

**HONORING AMERICA'S FALLEN HEROES: AN  
UPDATE ON OUR NATIONAL CEMETERIES**

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**HEARING**  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE  
AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS  
OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
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## **HONORING AMERICA'S FALLEN HEROES: AN UPDATE ON OUR NATIONAL CEMETERIES**

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**Thursday, March 8, 2012**

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE  
AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, D.C.*

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 1:36 p.m., in Room 340, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Jon Runyan [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Runyan, Stutzman, Turner and McNerney.

### **OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN JON RUNYAN**

Mr. RUNYAN. Good afternoon and welcome, everyone. This oversight hearing of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs will now come to order.

We are here today to examine the current state of our final resting place for our Nation's fallen heroes. These cemeteries and monuments span across our country and the entire world, from my own district in New Jersey with the Beverly National Cemetery; across the Atlantic to Normandy, France; and across the Pacific with Clark Veterans Cemetery in the Philippines. Some of these cemeteries instantly bring to mind the triumph of courage in conflicts fought around the globe for liberty and freedom. Others hold memories of bravery only known to God and to those who died on the field of battle. Yet each of these national shrines have this in common: They are all honored tributes to our service men and women who are now resting in peace.

I would like to welcome our witnesses today who oversee our fallen heroes in these many sites, wherever they may rest now. Under Secretary Muro is here on behalf of the National Cemetery Administration, which oversees 131 national cemeteries nationwide. Ms. Kathryn Condon is here representing the Army National Cemeteries Program, which includes perhaps the most recognizable site of our honored fallen in Arlington National Cemetery. Finally, Deputy Secretary Wollman represents the American Battle Monuments Commission, whose mission is to serve our country's fallen heroes and missing in action where they have served overseas.

I would note that the National Park Service was also invited, but has neglected to attend this hearing, to my disappointment and to the certain regret of the families who they serve. It is my hope that they have corrected the problems in the administration and upkeep

of their cemeteries that this Subcommittee uncovered in the last Congress.

This aside, I would like to begin the substance of this hearing on a positive note. I believe that every person in this room agrees we have a solemn obligation to cherish our veterans memory and heroic actions by holding ourselves and our organizations to the highest standards. I also believe that everybody here is as passionate as I am about our mutual duty in honoring our fallen heroes as best as we know how with all the resources we can muster.

Overall I believe every organization represented here does a great service to our Nation's service men and women and their loved ones. With that said, over the last several months, numerous problems have surfaced across our Nation's cemeteries, and they have not been isolated events or confined to one agency or another. From Arlington to Fort Sam Houston to Dover and beyond, the tragedies and missteps have continued to mount month after month. Most recently a series of audits conducted by NCA have revealed to date that there are over 240 mismarked or unmarked graves and 8 veterans or loved ones buried in the wrong place. Again, this was not a failing of just one national cemetery, but 13 NCA cemeteries nationwide.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a pattern here, and I find it totally unacceptable. And we have a duty to ensure to our Nation's veterans and their families, that these problems will be repaired and never occur again. Granted, most of these misfortunes originated many years ago, and in many cases decades ago. Only recently were most of these problems identified. And I am pleased to see solid progress being made to mend the harms across this Nation so that our fallen service men and women can finally rest in peace; however, this is no excuse for the problems that remain. Therefore, it is important to recognize that over the last several months, we have set a new standard of excellence for ourselves. It is one which recognizes just as our fallen service men and women once fought for our liberties, we must be diligent in fighting to ensure that our fallen heroes remain at peace, and that no family will ever have to suffer a second burial.

I am eager to hear the further progress that has been made in these regards and what actions are being taken to ensure that these same issues never resurface at any of our national cemeteries. Furthermore, I am looking forward to hearing the advancements with respect to ensuring greater accessibility to veterans burial options, as well as the measured progress outlined in the National Shrine Commitment.

I would now like to call on the Ranking Member for his opening statement. Mr. McNerney.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. RUNYAN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

#### **OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JERRY MCNERNEY**

Mr. MCNERNEY. Well, I would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for today's hearing entitled "Honoring America's Fallen Heroes: An Update on our National Cemeteries." One hundred fifty years ago, in 1862, President Abraham Lincoln created a National Veterans Cemetery System and dedicated it for the soldiers who shall die in

the service of this country. President Lincoln's words and our steadfast appreciations are as important today as they were during the Revolution and Civil Wars. Ensuring a proper burial for our fallen heroes is a solemn obligation.

This hearing follows up on a September 24, 2009, hearing in which the Subcommittee examined the VA cemeteries' policies and operations, as well as those of other cemeteries under our jurisdiction, primarily Arlington National Cemetery and the American Battle Monuments Commission. This Subcommittee conducts oversight over these systems to ensure that all eligible veterans are served by an optimal burial option with the highest quality possible as their final place of repose.

I want to recognize former Chairman Bob Filner's efforts to direct the NCA to change its requirements for establishing a national cemetery from a 170,000 veterans and 75-mile radius to 80,000 veterans in a 75-mile radius. With this change, the NCA met the burial needs of 89 percent of the total veteran population in the fiscal year 2011.

I appreciate the VA's decision, outlined in President Obama's fiscal year 2013 budget, to change service area guidelines to better accommodate the needs of rural and urban veterans. These changes will increase the number of veterans served by a federally implicated burial option.

Despite the progress we made in the previous Congress, we can and must do better, particularly as it pertains to wait times for burials and quality control at NCA facilities. I think we are all aware of the numerous errors related to the VA contractor-executed raise-and-realign project revealed after the VA's audit of 93 of the 131 cemeteries. As I have said in this Subcommittee before, mistakes like these are unacceptable. They are as avoidable as they are awful. They rob us of time that could otherwise be spent ensuring that our Nation's heroes are properly laid to rest. More importantly, these mistakes rob family and friends of peace of mind they deserve. I hope to hear a positive update from the NCA on the resolution of these errors and prevention efforts moving forward.

Further, the value of the current \$300 burial allowance and \$300 plot allowance for qualifying veterans has diminished as the funeral costs and burial costs have increased. This negatively affects the survivors left behind.

Additionally, the National Shrine Mandate holds that all national and other veterans cemeteries under the control of the NCA shall be considered national shrines. The NCA's ability to meet and maintain the National Shrine Mandate will require adoption of the highest-quality standards and insurance measures.

I applaud the Independent Budget's thorough assessment of the NCA, highlighting current shortcomings and the need for targeted funding. In that vein I believe the VA should conduct preemptive review of the NCA's obstacles in meeting the National Shrine Mandate and its other commitments. This will help toward new issues that may arise and ensure that existing ones do not grow in complexity as we have recently witnessed.

Finally, I look forward to hearing an update from Ms. Kathryn Condon on the progress that is being made with recordkeeping, contracting, and other issues at the Arlington National Cemetery.

I appreciate your vigilant oversight of Arlington, an unparalleled national treasure that serves a very unique tradition. More needs to be done, but you have made tremendous progress.

I also look forward to hearing from all of our esteemed witnesses. I welcome the opportunity to continue working with you to maintain our final commitment to those who gave so much to our country. I yield back.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. MCNERNEY APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. I thank the gentleman.

And at this time I would like to welcome our first witnesses. We have the Honorable Steve Muro, the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs for the National Cemetery Administration. Welcome.

Mr. MURO. Thank you.

Mr. RUNYAN. Next we have Ms. Kathryn Condon, the Executive Director of the Army National Cemeteries Program. And finally, we will hear from the Honorable Raymond Wollman, the Deputy Secretary for the American Battle Monuments Commission.

Secretary Muro, your complete written statement will be entered into the hearing record, and you are now recognized for 5 minutes for your oral statement.

**STATEMENTS OF STEVEN MURO, UNDER SECRETARY, NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; KATHRYN CONDON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ARMY NATIONAL CEMETERIES PROGRAM, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE; AND RAYMOND WOLLMAN, DEPUTY SECRETARY, AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION**

**STATEMENT OF HON. STEVEN MURO**

Mr. MURO. Thank you, Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member McNerney, and members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to update you today on VA national cemeteries. I am pleased to be here this afternoon with representatives of veterans service organizations, the Survivors Program, funeral industry, along with my colleagues from Arlington National Cemetery and American Battle Monuments Commission.

Today we honor the fallen from the past and present conflicts, and we commemorate the service and sacrifice of all the veterans, their families, and their survivors. We collaborate frequently and effectively. For example, representatives from ABMC, National Park Service, and Arlington National Cemetery are ex officio members of the congressionally mandated Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials. We share best practices and operational standards.

NCA recently provided technical assistance during DoD's internal review of service academy cemeteries, and we funded a Park Service study to identify best cleaning procedures for government-furnished headstones. For nearly 50 years we have worked closely with ABMC to the honor the Honolulu Memorial at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii.

We are constantly working with the Park Service and their experts on historical preservation for our cemeteries, features, and



monuments such as the cenotaphs at the Congressional Cemetery here in Washington, D.C., and on our 56 lodges.

We welcome Arlington, Park Service, and the State employees to our annual conference and to our national training center in St. Louis. We continue to strive to find new ways to work together to honor our veterans, and soon we will formalize our efforts through the joint NCA-Arlington Working Group.

Today NCA manages 131 national cemeteries, 33 soldier lots and plots and monuments. About 100 of these properties date back to the Civil War, and serve as reminders of the Nation's enduring commitment to care for him who shall have borne the battle.

We are leading the largest expansions of national cemeteries since the Civil War. We have built 18 new national cemeteries since 1992, and we are now acquiring land for 5 new more. We are also moving forward with an initiative designed to meet the needs of veterans in highly rural and urban areas, and we will continue to fund construction of State and tribal veterans cemeteries. Today these efforts move us closer to our target of providing nearly 95 percent of the veterans with a burial option within 75 miles of their residence by 2015.

The sound planning practices and your unwavering commitment to access to convenient burial for our veterans has increased from 75 percent of the veterans with a burial option in 2004 to 89 percent in 2011. Our 2013 budget request enables us to reach 90 percent next year.

Also, our fiscal year 2013 budget seeks \$258 million for operation and maintenance funds needed to maintain cemeteries as national shrines, meeting the increasing demand for benefits and services, and provides our outstanding customer service that NCA is known for.

In partnership with VA's Office of Information and Technology, we are strengthening the automated system that supports our day-to-day cemetery administration. Our VA 2013 budget request includes funding in IT that is crucial to our continued success.

