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June 30, 2026

TO: House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability and Memorial Affairs

SUBJECT: Memorializing our Veterans: Outreach, Upkeep, and Community Partnerships at Veterans Cemeteries

WRITTEN TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY: Shane LaGrone, Director, Cemetery Division, Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs

Thank you to Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member McGarvey, and the honorable Members of this Subcommittee for inviting me as a witness at today's hearing. It is an honor to be here. I look forward to sharing my perspective on these important issues and answering any questions you may have.

I spent 16 years in the U.S. Air Force and 14 years in the Kentucky Air National Guard as an Explosive Ordnance Disposal technician. I retired from the Air Force after 30 years of service in 2022. Shortly after retirement I was hired as the Cemetery Director for one of our State Veteran Cemeteries, and last year I was promoted to serve as the Director of the Cemetery Division of the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs (KDVA). As the Director of the Cemetery Division, I oversee our five State Veteran Cemeteries, including their budgets and procedures. I am responsible for the cemetery programs that work with the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) for compliance and with the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) for cemetery expansion.

Kentucky has five State Veterans Cemeteries, and the first interment was performed on March 1, 2004. Our other four cemeteries opened in 2007, 2008, 2010, and 2018. As of June 1, 2026, there are 24,592 veterans and dependents interred at our State Veteran Cemeteries.

The VCGP, which is administered by the NCA of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, is an excellent example of an outstanding federal/state partnership that has benefitted Kentucky State Veteran Cemeteries. Our cemeteries have received 12 federal grants from VCGP since 2002, totaling \$43.8 million. Each of Kentucky's five state cemeteries received grant funding for initial construction. In just the past four years, Kentucky has had three expansion grants for approximately \$3 million to build new Columbarium walls for cremains and pre-placed outer burial containers for casketed interments at our two oldest and busiest cemeteries.

The Commonwealth of Kentucky also has a great relationship with the NCA. We follow their guidelines, rules, and regulations because it requires all veteran cemeteries to meet the same high standards, which is what our veterans deserve. This year the NCA supported State and Tribal veteran cemeteries in holding in-person and virtual meetings, organized by the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA), to discuss common issues and help find resolutions to our

common problems. This has allowed us to collaborate with the NCA on more focused topics, and the NCA has already addressed several of our issues in the first year.

On January 1 of this year, Kentucky successfully implemented the Burial Equity for Guards and Reserves Act. Over the first five months, we have interred 10 Guard/Reserve veterans and 1 dependent. Thanks to the increased collaboration that NCA has facilitated between State and Tribal veteran cemeteries, we were able to consult with our State and Tribal counterparts who had already implemented this program. This helped us eliminate problems before they arose. We were able to find headstone vendors, use shared eligibility criteria, and establish Standard Operating Procedures in a timely manner and with confidence.

While I believe the NCA and VCGP are working well and serve as a valuable partnership for State and Tribal veteran cemeteries, I have some recommendations regarding the VCGP. There are 125 grant-funded State and Tribal veteran cemeteries across the country. Funding to help expand and extend the life of these cemeteries is urgently needed. Over the past 10 years, our cremains interments at Kentucky State Veteran Cemeteries have increased from 30% to over 40% of our interments, which has caused our columbarium walls to fill up faster than planned.

As cemeteries expand, we need more infrastructure to ensure we can maintain the National Shrine standard. Until recently, federal appropriations have limited this type of expansion, as more expansion projects result in higher infrastructure costs for cemeteries. For example, our next grant request for Kentucky Veteran Cemetery Central in Hardin County, Kentucky, will include increased infrastructure expansion costs for the first time.

Congress's recent increase of annual funding for VCGP, from \$50 million to \$150 million, has been very encouraging. I recommend that Congress maintain this funding in upcoming FY27 appropriations. This increased funding is essential to allow for more infrastructure expansion projects and to address the backlog of requests that many State and Tribal veteran cemeteries have, allowing us to advance vital projects that honor our veterans.

I would like to note that while State and Tribal veteran cemeteries are very thankful for Congress's increase of VCGP funding, it has taken time for cemeteries to adjust to this increased funding to ensure they are able to spend it within the required timeframe. In some cases, this adjustment period may give the impression that the \$150 million for VCGP is too high, or that State and Tribal cemeteries don't need this funding. I can assure you this is not the case.

In fact, the increase in VCGP funding this year surprised many State and Tribal veteran cemeteries. Getting this initial funding through the states takes time, even though we know it will be reimbursed through the VCGP. Engineers and contractors need time to submit estimates, and the build phase of projects takes time to plan. Several states have made and will make the push to complete this year's projects, and we will be even more prepared to receive this funding in the coming fiscal year.

Outside of VCGP funding, State and Tribal veteran cemeteries agree that the financial support we receive from burial plot allowances is essential for helping to offset maintenance costs and uphold the perpetual care of the cemetery. However, a downside of the burial plot allowance is that it only pays the cemetery for the veteran, not their dependents. I recommend that Congress consider reforms to ensure that veterans' dependents are included in the burial plot allowance.

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We are very grateful for Congress's support of State and Tribal veteran cemeteries, including Congress's increase in VCGP funding this year, and we want to thank the Members of this subcommittee for your important work on these issues and for your commitment to honoring our veterans. I want to give a special thank you to Chairman Luttrell and Ranking Member McGarvey for inviting me to participate in this hearing. Thank you for recognizing the importance of supporting our veterans and advocating for the memorials and cemeteries that are here in their honor. Without your support and dedication, we would not be able to honor our veterans the way they deserve.

We are also thankful for our partnership with the NCA and the VCGP, and we appreciate their understanding that State and Tribal veteran cemeteries play a critical role in honoring our veterans and connecting veterans to our local communities.

Thank you again for allowing me the honor to serve as a witness for this hearing. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.