

- “Families in our area are put off by the distance that they’d have to travel, not only for the actual funeral, but for visiting in the future.”
- “It is difficult for families that can’t afford burial, and the cemetery is too far of a distance for reasonable visits.”

For families making funeral arrangements, geography is not a technical issue; it can determine whether relatives can attend a service, visit a gravesite, or choose the burial option they believe best honors their loved one.

Ensuring continued access to national cemetery burial in Hawai‘i would reduce avoidable hardship and help families fully use a benefit earned through military service, regardless of where they live in the state.

NFDA believes the *Hawai‘i National Cemetery Act* is a measured and necessary response to Hawai‘i’s unique access and capacity challenges, and respectfully urges its passage.

NFDA SUPPORT FOR H.R. 9321, THE UNCLAIMED VETERANS’ LEGACY GRANT PROGRAM ACT:

Access to burial benefits is only meaningful when communities have the resources and partnerships necessary to help families navigate the process. Even after a veteran is identified and eligible benefits are available, substantial work remains to verify records, locate family members, coordinate services, and ensure appropriate final disposition. NFDA strongly supports the *Unclaimed Veterans’ Legacy Grant Program Act* because it would strengthen the organizations that perform this essential work and help ensure veterans receive the dignity and recognition they earned through service.

This bill complements the *Locating Our Unclaimed Veterans Act*. One improves coordination and information systems; the other strengthens the on-the-ground capacity needed to turn information into action.

Unclaimed veteran cases often require months of record review, service verification, next-of-kin searches, and coordination among funeral homes, veterans' organizations, educational institutions, public officials, and government agencies. These efforts are frequently undertaken with limited resources despite the significant public benefit they provide. Expanding grant eligibility would help strengthen this work and increase the likelihood that veterans are identified and honored in a timely manner.

NFDA Treasurer Bobby Steven Spann, CFSP, COO, who also serves as President of John A. Gupton Mortuary College in Nashville, Tennessee, shared that for more than 30 years the College has provided services for unclaimed veterans in Middle Tennessee. Through agreements with VA hospitals in Nashville and Murfreesboro, the College provides complete services using the available basic burial allowance.

These services include removal, embalming, clothing, a metal casket, and military honors at a veterans cemetery. The College also maintains a veterans closet with donated suits and assists with final arrangements for approximately 10 to 20 veterans each year.

The work performed by funeral service professionals is often complemented by community organizations, veterans' groups, educational institutions, and public officials who share a commitment to honoring unclaimed veterans. NFDA also appreciates Representative Nunn for his military service and leadership in honoring unclaimed veterans in Iowa, including support for local initiatives such as The Final Salute in Des Moines that help ensure unclaimed veterans and their spouses receive dignity and recognition. Data from NFDA's 2024 survey illustrates the scope of this issue:

NFDA 2024 Survey Finding	Result
Funeral homes that provided services for unclaimed veterans within the past five years	42.4%
Respondents identifying state veterans affairs offices as their first point of contact	49.1%

These findings underscore that funeral homes are frequently on the front lines of unclaimed veteran cases, often without consistent guidance or coordinated support.

Respondents also shared:

- “We always try to bury in either a state or national cemetery. We place the veteran in a typical military style casket, arrange for military honors, and invite the public to join us.”

- “One veteran we cremated and transported to the veterans cemetery with no local or state funding. We donated our services in their entirety.”

These examples show why grants matter: honoring unclaimed veterans often depends on people and organizations contributing time, resources, and expertise beyond what is required or reimbursed.

The *Unclaimed Veterans’ Legacy Grant Program Act* recognizes a straightforward reality: this work requires coordination, resources, and partnership. NFDA respectfully urges passage of this bill.

HOW THE BILLS WORK TOGETHER:

Although these bills address different issues, they operate as complementary parts of the same process.

Challenge	Legislative Solution	Outcome
Unclaimed veterans are not always identified and families may be difficult to locate.	H.R. 9006 , the Locating Our Unclaimed Veterans Act	Improves identification, verification of service, and next-of-kin notification.
Families in Hawai’i face increasing barriers to accessing national cemetery burial options.	H.R. 9621 , the Hawai’i National Cemetery Act	Expands long-term burial capacity and access to earned benefits.
Community organizations often lack resources to complete veteran identification and burial efforts.	H.R. 9321 , the Unclaimed Veterans’ Legacy Grant Program Act	Provides support for research, outreach, coordination, and final disposition efforts.

Taken together, these measures strengthen the full continuum of care by improving identification, expanding access, and supporting the organizations that help ensure veterans receive the honor and recognition they earned through service.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS:

NFDA acknowledges the Department of Veterans Affairs for its continued efforts to improve end-of-life education and outreach. The National Cemetery Administration,

Veterans Benefits Administration, and Veterans Health Administration continue to work with NFDA and the funeral service profession to improve awareness of burial and memorial benefits, strengthen end-of-life planning, and ensure veterans and their families receive timely and accurate information.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member McGarvey, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your leadership and continued commitment to our nation's veterans and their families.

The legislation before the Subcommittee addresses important but often overlooked challenges at the end of life. Together, these measures would strengthen efforts to identify unclaimed veterans, expand access to national cemetery burial options, connect families with earned benefits, and support the organizations working to ensure dignified final disposition for those who served our country.

Funeral directors see these issues every day: the relief when remains are identified, the gratitude when military honors are rendered, the hardship when geography limits burial options, and the dedication of professionals and volunteers who ensure that no veteran is forgotten.

Our obligation to those who served does not end with military service. These bills reaffirm a simple promise: every veteran should be identified when possible, every family should have meaningful access to earned benefits, and no veteran's service should go unrecognized.

NFDA respectfully urges the Subcommittee to advance all three bills to the full Committee and recommends favorable consideration by Congress.

On behalf of NFDA and funeral directors and embalmers across the country, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. NFDA remains committed to supporting policies that ensure veterans receive the honor, dignity, and recognition earned through service.

I welcome any questions the Subcommittee may have.