For example, our Burial Operations Support System, known as BOSS, is used by State, tribal, Army and Park Service in addition to our cemeteries. At present the system contains about 10 million records and is essential to accountability. We use it to manage our burial cases, schedule interments, maintain gravesite information, track orders of headstones, and compile reports. Our nationwide grave locator, now available on mobile devices, also relies on this system. The BOSS system remains vital to ensuring that veterans and their families receive the benefits they have earned through their service and sacrifice.

I appreciate the Subcommittee's continued interest in improving access and accountability at the national cemeteries, and am ready to take your questions. Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. MURO APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX ]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Under Secretary Muro, for your comments.

And Ms. Condon, you are now recognized for your opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF KATHRYN CONDON**

Ms. CONDON. Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member McNerney, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you once again to talk about the progress at Arlington National Cemetery.

Since our last meeting, we have made rapid, state-of-the-art, sustainable progress across all aspects of the cemetery, from the sound fiscal stewardship to our campaign plan, which codifies in one strategic document the long-term vision for the operation and the expansion of Arlington. No longer is Arlington a paper-based operation. On this upcoming Monday, March 12, we will launch our internal geospatial application system for managing the cemetery. By producing a single electronic map of Arlington, the staff will assign, manage, and track gravesites with an authoritative digital map, a first for the cemetery. It will allow us to synchronize in real time our burial operations at Arlington, a great difference from 21 months ago when we were copying 60 copies of manual documents and distributing them to our stakeholders, and assignments were made by pencil on paper maps.

Arlington is the first national cemetery to use geospatial technology for our day-to-day operations. Our geospatial operation will be linked to the accountability database that we reported on in December to this Congress.

We have validated 84 percent of all markers in the cemetery, and are working diligently to validate the remaining 16 percent. We have also started the validation of the 14,000 markers that we have at the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home. And we will use—all future interments will use the same accountability that we have devised from the Accountability Task Force.

This summer we will introduce and release our public-facing GIS applications that will allow the public to locate gravesites or other locations in the cemetery, generate front and back pictures of each and every marker, and receive directions to their loved one's gravesite. These applications will operate across common Web browsers, mobile smart phones, and kiosks, and all will be able to access Arlington either via our state-of-the-art Web site or our advanced technological applications.

We have been partnering with the National Cemeteries Administration of the VA. By sharing lessons learned and best practices, all veterans will benefit. We have sent a number of our personnel to the VA training center in St. Louis, and, conversely, we have hosted representatives from the VA to demonstrate our advanced geospatial capabilities and discuss our information technology experiences, from our public-facing applications, to our digital mapping, to our Internet-accessible headstone designer tool.

The Arlington National Cemetery Advisory Commission, under the Chairmanship of Mr. Max Cleland, is holding their second meeting as we speak. They are at the cemetery right now. And the Commission will provide recommendations on how best to extend the burial life of Arlington, to address the crack in the Tomb of the Unknowns, and to capture and convey Arlington's history, including the long-term implications of the Section 60 memento program, and improving the experience for all who visit the cemetery.

In conclusion, since my last report to this Congress, I believe that Arlington has made monumental changes and achieved great progress, but we still have a lot of work left to do. But the superintendent, Pat Hallinan, myself, and the entire cemetery are all dedicated to the mission of honoring our veterans and their loved ones.

I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Members, and especially the staff of this Committee, for your support and leadership to me personally the last 21 months, and I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MS. CONDON APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Ms. Condon.

Deputy Secretary Wollman, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

#### **STATEMENT OF HON. RAYMOND WOLLMAN**

Mr. WOLLMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the cemeteries administered by the American Battle Monuments Commission.

Our Secretary, Max Cleland, asked me to convey his regrets that he could not attend this afternoon's hearing. He is chairing a meeting of the Arlington Cemetery Advisory Commission across the river.

As we reported to you previously, honoring our Nation's fallen has been our purpose since the Commission's creation in 1923. We maintain 24 cemeteries and 25 memorials, monuments, and markers around the world. Most of our commemorative sites are in Europe. Others are in North Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific.

But it is not geography that defines the American Battle Monuments Commission, it is purpose. ABMC's core mission is commemoration, honoring service and sacrifice by maintaining memorials and shrines to our Nation's war dead and preserving their stories. We execute that mission by striving to maintain our commemorative sites to a high standard, and by providing historical context for why our overseas monuments and cemeteries were established, why those memorialized within them died, and the values for which they died. Those whom we honor deserve nothing less.

Our maintenance standard is "like new." Most of our sites are 52 to 98 years old, with Mexico City National Cemetery being nearly 161 years old. Maintaining these sites in a like-new condition is challenging, but that is our objective.

I would like to take a moment to describe the types of projects we routinely execute to maintain our infrastructure. A significant amount of work is required at our memorials to keep these beautiful centerpieces of our sites in excellent condition. This can range from replacing the roofing system above the chapel and memorial at Florence American Cemetery, to restoring fresco paintings and a bronze and ceramic relief map at Sicily-Rome American Cemetery.

Other typical projects affecting our memorials are improving waterproofing and drainage, and cleaning and repointing of memorial

stonework. Headstone refurbishment and replacement is an ongoing process for us, particularly at our World War I cemeteries. By using two robots capable of refurbishing and engraving eight headstones per day, we have made much progress in improving the overall appearance of our sites.

Just as our cemeteries are ennobled with great architecture and art, so, too, they are enriched with beautiful landscapes. All of our plantings, including fine lawns and to some extent the meadows, require typical horticulture maintenance at regular intervals. Occasionally, more ambitious planting projects are required, such as at Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, where we will restore tree plantings to the original landscape plan.

Luxembourg Cemetery has several projects underway or planned that are typical of our sites: replacing a network of pathways to improve bearing loads, replacing original drainage systems, releveling terraces, and improving handicapped access to the burial plots and to General Patton's grave.

We completed a comprehensive accessibility study at our 11 cemeteries in France. While the study included all areas that do not meet United States or host Nation codes, the focus was to ensure physical access to the plot areas, memorials, visitor centers, and restroom facilities. Accessibility studies will be conducted at our other sites while projects are developed to correct deficiencies identified at the sites in France.

Maintaining our monuments and cemeteries is and will remain the Commission's core mission and top priority, but we also have a responsibility to tell the stories of those we honor. Accordingly, we have several improvement projects underway to do just that. We expect to award three visitor center projects this year at the Cambridge American Cemetery in England; Sicily-Rome American Cemetery south of Rome, Italy; and at the Pointe du Hoc Ranger Monument in Normandy, France. We have a project in design for our largest World War I cemetery, Meuse-Argonne in France.

To ensure that all of our cemeteries have basic interpretive information available as soon as possible, we are producing temporary exhibits that will be deployed within the next 18 months. This is particularly important for our World War I sites as we approach the August 2014 beginning of the World War I centennial.

Turning to the Pacific, in fiscal year 2010, the Commission began efforts to bring the Manila American Cemetery and our Pacific memorials up to the same standards we maintain in Europe. Manila American Cemetery in the Philippines is the Commission's largest cemetery and our only commemorative cemetery in the Pacific. The more than 53,000 service men and women buried and memorialized in Manila represent 24 percent of the 225,000 individuals honored at ABMC commemorative sites.

During fiscal 2010 and 2011, ABMC invested in horticulture projects, irrigation projects, and pump systems, and other horticultural features. The Manila Cemetery requirements beginning in fiscal 2012 are twofold: improve the infrastructure of the cemetery, and establish an enhanced interpretation program. In order to combine interpretation and infrastructure efforts in a thoughtful process, a master plan was funded in fiscal 2011 to evaluate the need for facilities upgrades, assess current conditions, and address the

Commission's interpretive program. The plan is not yet complete. And to the extent outyear funding is available, infrastructure-interpretation projects will be allocated and prioritized accordingly.

However, early indications are that the Commission needs to address serious cemetery requirements. Two of those requirements will be addressed in fiscal 2013. One, there are serious encroachment and boundary issues at the Manila Cemetery. To protect the cemetery and address security concerns, the Commission will replace the current chain link fence around the site with a more robust perimeter wall. The new perimeter wall will be constructed in fiscal 2013 and should protect ABMC land from future intrusions.

Second, the design of our quarters will be funded in fiscal 2013. The existing two quarters are aging and are deficient in structure and air conditioning.

Turning to our Pacific memorials, the Cabanatuan Memorial in the Philippines and the Guadalcanal Memorial in the Solomon Islands were built by others to lesser standards and with inappropriate materials. The Commission is renovating Cabanatuan in fiscal 2013.

And at Guadalcanal we are addressing seismic activity concerns, and degradation of the granite, and encroachment issues.

In addition, at the Honolulu Memorial, the site that we share with the VA, a handicapped accessibility project was completed last year. New Vietnam War battle maps will be dedicated this November, and significant memorial renovations are scheduled.

Our commemorative memorial cemeteries are completed works of civic art. As we perform the work described above, be it routine maintenance or new construction, we are sensitive to the Commission's responsibilities to preserve the historic fabric of our sites. The essence of our mission does not change from year to year: Keep the headstones white, keep the grass green, and tell the story of those we honor. We are a small agency, about 400 people in total, but whether United States citizen or foreign national, our people remain committed to executing those objectives.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. WOLLMAN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. Wollman.

I will begin the questioning and then recognize the Ranking Member and other Members, as Mr. Turner is currently our only other one here.

I want to start with Under Secretary Muro. Currently NCA is performing 39 raise-and-realignment projects. Could you discuss what is being done to ensure the problems related to the prior raise-and-realignment projects are not repeated?

Mr. MURO. Thank you for the question, Chairman.

The first thing we have done is we ensure that the headstones are not taken from the gravesite. So they are maintained on the gravesite.

The second thing is we are requiring the COOR, which is a contracting officer's representative at the site, to do a daily check before they leave at the end of the day to ensure that the headstones are on the correct gravesite.

Mr. RUNYAN. Were you able to identify all the contractors involved in the previous raise-and-realignment projects where the errors occurred that actually uncovered and started this national audit?

Mr. MURO. Yes, we were able to identify the contractors that did the work. Some of them had done multiple cemeteries. We didn't have issues at other cemeteries. But we were able to identify them.

Mr. RUNYAN. And what are you doing to ensure that none of these contractors involved during the initial errors are involved in the current or future raise and realignments? Are you going to reach out to the same ones, or do we have to make sure that we have obviously the process of checks and balances in there? Because, rewarding bad behavior sometimes becomes, unfortunately, a bad pattern around here.

Mr. MURO. Two things we have done. Some of them didn't rebid other contracts, but the ones that have, we have been watching them, and at the other cemeteries where they didn't have problems. Plus if they have a site now, we are making sure that they are doing it.

Mr. RUNYAN. So you are still offering them—

Mr. MURO. Unfortunately, if they did it in error, and we didn't catch it, it became our responsibility once they left and we signed off on it. So that is where we are holding our employees accountable for that issue.

Mr. RUNYAN. But you are still offering the same contractors—

Mr. MURO. Actually most of the contractors that did the first rounds aren't in the business anymore. A lot of them couldn't keep up with the standard that we set and have not rebid the contracts.

Mr. RUNYAN. What is the process of accountability once personnel are identified who directly led to some of the failings uncovered by the national audit?

Mr. MURO. Whenever an error is found at the national cemeteries, it is reported up through the chain. And then we double-check to make sure everything, what we think they found. We ask different questions to verify. Then when we are sure that it is an error, we make sure we advise Congress of the error, and this Committee. And we also work with the families. We contact the families, where there are families available, and we talk to them. If it is just the headstone, once we have moved it, we advise them before we move it and after we move it that it has been corrected. And then if it is cremated remains or a body that needs to be relocated, the eight that we did, we contact the family, and we have a funeral director there. If the family wishes us to use their original funeral director if they are still in business, we do. Otherwise we hire a local one from the area.

Mr. RUNYAN. But to the personal accountability, there is nothing being done there?

Mr. MURO. Yes, there is. We are holding those employees that are still employed with us accountable for the error and for not catching the error.

Mr. RUNYAN. Do you have any examples of that?

Mr. MURO. We are in the process of doing the investigation to take the appropriate administrative action on those employees.

Mr. RUNYAN. I know we talked about this in a previous budget hearing a little bit, but could you identify the resources needed to increase the burial options and accessibility to veterans cemeteries to the NCA's strategic goal of 94 percent, particularly with the State Cemetery Grants Program, which I understand is currently holding just over 100 cemetery grant applications?

Mr. MURO. Yes. We have \$46 million in our budget for the fiscal year 2013 budget request to continue expanding State cemeteries, start up new State cemeteries, and do maintenance of them. Of that \$46 million, \$5 million is for maintenance, raise and realign, any type of maintenance they need.

Of the projects we have moving forward, we have enough funding at this time and in 2013 to fund those where the States are ready to move forward. A couple of the States this year had to back out because they didn't have the funding they needed to hire the staff and move on. So with the \$46 million, we should be well covered. Even though we have a large list, many of the States aren't ready to move forward, and before we can fund it, they need to be ready to move.

Mr. RUNYAN. I just had one quick question. We will probably get to a second round, but one for Ms. Condon. What is the current average wait time for a burial of a servicemember not killed in action?

Ms. CONDON. Sir, we can now tell you, with data to support, right now for a full honors funeral, which is everything from the caisson, the band, the escort platoon, the bugler, the chaplain, the chapel—right now the average wait time is 98 days. People are willing to wait to get to Arlington.

But what we have also been able to determine, now that we have data to support this, is funeral scheduling is cyclical at Arlington. We have found that people did not want to schedule their loved one's funeral in the winter months. And we are picking up the funerals that people want to schedule in the spring, summer, and fall. A year ago we couldn't tell you that, but now we now are answering every call for people to schedule their funerals so that the average wait time has gone up to 98 days for the full honors. Lesser honors, sir, does not take as much time. But we base everything on the full-honors funeral.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you.

Mr. McNerney.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Mura, I have been impressed personally by your dedication and your breadth of knowledge on the subject that we are looking into now. So thank you for that.

The VFW, on behalf of the Independent Budget, indicates in its testimony that NCA's operation-and-maintenance budget should be increased by \$20 million per year until its goals of 95 percent of headstones are free of debris and 90 percent of headstones are at the proper height and alignment. Currently those goals are lower, 82 percent and 73 percent respectively. Do you agree with that conclusion about the resources that are required and about the current state?

Mr. MURO. Thank you for that question.

Right now, with the funding that we have requested, we can get the work done and get the contractors in that can do that type of work. One of the things we found, it is tough to find contractors. And we contract with disabled veterans small business contracts. Most of them, we have actually had to train them how do raise and realign. It is hard to find contractors to come in and do that kind of work. So we are planning our workload based on what we can get done in a year's time. We want to make sure that we stay fiscally responsible for the moneys that you provide us for this.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Are you going to be able to meet those new requirements, 75 percent?

Mr. MURO. It would be tougher, but, you know, if you provided us the extra funding, we would move forward.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Thank you.

The National Association of Funeral Directors points out that over half of its members reported that the VA reimbursements take longer than 10 months to process, with an average of \$6,000. What is your assessment of that information?

Mr. MURO. Thank you for the question, Congressman. I will have to take that one for the record. That is VBA that handles that. We don't handle any of the funding for reimbursement to the families. But I will get back to you with that.

[THE ATTACHMENT APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. MCNERNEY. Okay. The Independent Budget also noted that between 2010 and 2011, that NCA's annual facilities conditional assessment, the FCA, reported a 10 percent decline, from 84 to 74 percent, in what is considered acceptable for NCA structures. It also notes that it will take about \$62 million to make up for this shortfall. Again, your answer to that assessment?

Mr. MURO. Thank you for the question.

Yes, Congressman, in the past we did the assessment ourselves, our engineers. We had an internal assessment. This last year we had an outsider that was hired, a contractor that did the assessment, and so the numbers went up higher. Their view of the condition of the buildings was different than our view, which drove the price up also.

Mr. MCNERNEY. So you are going to take their assessments from now on or—

Mr. MURO. We are, since we are using them to set up for further reviews of our facilities. We will be using their estimates.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Well, at one point I heard that families were having difficulty finding military honor guards for veterans' funerals in some instances. Has this situation been resolved yet?

Mr. MURO. No. Congressman, thank you for that question. But unfortunately, no. VA technically has no responsibility, but we do work with VSOs and DoD to assist the families. DoD provides two individuals, and one of the individuals must be from the branch of service. We don't have real control over it. The VSOs, some are voluntary service VSOs that are assigned to the cemeteries.

At those cemeteries that we have that, we can provide pretty much what we consider full honors, rifle detail, two individuals to fold the flag, and Taps. One of our strategic goals is the top 20 cemeteries to have our own honor detail that are voluntary service VSOs, where we provide them the rifles and the blank ammo and



the uniforms to provide honors, because it is getting—it has always been hard for us to get honors for the veterans.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Do you provide any reimbursements for allowable expenses for the volunteers?

Mr. MURO. The volunteers, through voluntary service, are non-compensated volunteers. They do provide them a lunch if they work so many hours per day.

Mr. MCNERNEY. That might explain why it is hard to find volunteers if they are not reimbursed for their allowable expenses, such as travel and so on.

Mr. MURO. If we reimburse them, then they are not considered volunteers. There is regulations with that. There is—DoD can provide funding for those that file to go, but they have to do honors per DoD's recommendation. And many of the VSOs don't want to move to that because they have their part that they would like to add to the service.

Mr. MCNERNEY. I have one more question for Ms. Condon, if you would allow it.

You know, there has been some stories in recent years that have been unsettling from Arlington National Cemetery. What have you done to reach out to the families to reassure them that the situation is now improving, and we will have the highest quality in the future?

Ms. CONDON. Sir, the main way we have been reaching out to our families is through our new Web site, which has a section where families can comment back to us. We are on Facebook. We are on Twitter. We are asking each family after their services. What can we do better?

But it has been our priority in Arlington to make sure that we are meeting the families' needs. One of the primary drivers behind our headstone designer tool was that the families were concerned that on the day of their service, we would have them design what they wanted on the headstone of their loved one. Now we are testing a pilot where the family can actually design the headstone, and it will be a photo of what it will actually look like. So that is one more thing that we are taking away from the family on the day that they bury their loved one.

Mr. MCNERNEY. But the ones that were affected, have they been notified or—

Ms. CONDON. Oh, absolutely, sir. The bottom line, any time we find a discrepancy at the cemetery, the first thing we do is to notify the next of kin. That is, we have a standard procedure for if anything that we would discover at the cemetery.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you.

Mr. Turner.

Mr. TURNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I actually don't have a question. I have a comment, Ms. Condon. I had a constituent a few months ago call me that his grandfather was without a headstone in New Hampshire, and could we help out. Well, we made the calls. And you found, identified the individual. A headstone is in place, the picture is taken, it made the papers. Thank you.

Ms. CONDON. Thank you, sir. That is the standard that we want to have every time we have a constituent call any Member of Congress, that we can have that turnaround.

Mr. TURNER. That was a World War I veteran, if I didn't mention that.

Mr. RUNYAN. I thank the gentleman.

I have a few more questions. I am sure the Ranking Member may also. Actually, Mr. Wollman, I have a couple about Clark Cemetery in the Philippines for you. If Clark Cemetery agreed to stop accepting burials would this bring Clark under the ABMC's jurisdiction?

Mr. WOLLMAN. Mr. Chairman, we don't believe so. The threshold question at Clark—and I had the honor of visiting Clark last August on site—the threshold question really is that the United States Government doesn't own the site at all. So at this point right now—or even have control of the site. At this point, we don't have permission to work on that site in any case.

So the threshold question is if the Congress was interested in pursuing this, how would the United States Government regain control of the site? The fact of whether the burials stopped or not would really not be relevant to the ABMC. It wouldn't change—according to our counsel, wouldn't change that legal requirement.

Mr. RUNYAN. That actually answers a lot of the questions I had, being a legal matter in itself. So thank you for that.

Ms. Condon, has Arlington National Cemetery seen improvements since switching from working with the Army Corps in the Baltimore district to the Norfolk district?

Ms. CONDON. Sir, just like when Pat Hallinan and I took over the cemetery, it was a fresh look. And we are finding the same thing with the Norfolk district is they are coming into the cemetery for all of our engineering projects with a fresh look, new ideas, and so forth. So we have been very pleased with our partnership with Norfolk to date.

Mr. RUNYAN. Okay. And also presuming that the Millennium Project and the Navy Annex expansion projects progress forward as planned, how long will it extend the ability of Arlington to handle first burials?

Ms. CONDON. Sir, one of the things that we are doing in our designs for both the Millennium Project right now, because that is the project that we are going to do first, is to extend the cemetery. We think we can extend the cemetery, with the Millennium Project, to 2030 and beyond. But for the Navy Annex, with new ways of burying, looking at data and so forth, we haven't started the planning and design for the Navy Annex yet.

So I can't tell you right now what the actual end state will be for Arlington. Previously people have said 2050, but until we do the planning and design of the Navy Annex and properly use every acre of that, we really will not be able to tell you the actual day when we will run out of space. But we are working on that, because we want to base it on sound data.

Mr. RUNYAN. And how do you see any of the expansion affecting your future budgets?

Ms. CONDON. Sir, in fiscal year 2013, if the budget gets passed, we will be able to start the Millennium Project. And we also have

in the 2013 budget our planning and design for the Navy Annex. Those are our two major projects at the cemetery. Once we start those and complete those, then it will just be sustainment in the outyears. So those are the two projects that we really, once set, then it will be just until we run out of space at Arlington.

Mr. RUNYAN. Mr. McNerney?

Mr. MCNERNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Muro, the NCA audit covers raise and realignments done between 2001 and 2011. Has the NCA during the audit discovered any problems that happened prior to that date, prior to the 2001 date?

Mr. MURO. Thank you, Congressman.

Yes. Some of the numbers that we reported were actually gravesites that had not been raised and realigned. They were in sections of some of the cemeteries where headstones had to be pulled to go in to do a second interment. Unfortunately, past years, as cemeteries got close to closing, aisleways were used for interments, and buffer zones. We used to maintain a 20-foot buffer zone from the last grave to the fence line. Those were taken up and assigned for graves. When they did that, it created a problem for the operators in the field. Many of the sections, they would have to pull stones to get in and out so they can do a burial. And normally, they would put the stones, lay the stones on the adjacent grave while they did the interment.

Because of the issue we found, we have initiated that now they need to write down what stone they have moved and identify it to the office so at the end of the day we can go back and check to make sure the stone is placed back on the gravesite. Unfortunately, those were procedures that were put in place when cemeteries were starting to close, and NCA was not in a very expansion program for many years. We didn't expand. It wasn't until recently that we started expansion.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Well, if problems were revealed in the audit that took place before 2001, were those mistakes included in the report?

Mr. MURO. Yes. Any errors that were found we have included in the report. That is why there is some that talk about headstones were switched; where we found that there was no markers or the broken marker, and it hadn't been replaced for whatever reason. And because of our electronic system and our historical records, we were able to identify the graves and identify—a couple of the stones were actually private headstones.

As Arlington has, many of our cemeteries have private headstones. And so at the time of the interment, no headstone was ordered. And on a couple of them, the headstone had been ordered, but it sunk, and it was covered up. When we probed, when we went to identify, we actually probed and found the headstone. We dug it up, put it back—cleaned it up and put it back in place. And we have ordered headstones for those that didn't have any headstones.

At a couple of cemeteries that we had, it actually said “no headstone to be ordered” on the record of interment, and there wasn't any. We have ordered them since. One of the procedures we put in place is that if we have a grave, we are going to mark the grave. So we are marking all of them now.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Ms. Condon, one more question. Do you have any suggestions on how this Committee could be helpful to you in your job authority?

Ms. CONDON. Sir, the biggest issue I have right now is support for our 2013 budget so that we can start the Millennium Project and the planning and design for the Navy Annex. By the end of this year those buildings that are currently at the Navy Annex will be torn down, and we really need to start on the planning and design. So support of the 2013 budget is what I would really need support for, sir.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Thank you.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank the gentleman.

Mr. Turner, do you have any further questions?

Mr. TURNER. No, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Mr. Chairman, sorry, before we dismiss, I have one more question for Mr. Wollman.

Mr. RUNYAN. Feel free.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Mr. Wollman, who does own the Clark cemetery? You said it wasn't in our government control.

Mr. WOLLMAN. It is actually owned by the Philippine Government. When the United States Air Force left Clark at the end, at the cancellation of the treaty with the Government of the Philippines, that land transferred over to the Filipino Government. So it is technically owned by the Filipino Government. I think there is a quasi-governmental corporation of the Philippine Government that is now developing that site. So ownership is not with either the VFW—that is doing a fantastic job in maintaining that cemetery now—nor with the United States Government. It rests with the Filipinos.

Mr. MCNERNEY. What soldiers are buried there?

Mr. WOLLMAN. It is really effectively the base cemetery for Clark Air Force Base. But the initial burials were a group of military burials that came from the current site of the American Battle Monuments Commission cemetery in Manila that were relocated at the end of World War II to make room for the burials at the ABMC cemetery. That cemetery has existed at Clark for, I don't know, over 100 years. But a chunk of those burials came from the site of the current ABMC cemetery in Manila. The rest of those burials range from the Spanish-American War to the final days of Clark Air Force Base. It is not a battle death cemetery. Veterans are buried there, people who died in industrial accidents.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Do you have an approximate number of Americans?

Mr. WOLLMAN. I would have to take that for the record, but it is in the thousands.

[THE ATTACHMENT APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. WOLLMAN. It is in the thousands, the number of Americans. I think the total burial is 7,000, and almost all are Americans. Some are civilians, though. But there is a big chunk of veterans buried there. It is not a private cemetery or a civilian cemetery. The vast majority are veterans.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. RUNYAN. I thank the gentleman.

Mr. Wollman, though, I know there is a piece of legislation, I think it was being dropped today by Representatives Guinta and Owens, to designate ABMC as the appropriate entity to do that.

Mr. WOLLMAN. Thank you, sir.

Mr. RUNYAN. Would you oppose any of that legislation?

Mr. WOLLMAN. Our position is that Clark Air Force Base cemetery is an important site, an honored site. It doesn't meet the mission of the ABMC. And so the position of making that our 25th cemetery, if you will, is not something that the ABMC supports.

Mr. RUNYAN. Okay. Well, Under Secretary Muro, Ms. Condon, Deputy Secretary Wollman, on behalf of the Subcommittee, I thank all of you for your testimony. And we look forward to continuing to work with you on all these important matters in honoring our heroes. So you are all now excused.

And panel two, please come forward to the witness table.

I want to take a moment to commend the next panel, which includes several organizations speaking on behalf of veterans and their families everywhere. Each one of you provides an invaluable service to our Nation's veterans, and in particular their loved ones, in times of need.

We will begin hearing first from Mr. Ray Kelley, the director of national legislative service for the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Next we will hear from Mr. Ashley Cozine, an executive board member of the National Funeral Directors Association. And finally, we have Ms. Melissa Lofaso, a casework assistance manager for Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors.

We appreciate each of your attendance today, and your complete written statements will be entered in the hearing record.

And, Mr. Kelley, you are now recognized for 5 minutes for your testimony.

**STATEMENTS OF RAYMOND C. KELLEY, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE, VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS; W. ASHLEY COZINE, EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBER, NATIONAL FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION; AND MELISSA LOFASO, CASEWORK ASSISTANCE MANAGER, TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS**

**STATEMENT OF RAYMOND C. KELLEY**

Mr. KELLEY. Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity on behalf of the more than 2 million of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and our auxiliaries for the opportunity to testify today.

I would like to start by acknowledging the dedication and commitment of NCA's Under Secretary, Secretary Muro, and his staff. They have done an exceptional job. They are very responsive to any questions that we have, and we truly do appreciate the work that they do.

Each year VA publishes a performance and accountability report. There are 16 performance measures that fall under NCA. These measures range from how quickly gravesites are marked after interment, and how many people would recommend a national cemetery to a veteran in need. More than half of these measures come very close or perform better than their strategic targets.

There are four of these performance measures the VFW would like to discuss today. First is accessibility to veterans cemeteries. NCA has made a commitment to provide burial options for 94 percent of all veterans living in the United States. They are currently at 89 percent. Their success in providing these options is based on them having a solid metric that account for where there is or where there will be burial needs and where NCA doesn't have an accessible cemetery. In fiscal year 2012, NCA revised its guidelines on the establishment of future cemetery placements, providing national cemetery access to an additional 500,000 veterans.

NCA has also been investing in State Cemetery Grants Programs. And between 1998 and 2010, 75 State veterans cemeteries have been established. The NCA is currently holding 104 State cemetery grant applications, 61 of which the States or Nations or tribes have committed their portion of the funds. The NCA will have to invest \$152 million in architectural and engineering funds to meet their obligation to match these State cemeteries. This is a cost-effective way to ensure that areas that don't contain the threshold of veterans will have burial options. These States have made a commitment to veterans. VA must match that commitment and fund these cemeteries as quickly as possible. The VFW is requesting appropriations of \$51 million for fiscal year 2013 to accommodate these grant programs.

NCA's latest strategy to provide access to veterans cemeteries is to purchase land from private cemeteries in rural areas where there is no national or State cemetery burial option. This will provide burial options for an estimated 136,000 veterans.

These are all very positive steps, and as they move forward with closing these gaps, Congress must be prepared to fund these projects.

The next two performance measures can be combined, the percent of headstone markers and niche covers that are clean and free of debris, and the percent of headstones and markers that are of proper height and alignment. These two measures represent the aesthetic appearance of our national cemeteries.

In 2002, the Independent Study on Improvements of Veterans Cemeteries identified nearly 1,000 deficiencies nationwide that will need to be corrected to reach their goal of improving cemetery appearance. This is not a static number of deficiencies. As some deficiencies are fixed, other sites, due to climate and time, become in need of correction.

Over the past few years, NCA has done a commendable job in addressing these deficiencies by taking funds out of their own operational and maintenance budget, but targeted funding is the only way NCA will be able to reach the strategic goal. That is why, in partnership with the Independent Budget, VFW believes that the NCA operational and maintenance budget should be increased by \$20 million per year until this goal is reached. Two hundred eight million dollars will have to be invested to eliminate this appearance gap.

The fourth issue of concern is the capital infrastructure of NCA. The VFW believes NCA is a model administration not only within VA, but throughout the government.

Mr. KELLEY. However, without proper resources. It will continue to fall victim of VA's glaring concern: infrastructure. Just like the rest of VA's infrastructure, NCA's buildings are in decline. Between 2010 and 2011, NCA's annual facilities condition assessment reported a 10 percent decline from 84 to 74 percent in what is considered acceptable conditions for these structures. It will take an investment of more than \$62.5 million to fill these—all these condition gaps that have currently been identified.

To continue to put off repairing VA's infrastructure issue is irresponsible. VA and Congress must make a commitment to improve VA's infrastructure, and that commitment starts with increased funding.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony, and I look forward to any questions you or the Committee has.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MR. KELLEY APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. Kelley.  
Mr. Cozine.

#### STATEMENT OF W. ASHLEY COZINE

Mr. COZINE. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this afternoon. I am Ashley Cozine, a third-generation funeral director in our family-owned business that began operation in 1913. I have been a licensed funeral director since 1995. In addition to our mortuary, we also own and operate a cemetery and a crematory that we developed in 1997. We serve approximately 350 families a year at our mortuary and employ 10 to 12 staff members. I currently serve on the executive board of the National Funeral Directors Association, and I am a past president of the Kansas Funeral Directors Association.

I am testifying today on behalf of the more than 19,000 funeral directors and funeral service personnel who are members of the National Funeral Directors Association. The average NFDA member is an independently owned and operated business with fewer than 10 employees and has been in the same family for over 60 years. NFDA is the leading funeral service organization in the United States providing a national voice for the profession.

The VA estimates that approximately 650,000 veterans died in the U.S. in 2011. Each one of these service men and women had a family or friends who grieved their loss, and in each case a funeral director helped ensure that every veteran received the care, honor and dignity they earned because of their sacrifice for our country.

Most of my experience with the VA has been with the Kansas Veterans Cemetery in Winfield, Kansas. This cemetery is under the direction of the Kansas Commission of Veterans Affairs. In my experience it is a well-run and efficient cemetery operation. The staff is very friendly and helpful in assisting our mortuary and the families we are serving. The grounds and facilities are well maintained. It is a good option for veteran families that do not already have cemetery property.

I have also had the opportunity to work with Fort Leavenworth and Fort Scott National Cemeteries, albeit on a more limited basis.

Because these two cemeteries are several hours away from Wichita, fewer families choose these options. However, my experience has been very positive with them as well. They appear to be efficiently operated and are beautifully maintained. Families seem to be very appreciative of the services they offer.

The National Cemetery Administration is to be commended to their service to our Nation's veterans.

In preparation for my testimony today, NFDA conducted an email survey of its members to obtain firsthand experiences in relation to veterans cemeteries. Overall our members were highly complimentary of the state of our Nation's veterans cemeteries. Our members have found the management and operation of these cemeteries to be courteous, flexible and accommodating to the needs of the funeral director and the family members of the deceased veterans.

While most of our members are satisfied with the services provided to them by the national cemeteries, there is some improvements that could be made to improve the service funeral directors can provide to the families of our Nation's veterans.

In February of 2012, NFDA conducted a nonscientific study of our members to assess their experiences when dealing with the Department of Veterans Affairs funeral reimbursement policies. Approximately 60 percent of the respondents stated the VA still owes them for outstanding veterans funerals that are over 6 months past due, with the average amount being nearly \$6,000. Half of the respondents indicated that reimbursements take 10 months or longer. One funeral director reported that the VA owes him more than \$128,000.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that there are hundreds of funeral directors in Washington, D.C., today.

My colleagues and I have come to Capitol Hill to support our Nation's veterans by working for passage of H.R. 2051, a bill to repatriate unclaimed veterans' cremated remains. Currently many funeral homes across the country are holding the cremated remains of veterans who have been unclaimed by family members. NFDA strongly believes that these remains should be given proper burial or interment along with the appropriate military honors.

H.R. 2051 would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to work with veterans service organizations and other groups in assisting funeral homes in possession of abandoned and cremated remains to determine if the remains are those of a veteran eligible for burial at a national cemetery. If remains are determined to be those of an eligible veteran with no next of kin and no available resources to cover burial and funeral expenses, then the Secretary of Veterans Affairs would cover the cost of burial. In addition, the bill would call on the VA Secretary to establish a public database of the veterans identified in this project. NFDA strongly supports this legislation and encourages Congress to pass this important legislation.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, on behalf of the members of the National Funeral Directors Association, I want to conclude my testimony today by thanking you for the opportunity to testify to you on behalf of NFDA. I hope my testimony has been helpful, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.



[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MR. COZINE APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. Cozine.  
Ms. Lofaso.

#### STATEMENT OF MELISSA LOFASO

Mrs. LOFASO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee. I am pleased to submit this testimony on behalf of the families of America's fallen military heroes and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, known as TAPS. TAPS is the national program providing compassionate care for all those who are grieving the death of someone who died while serving in the Armed Forces. Since our founding in 1994 by military families, TAPS has provided peer-based emotional support, grief and trauma resources, survivor seminars, Good Grief Camps for children, casualty case-work assistance and a 24/7 hotline.

My name is Melissa Lofaso, and I am the national director for care coordination at TAPS, and I am the proud wife of Active Duty Navy Petty Officer Edward Porrey. As a clinical and mental health counselor specializing in grief and trauma, my job involves assisting families of our fallen military who are encountering administrative challenges that are difficult to navigate when deeply grieving, while also addressing their bereavement needs. I have supported many families in communicating with VA cemeteries.

Our perspective at TAPS is anchored in our experience, which is providing emotional support for surviving families of our fallen military. Whether it is regarding a mismarked headstone, a grave marker that has been moved or some other concern, we believe that resolving issues quickly in coordination with VA leadership of the National Cemetery Administration helps survivors heal.

Most of the families we talked with are satisfied with the care they receive from the national cemetery system, but sometimes there are problems that arise. In one case TAPS connected the VA cemetery with a family who was upset that their loved one's gravestone had an error. We brought the matter to the attention of the National Cemetery Administration, and a new stone was cut immediately. It was express-shipped to the cemetery and installed within 48 hours. The family was overjoyed.

This case illustrates an important point. Addressing concerns raised by surviving families promptly can go a long way to correcting problems. In a more recent case, a family wanted their Marine son's headstone to mention his service in Iraq and Afghanistan. I contacted NCA, and the headstone was changed. Having this change made so quickly and with such professionalism changed the tone of the family's grief and allowed them to focus on healing rather than their frustration.

In another case, however, a widow went to visit her husband's memorial marker at the National Cemetery of the Pacific. Her husband's marker was missing, and she had to search to locate it. When she asked the cemetery staff why the marker had been moved, she was told she must be mistaken, and that the stone had not moved. This widow had photos showing the marker's previous location. The cemetery staff then researched the situation and

found that the marker had, in fact, been moved during a renovation project.

This case illustrates another key point. When problems arise, it is always better to be honest with surviving families. Families become most upset when they believe that information is being kept from them.

Based on our experiences supporting surviving military families, TAPS offers the following recommendations for improvements in the national cemetery system: One, to provide sensitivity training for local VA cemetery staff who may encounter surviving families. TAPS has conducted training for military casualty assistance officers in all services, military chaplains, USO volunteers and many others. The trainings that we offer teach how to work with each staff member with compassionate and empathic care when working with surviving military families. TAPS welcomes the opportunity to provide this training at no cost to national cemetery staff who come in contact with grieving families.

Two, encourage local VA cemetery staff to connect with TAPS when emotional issues arise so that we can help them facilitate the resolution the family seeks, while also addressing the family's bereavement needs.

Finally, encourage local VA cemetery staff to provide accurate and clear information to families when a concern arises. Over the past year and a half, families of our fallen military and veterans have endured a series of revelations about mismanagement and mistakes at Arlington Cemetery, the Dover Port Mortuary and the VA national cemeteries. For some families, their trust in our Nation's commitment to honor the service and sacrifices made by their loved ones has been shaken. It is our perspective that we must work together as a community of care to find a way forward beyond these challenges surrounding the care of our fallen military servicemembers and veterans. TAPS is ready and willing to work collaboratively with the military, the VA and other partners as together we will provide better care and more compassionate support to the families of our fallen heroes.

Thank you very much. This concludes my testimony. I welcome any questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MRS. LOFASO APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mrs. Lofaso.

I want to begin a round of questioning with Mr. Kelley dealing with ABMC and Clark Veterans Cemetery. What organization do you believe should be responsible for maintaining that cemetery?

Mr. KELLEY. It seems most logical to have the battle monuments, they have already got folks in the Philippines. To carry over to take care of that would seem to be the most reasonable way to take care of that. But if and when they do, resources need to be put in place to bring it up to the same standard.

Mr. RUNYAN. And also, do you think the NCA has properly responded to the recent problems revealed at several of their cemeteries, including headstones placed over the wrong graves, in some cases for years? I know at least eight people were buried in the wrong place.

Mr. KELLEY. I think they have. They took initiative on their own to see where the mistakes were. They identified the mistakes and contacted families, contacted Congress immediately, let them know what the corrective actions were going to be taken, and then they put in a plan to move forward to minimize those mistakes.

Mr. RUNYAN. Do you think the NCA's plan to address accessibility to veterans cemeteries are adequate to handle the aging veterans population for the foreseeable future?

Mr. KELLEY. Yes, they are. Since they have reduced the threshold rate from 175- down to 80,000, that is going to allow them to establish, I think, 5, maybe 7 new national cemeteries. The new, innovative idea of purchasing in small areas is a great idea. Those will be attached to larger cemeteries for management purposes. So they will hold the same respect and have the same visual appeal. So I think it is a great idea.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you.

Mr. Cozine, you brought up in your testimony H.R. 2051—I actually have a group of veterans in my district that do, quite frankly, what you were talking about. Where you have veterans that have no next of kin, these gentlemen actually go out—and they are all former servicemembers themselves—they go out and go to places of business like yours and seek these individuals out. I am glad you brought that up. Could you just elaborate for the record on what a problem this is?

Mr. COZINE. Thank you for that question.

It is a problem, because when we take care of a family and their loved one, oftentimes they leave us with the cremated remains, and the responsibility and liability all rests with us. Oftentimes there is nothing we can do.

This H.R. 2051, I think, is a great solution. I know in Kansas they are looking at similar legislation. The benefit of H.R. 2051 is the fact that there would be a national database. The idea with that would be if there was a loved one that was maybe not in Kansas that didn't know what funeral home had taken care of their loved one potentially could go to that national database and find out where their loved one was interred. And I think that that is a major benefit of that proposed legislation.

It is a sad, sad thing when families don't come back to claim their loved one, in my opinion, and take responsibility for their final interment.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you.

In general how would you rate the upkeep and appearance of the NCA cemeteries compared to other private and State veteran cemeteries?

Mr. COZINE. I would say my experience has been that they are well maintained, and have very helpful staff, and beautiful landscape, and well taken care of.

Mr. RUNYAN. Do you have any recommendations as to what NCA can do to improve access to cemeteries?

Mr. COZINE. That is a great question. I think the thing that I hear the most from my colleagues is the fact that scheduling can be an issue. That was addressed in the first panel. And I am not specifically talking about Arlington, but even in some of the national cemeteries, for example in Kansas, their hours are limited

more than other cemeteries would be. So sometimes families will want to have a funeral service and are unable to get confirmation from a cemetery as to when and what day and time that can take place. So if we can improve upon that, I think you would have a lot of funeral directors and families that would be pleased so that they can better plan their funeral services.

Another thing that is dependent on that is just waiting to be able to put an obituary in the newspaper. Sometimes our hands are tied on that until we can find out when that service is going to be.

So just those efficiencies. I think if they can be improved, I think the families would be better served.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you.

Mrs. Lofaso, do you think the NCA properly takes the sensitive nature of the grief and loss experienced by families of deceased servicemembers into account, particularly when they are handling a challenging problem as a missing memorial marker or misplaced headstone?

Mrs. LOFASO. Thank you.

For the most part I do. I think that we have been very impressed with the level of professionalism that has been shown by the staff members. However, there are some situations that do stand out, and for those families, that changes their entire view of the VA cemetery system as well as the experience that they have during the burial of their loved one. And for those situations, that is why I recommend that we do work together to give some sensitivity training to staff members around the country, just to make sure that they are familiar with how to work with families who are deeply grieving and may be expressing emotions that others may not be as comfortable working with.

Mr. RUNYAN. In your experience, does the NCA typically respond to the types of issues you testified about promptly and honestly, or are family members sometimes met with delayed response times or the sense that they are being misled?

Mrs. LOFASO. Yes, there have been a few cases, unfortunately, where it has taken a lot of time for responses to be made to family members. In those cases TAPS has gotten involved as an advocate organization and has been directly connected with the NCA in making sure that the answers to their problems have been found.

For the most part I would say that everybody has been working very efficiently, and we have been very thankful and impressed with the level of progress that has been made on behalf of the families.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you.

Mr. McNerney.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Kelley, I want to thank you for the hospitality you showed me Tuesday night at the VA's VFW reception.

Do you think that the NCA's new policy of reducing the threshold from 80,000 to 25,000 veterans in a 75-mile radius in rural areas is sufficient to address the need of veterans and survivors residing in rural and urban areas?

Mr. KELLEY. I think it is a good start. It is going to provide access for 136,000 veterans. I think let it be enacted for a few years, see how the program goes; if they need to reduce or increase that

threshold of veteran as higher than 25,000 because they are just not finding enough cemeteries or enough veterans, then we can move in that direction, similar to what they did with the national cemeteries from taking it from 175- down to 80-.

So they are doing a really good job of bridging those gaps, and I will hold off an opinion until we have a year or two to really understand how well it is being implemented.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Thank you.

Well, would you elaborate on the figures in your testimony wherein you concluded a few minutes ago the VA will need to increase its operational and maintenance funding by \$20 million? How many years do you think that will be needed, or is that a perpetual need?

Mr. KELLEY. There is always a perpetual need, because nature takes over after you leave, after you place headstones. So those realignment issues, the cleanliness of the headstones will always be an issue.

But I think the number is a little over \$200 million that would be needed to correct all those deficiencies. Part of that should be coming out of the regular operational and maintenance budget. But an increase is needed, and we recommend the \$20 million a year. It may take 5 years, somewhere in that neighborhood, to completely correct and get them to the standard that they want to be. They have been hovering around that mid-80 point for 5 or 6 years now after bringing it up some. So that is what causes us to believe that an extra infusion of money is needed to help them bridge those deficiencies.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Thank you.

Mr. Cozine, of course, I thank you and the funeral directors for working with veterans and their families.

Let's talk about this 10-month delay. How serious is that? I mean, is that enough to make funeral directors not want to deal with the VA? How can we make this better?

Mr. COZINE. That is a great question. It is frustrating, yes. I think what oftentimes happens is that funeral directors may tend to help the family apply for those benefits so that they are not waiting for those funds directly. So those are potential issues that can arise when the bills are not being paid on time.

It is frustrating from our end, because when we do file, and we are waiting for a long time like that, I sense that the line of communication is not always real clear with the VA. And a wait could be several months, and then there is a letter that comes in the mail that says that this allowance has been declined. You know, there is not a lot of further explanation to it. So you can imagine waiting several months and then getting a letter like that and virtually starting the process over again.

Mr. MCNERNEY. So these directors are using their own money to help the family get through this period; is that right?

Mr. COZINE. Absolutely. They are waiting on those funds and in many cases may or may not be charging any interest or anything like that in that situation.

Mr. MCNERNEY. We need to work with—between the VA to open up this line of communications, because that is not acceptable.

Mr. COZINE. I agree completely. You know, the NFDA has an office here in Washington. I know that they would be glad to work with you on that.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Okay. Thank you.

Overall how can the process be improved to ensure that memorial benefits are delivered to families seamlessly during a sensitive time?

Mr. COZINE. Well, obviously, the time issue would be a major thing. If we can improve upon that, I don't see that it would be an issue.

The other thing to think about, too, is the fact that—and my understanding is that the inception of this was in 1973 when the benefits came into play. That has not been adjusted over a period of time for inflation. So you see the steady rise of costs go up, but that burial and plot allowance has not increased for many, many years. So that would be an issue that could be addressed, obviously.

Mr. MCNERNEY. That is an issue that is important. We need to make sure that those families get reimbursed a sufficient amount. Would it help the families, in your opinion, to have a standard VA coffin that the poor families could have access to as a base in case they can't afford anything better?

Mr. COZINE. That is a good question. My experience has been, that becomes such an individual choice with families. Sometimes if you try to offer something to them that may be financially beneficial, they don't always take that option. And so I don't know how to answer that question directly. I mean, in theory it makes sense, but from a practicality standpoint, I don't know what the reception of the families would be for that.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Mrs. Lofaso, what do you think is the most frustrating thing that families experience when dealing with burying their loved ones?

Mrs. LOFASO. Thank you.

I think the most frustrating thing is the family's feeling as though information is being kept from them. Families, they are fragile, and they are grieving, and they do want sensitivity, but first and foremost they want to know that they are not being lied to. And I think that if they are given the correct information up front, even if it is not good news, they will take the information a lot better than if they find out later that they were, in fact, lied to or given misinformation.

Mr. MCNERNEY. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, I yield.

Mr. RUNYAN. I thank the gentleman.

I actually have one comment for Mr. Cozine, and kind of a question. First of all, I want to thank you for your written testimony, including the statement from the funeral director from south Jersey—I happen to represent Brigadier William Doyle Veterans Cemetery, and I appreciate the testimony saying things are going well there. I have a lot of constituents. All the times that—again, the long wait times are there, because this is a very popular cemetery, and the next nearest one is way up in north Jersey, which creates a lot of travel time.

From your experience, do you perceive a need for another cemetery in the southern part of the State?

Mr. COZINE. You know, something that—as I mentioned, in Kansas we have several new State veterans cemeteries, and I think that that may be something to look at. They have offered a good alternative to the national cemeteries when those may not be close to a veteran family's residence. So that may be a solution. It seems to work well in Kansas. As far as New Jersey, I am not sure, though.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you very much for that information.

Do you have a closing statement.

Mr. MCNERNEY. No.

Mr. RUNYAN. Well, ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Subcommittee, I thank you for your testimony. You are now excused.

I ask unanimous consent that all Members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material. Hearing no objection, so ordered.

[THE ATTACHMENT APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. RUNYAN. I thank the Members for their attendance today, and the hearing is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

## A P P E N D I X

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### Prepared Statement of Hon. Jon Runyan, Chairman

Good morning and welcome everyone. This oversight hearing of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs will now come to order.

We are here today to examine the current state of the final resting places for our nation's fallen heroes. These cemeteries and monuments span across our country and the entire world: from my own District in New Jersey with Beverly National Cemetery; to across the Atlantic in Normandy, France; or across the Pacific with Clarke Veterans Cemetery in the Philippines.

Some of these cemeteries instantly bring to mind the triumph of courage in conflicts fought around the globe for liberty and freedom. Others hold memories of bravery now known only to God and those who died on the field of battle. Yet, each one of these national shrines has this in common: they are all honored tributes to our service men and women, now resting in peace.

I would like to welcome our witnesses today who oversee our fallen heroes in the many sites where they now rest.

Under Secretary Muro is here on behalf of the National Cemetery Administration which oversees 131 national cemeteries nationwide.

Ms. Kathryn Condon is here representing the Army National Cemeteries Program, which includes perhaps the most recognizable site of our honored fallen in Arlington National Cemetery.

Finally, Deputy-Secretary Wollman (WOL-MAN) represents the American Battle Monuments Commission whose mission is to serve our country's fallen heroes and missing in action where they have served overseas.

I would note that the National Park Service was also invited, but has neglected to attend this hearing to my disappointment, and to the certain regret of the families they serve. It is my hope that they have corrected the problems in administration and upkeep of their cemeteries that this Subcommittee uncovered in the last congress.

This aside, I would like to begin the substance of this hearing on a positive note. I believe every person in this room agrees we have a solemn obligation to cherish their memory and heroic actions by holding ourselves and our organizations to the highest of standards. I also believe everyone here is as passionate as I am about our mutual duty in honoring our fallen heroes as best as we know how, with all the resources we can muster.

Overall, I believe every organization represented here does a great service to our nation's service men and women, and their loved ones. With that said, over the last several months numerous problems have surfaced across our nation's cemeteries. And they have not been isolated events confined to one agency or another. From Arlington to Fort Sam Houston, to Dover and beyond, tragedies and missteps have continued to mount, month after month.

Most recently, a series of audits conducted by NCA has revealed, to date, over 240 mismarked or unmarked graves and 8 veterans or their loved ones buried in the wrong place. Again, this was not a failing of just one national cemetery, but at 13 NCA cemeteries nationwide.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a pattern here, and I find it totally unacceptable. We have a duty to ensure our nation's veterans and their families that these problems will be repaired, and never occur again.

Granted, most of these misfortunes originated many years ago, and in many cases, decades ago. Only recently were most of these problems identified, and I am pleased to see solid progress being made to mend the harms across this Nation so that our fallen service men and women can finally rest in peace.

However, this is no excuse for the problems that remain. Therefore, it is important to recognize that over the last several months we have set a new standard of excellence for ourselves.



It is one which recognizes that, just as our fallen service men and women once fought for our liberties, we must be diligent in fighting to ensure that our fallen heroes remain at peace. And that no family will ever have to suffer a second burial.

I am eager to hear of further progress that has been made in these regards, and what actions are being taken to ensure these same issues never resurface at any of our national cemeteries.

Furthermore, I am looking forward to hearing of advancements with respect to ensuring greater accessibility to veteran burial options; as well as measured progress outlined in the National Shrine Commitment.

I would now call on the Ranking Member for his opening statement.

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### **Prepared Statement of Hon. McNerney, Ranking Democratic Member**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to thank you for holding today's hearing entitled, "Honoring America's Fallen Heroes: An Update on our National Cemeteries."

150 years ago in 1862, President Abraham Lincoln created a national veterans' cemetery system and dedicated it, "... for the soldiers who shall die in the service of the country." President Lincoln's words and our steadfast appreciation are as important today as they were during the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Ensuring a proper burial for our fallen heroes is a solemn obligation.

This hearing follows up on a September 24, 2009 hearing, in which the Subcommittee examined the VA's cemetery policies and operations, as well as those of the other cemeteries under our jurisdiction, primarily Arlington National Cemetery and the American Battle Monuments Commission. This Subcommittee conducts these oversight reviews to ensure that all eligible Veterans are served by an optimal burial option with the highest quality possible as their final place of repose.

I want to recognize former Chairman Bob Filner's efforts to direct the NCA to change its requirements for establishing a national cemetery from 170,000 veterans in a 75-mile radius to 80,000 veterans in a 75-mile radius. With this change, the NCA met the burial needs of 89% of the total veteran population in fiscal year 2011. I appreciate the VA's decision outlined in President Obama's fiscal year 2013 budget to change service area guidelines to better accommodate the needs of rural and urban veterans. These changes will increase the number of veterans served by a federally implicated burial option.

Despite the progress we made in the previous Congress, we must do better, particularly as it pertains to wait times for burials and quality control at NCA facilities. I think we are all aware of the numerous errors related to the VA's contractor-executed Raise-and-Realign project revealed after the VA's audit of 93 of its 131 cemeteries.

I've said this in the Subcommittee before. Mistakes like these are unacceptable. They are as avoidable as they are awful. They rob us of time that could otherwise be spent ensuring that our Nation's heroes are properly laid to rest. More importantly, these mistakes rob the family and friends of the peace of mind they deserve. I hope to hear a positive update from NCA on the resolution of these errors and prevention efforts moving forward.

Further, the value of the current \$300 burial allowance and \$300 plot allowance for qualifying veterans has diminished as funeral and burial costs have increased - negatively affecting the survivors left behind.

Additionally, the National Shrine Mandate holds that "all national and other veterans' cemeteries under control of the NCA shall be considered national shrines." The NCA's ability to meet and maintain the National Shrine Mandate will require adoption of the highest quality assurance measures.

I applaud the Independent Budget's thorough assessment of the NCA, highlighting current shortcomings and the need for targeted funding. In that vein, I believe that the VA should conduct a preemptive review of the NCA's obstacles in meeting the National Shrine Mandate and its other commitments.

This will help thwart new issues that may arise and ensure that existing ones do not grow in complexity, as we recently witnessed.

Finally, I look forward to hearing an update from Ms. Kathryn Condon and the progress being made with record keeping, contracting, and other issues at Arlington National Cemetery. I appreciate your vigilant oversight of Arlington, an unparalleled national treasure that serves a very unique mission. More needs to be done but you have made tremendous progress.

I also look forward to hearing from all of our esteemed witnesses. I welcome the opportunity to continue working with you to maintain our final commitment to those who gave so much for our country.

I yield back.

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### **Prepared Statement of Hon. Steve L. Muro**

Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member McNerney and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the national cemeteries under the jurisdiction of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). I know we all share the same commitment to providing our Nation's Veterans and Servicemembers with final resting places that memorialize their service and sacrifice.

I am pleased to provide an overview of several current activities the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is undertaking to meet its missions of providing burial and memorialization benefits to Veterans as well as maintaining our VA national cemeteries as national shrines. I will also describe steps being taken to further strengthen our operational processes and systems as well as listen to our customers, both Veterans and their families. Finally, I will review how NCA will meet the changing environment and technologies of the future while remaining respectful of the 150 years that make our history.

#### *Collaboration with our Federal, Private, and VSO Partners*

While each Federal agency present today has a distinct focus and expertise, we share a common commitment to memorializing the service of our Nation's Veterans. I would like to share some examples of long-standing partnerships that promote cross-agency efficiency and enhance the quality of Federal burial and memorial services.

NCA provides Government-furnished headstones and markers for all federally-administered cemeteries, except the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC). In FY 2011, NCA was honored to provide over 39,000 headstones and markers to other Federal and state Veteran cemeteries, including Department of Defense (DoD) cemeteries and the Department of the Interior's National Park Service (NPS) national cemeteries.

NCA's National Training Center and annual conference provide an opportunity to share best practices and standards among all agencies. NCA manages a congressionally mandated advisory Committee, on which representatives from ABMC, NPS, and Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) are ex-officio members. The Committee provides advice to the Secretary on issues related to the selection of cemetery sites, erection of appropriate memorials and the adequacy of Federal burial benefits for Veterans. The Committee performs relevant work to help NCA meet its strategic goals that allow it to meet the needs of Servicemembers, Veterans and their eligible family members.

In addition to these ongoing partnerships, NCA recognizes the need for continuous collaboration. For example, we recently responded to DoD's invitation to provide technical assistance during their internal comprehensive review of all service academy cemeteries. We continue to partner with ANC and look forward to establishing a joint DoD/NCA working group, a recommendation of a recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report, to continue support and to further leverage opportunities for shared improvement. With this expanded collaboration the working group can collectively identify potential improvements, share lessons learned, avoid potential duplication and develop solutions. We continue our long-standing partnership with ABMC to preserve and enhance the Honolulu Memorial at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific.

Partnering with other Federal agencies is just one aspect of providing burial benefits to our nation's Veterans. NCA also works closely with funeral directors and private cemeteries, two other significant stakeholder groups. Funeral directors are often the spokespersons for the Veteran or next of kin and are also directly involved in the delivery of NCA services through the coordination of committal services and interments. Funeral directors may also assist families in applying for headstones, markers, and other memorial benefits. NCA partners with private cemeteries to furnish more than 200,000 headstones and markers for Veterans' gravesites in these private cemeteries each year.

Veterans Service Organizations are key stakeholders and partners in the VA mission. These organizations act as a voice for Veterans and their families, and as advocates for their needs and expectations. At many national cemeteries, they are impor-

tant partners in providing support for military funeral honors, and we value the services they provide to our Veterans.

States and tribal governments, usually operating through their Veterans Affairs Departments, play an increasingly important role in providing service to Veterans and their families. By establishing and operating Veterans cemeteries as a complement to VA national cemeteries, they provide burial options for Veterans and their families.

#### *National Cemetery Administration Overview*

NCA is one of the three administrations within VA. NCA is responsible for administering burial and memorial programs to meet the needs of Veterans, their families and survivors. We partner with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) in the provision of burial benefits provided by VA.

Our responsibilities include: managing 131 national cemeteries and 33 soldiers' lots and monuments; furnishing headstones, markers and medallions for the graves of Veterans around the world; administering the Presidential Memorial Certificate program; administering the First Notice of Death Program; and, overseeing the Federal grants program for construction of state and tribal Veterans cemeteries.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the enactment of congressional legislation authorizing the establishment of national cemeteries during the Civil War. We are proud to be the latest in a long line of cemeterians charged with keeping this sacred trust.

As we move forward into the next fiscal year, we project our workload numbers will continue to increase. For FY 2013, we anticipate conducting an estimated 119,700 interments of Veterans or their family members, maintaining and providing perpetual care for over 3 million gravesites, maintaining 8,700 developed acres, and processing approximately 350,000 headstone and marker applications. We plan to meet this demand while maintaining our high level of customer service to those we serve.

VA's burial and memorial programs are funded from both discretionary and mandatory accounts. Mandatory funding is provided from the Compensation and Pension account, managed by VBA. These funds are used to purchase headstones, markers, medallions and burial crypts. The President's 2013 budget request includes a total of \$372 million for NCA's discretionary programs. Of this amount, \$258 million and 1,700 FTE are included for operations and maintenance of our national cemeteries which will allow us to continue to meet our growing workload.

#### *Ensuring Access to a Burial Option for our Veterans*

NCA is currently experiencing the largest expansion of the national cemetery system since the Civil War. We built 18 new national cemeteries between 1992 and 2010, and are in the land-acquisition and planning phases for five more. Further, we are moving forward with initiatives to meet the unique needs of Veterans in highly rural and urban areas, and we continue to partner with states and tribes to fund construction of Veterans cemeteries in areas where national cemeteries do not meet the full demand. Taken together, these efforts will allow us to attain our target of providing 94 percent of Veterans with a burial option within 75 miles of their home by 2015.

Veterans' access to a burial option has increased from 75 percent as recently as 2004 to 89 percent in 2011. Our FY 2013 budget request will enable VA to provide almost 90 percent of the Veteran population, or close to 20 million Veterans, with a burial option in a national, state or tribal Veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their homes. This dramatically increased access over just 8 years is the result of a comprehensive strategic planning process that analyzes the best use of resources to reach the greatest number of Veterans, as well as the continued support of Congress.

In FY 2011, VA reduced the minimum Veteran population threshold requirement for building new national cemeteries from 170,000 to 80,000 within 75 miles of a proposed site. As a result of this policy change, NCA is planning to establish five new national cemeteries in the areas of Central East Florida; Omaha, Nebraska; Western New York; Tallahassee, Florida; and Southern Colorado. NCA is actively searching for land in these locations and expects to request related construction funding in future budgets. With available resources, NCA will continue with land acquisition efforts and preliminary design for the five cemeteries in FY 2013.

Also in FY 2011, VA introduced its urban initiative. NCA plans to build columbarium-only satellite cemeteries in five urban locations: Chicago, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, New York and San Francisco. Construction of these facilities will improve access for Veterans in densely populated metropolitan areas where issues of distance and travel challenges between the urban population core and the existing national

cemetery are known to be barriers to service and satisfaction. Funding was provided for Los Angeles, San Francisco (design) and Chicago through FY 2012. The FY 2013 budget includes funding for the New York City area; Indianapolis will be included in a future budget request.

Additionally, NCA is implementing a new policy aimed at reaching Veterans in highly rural areas that do not qualify for a national cemetery and where the construction of a state cemetery is not likely. This initiative will establish a national cemetery presence in 8 rural areas where a Veteran population of at least 25,000 within a 75-mile radius service area currently has no national or state Veterans cemetery option. These National Veterans Burial Grounds would be NCA-owned and managed acreage within the boundaries of public or private cemeteries. As a result of this initiative, an additional 136,000 Veterans will have convenient access to a burial option in Idaho, Maine, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Utah, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

#### *Memorialization of Veterans' Service*

NCA administers the VA headstone, marker, and medallion benefit as well as the Presidential Memorial Certificate (PMC) program. NCA provides at no charge to the applicant, a headstone, marker, or medallion for any deceased eligible Veteran in any cemetery in the world. We provide headstones and markers for eligible spouses and dependents of Veterans in Federal and state Veteran cemeteries. NCA also provides a PMC to honor the memory of a deceased Veteran discharged under honorable conditions and expresses the country's grateful recognition of their service in the Armed Forces. Available to family members and loved ones, the PMC is a gold-embossed paper certificate bearing the official signature of the President of the United States. We continue to see an increase in the number of requests and copies for PMCs. While the number of applications processed for headstones and markers has remained relatively steady, the number of PMCs issued has increased substantially. In FY 2011, NCA processed 373,000 applications for headstones and markers and issued nearly 780,000 PMCs.

Recent congressional action with the enactment of Public Law 109-461, Veterans Benefits, Health Care, and Information Technology Act of 2006 has allowed VA to memorialize with a medallion a Veteran's service if they are buried in a private cemetery and have a privately-furnished marker. This law, which allows VA to provide a bronze medallion for placement on a privately-furnished marker, has been well received by families whose Veteran loved-one is buried in a private cemetery. In 2011, over 7,000 medallions were provided. The Department's FY 2013 budget includes two legislative proposals for consideration. One would expand eligibility for medallions by removing the November 1, 1990 applicability date, and the other would allow VA to provide government-furnished headstones and markers for the privately marked graves of Medal of Honor recipients who died prior to November 1, 1990. The proposals, if enacted, would allow for expanded recognition of the service of our Veterans.

#### *Partnership with the States and Tribal Governments*

NCA continues to maintain a close partnership with the states and tribal governments through our Veterans Cemetery Grants Program. The program was created in 1978 to further expand burial access to Veterans, especially those living in highly rural areas. Today, there are 85 VA-funded state and tribal cemeteries in 39 states, Guam and Saipan, with seven more now under construction. These cemeteries conducted 29,500 burials for Veterans and family members in FY 2011.

The expansion of the grant program to allow tribal governments to receive grants has been extremely valuable. Last fall, NCA awarded the first of three grants for the establishment of tribal Veterans cemeteries on tribal lands; recipients were the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in South Dakota; the Yurok Tribe in California; and the Pascua Yaqui Tribe in Arizona. Additional tribal governments have submitted applications for consideration in FY 2012.

Our FY 2013 budget request provides \$46 million for the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program and will allow NCA to support states in collaboratively meeting high priority projects that serve Veterans, including those projects submitted by tribal governments. As part of this program, VA will continue to offer operating grants to assist states and tribes in achieving and maintaining standards of appearance commensurate with national cemetery shrine status.

#### *Accountability in VA National Cemeteries*

As you know, in October 2011, I directed a system-wide audit of the entire inventory of gravesites within the national cemetery system. This self-initiated and comprehensive audit will confirm the proper location of all headstones and markers. It is being conducted in two phases: 1) in those burial sections where "raise and re-

align” projects were completed, and 2) in the remaining burial sections that comprise the rest of the NCA inventory.

NCA initiated the first phase of the audit in October 2011, following the discovery of markers that were offset one gravesite in a burial section of Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery in San Antonio, Texas, where a “raise and realign” project had been completed in 2004. Cemetery staff discovered the error during a field test to verify the accuracy of newly formatted gravesite maps.

NCA recognizes the grief and emotional hardship these errors cause and will correct these errors as soon as possible. We know we have just one chance to get it right. When we make a mistake, we address it immediately and openly. We have contacted the affected families where possible, extended our sincere apologies and made appropriate corrections. For all additional corrective actions identified, NCA will notify next of kin, congressional Committees, and congressional district offices regarding required corrective action.

Generally, situations involving headstones or markers set on the wrong gravesites during “raise and realign” renovation projects are very rare. The major “raise and realign” renovation projects are critical to NCA’s ability to meet its National Shrine standards which ensure headstones and markers are maintained at proper height and alignment. The audit confirmed that the vast majority of work accomplished during “raise and realign” projects at 92 VA national cemeteries was accomplished accurately and according to contract. NCA is taking corrective actions when errors are identified. One and one-half million gravesites at 92 national cemeteries and one confederate cemetery have been audited.

The first phase has been completed and 1.5 million headstones and markers were audited. The second phase will begin to audit the remaining headstones and markers until all 3.1 million gravesites that NCA maintains are audited. NCA anticipates completing phase two of the audit by the end of calendar year 2012.

NCA requires that the performance of all cemetery work, whether contracted or in-house, meets the highest standards of accuracy and appearance. Future contracts for renovation projects to “raise and realign” headstones and markers will require contractors to keep each headstone or marker at the gravesite. Such control measures will reduce the likelihood of human error in inaccurately replacing the headstones and markers.

During the initial phases of the audit, a finding related to contract oversight was identified. In the few instances where headstones or markers were offset by one gravesite, it was determined that employees who were responsible for monitoring the contractors work did not do a proper final check of all headstone and markers to ensure final proper placement back on the current gravesite. NCA will be hiring certified, full-time, contracting officer representatives (CORs) at each of our Memorial Service Network (MSN) offices to oversee future gravesite renovation projects.

NCA continues to promote corporate accountability through updates to system-wide operational accountability practices, workforce training, integration of information technology and strategic planning. We are confident that the processes and systems that we have in place will continue to ensure such errors are minimized as we reinforce compliance to them by our employees and contractors.

#### *Continued Enhancement to our Record Keeping System*

NCA’s Burial Operations Support System (BOSS) Enterprise database was developed in 1994 to be a multi-function electronic system that provides automated capabilities for supporting the day-to-day administrative processes at VA national cemeteries. Its functionalities include establishing and managing burial application cases, scheduling interments, creating and maintaining gravesite information; creating and tracking orders for headstones, markers, and niche covers; scheduling and tracking disinterments and reinterments; and compiling reports. BOSS is the major information technology (IT) application hosting many subcomponent systems including:

- Automated Monument Application System (AMAS);
- Monument Application Scanning System (MASS);
- Management and Decision Support System (MADSS);
- Presidential Memorial Certificate (PMC); and
- Cemetery Kiosk and Nationwide Gravesite Locator (NGL) with Mobile Outreach Application.

In 2003, NCA completed a project that converted approximately 2.5 million paper and microfilm historical interment records dating back to the 1800s into electronic records. These records were reviewed and verified utilizing Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology and manual processes to ensure their accuracy, completeness, and reliability before they were included in BOSS.

Presently, BOSS maintains approximate 10 million records. It is used by VA national cemeteries as well as other Veteran cemeteries, including State and tribal Veterans, Post/Military, Department of Army, and Department of the Interior Cemeteries. Over 100,000 interments at VA National Cemeteries are recorded in BOSS each year. It is proving to be one of our strongest cost saving resources in conducting the current audit of the burial sections that have undergone “raise and realign” projects.

NCA and VA’s Office of Information and Technology (OIT) are positioned to provide continued support of NCA’s legacy IT systems, all of which are at the end of their life-cycle, while also supporting IT modernization and redesign efforts.

The VA’s 2013 OIT budget includes approximately \$10 million for operation and maintenance of existing IT systems and \$11 million for development projects to modernize and redesign its databases, IT systems, hardware and software infrastructure platforms, and network. These funds will support development projects that will enable NCA to improve quality, minimize the possibility of error, and reduce the time needed to deliver burial and memorial benefits. Development projects will enable the exchange of information within VA as well as with organizations outside of VA. The ability for NCA to take advantage of the information flow from other agencies such as DoD, Department of Justice, and Social Security Administration, as well as from VA, will improve the efficiency and timeliness of providing burial and memorial benefits. In return, information gathered by NCA may create one IT data base that would support information data exchange and sharing with other agencies and administrations that operate Federal, state, or tribal cemeteries to ensure accurate accounting of Veteran records.

As part of our oversight responsibilities and commitment to transparency, NCA instituted enhanced accountability measures and maintained our focus on workforce training. NCA shared our plans and these aspects of our success with Arlington National Cemetery and recently requested that a planning meeting be scheduled to establish the joint DoD/NCA working group recommended by GAO. We look forward to sharing best practices with our Federal partners.

#### **Achieving Performance Results and Customer Satisfaction**

The 2013 budget will allow NCA to continue to achieve exceptionally high performance results. We will process 90 percent of headstone and marker applications for Veterans buried in locations other than VA national cemeteries (e.g., private cemeteries, state and tribal Veterans cemeteries) within 20 days of receiving the request. Ninety-five percent of gravesites in national cemeteries will be marked within 60 days of an interment.

NCA is committed to maintaining its high level of customer satisfaction. NCA achieved the top national rating four times in ten years on the prestigious American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) established by the University of Michigan. The Index is the only national, cross-industry measure of satisfaction in the United States. In 2010, we surpassed over 100 other Federal agencies, and industry leaders like Ford, FedEx, and Coca Cola. NCA’s independent customer survey confirms this exceptional level of performance. In FY 2011, 98 percent of respondents rated the appearance of national cemeteries as excellent and 95 percent rated the quality of service as excellent. Our 2013 targets for cemetery appearance and quality of service are 99 and 98 percent, respectively.

NCA attributes this success to the development and application of rigorous operational standards and measures that promote transparency and accountability, a national focus on training and strategic planning, as well as the continued support of the President and Congress. The FY 2013 budget reflects the sustained and significant investments in national cemeteries provided over the past several years. The base budget for operations includes nearly \$32.9 million for projects to raise, realign and clean headstones and markers and repair sunken graves, as part of our ongoing effort to maintain national cemeteries as national shrines worthy of Veterans’ service and sacrifice. My personal expectation of each employee in NCA is that they will provide Veterans and their families with outstanding customer service.

#### **Veterans Serving Veterans**

Our veteran-focused work ethic is no surprise, given that 73.5 percent of NCA employees are Veterans and 80 percent of our cemetery directors are Veterans. Since January 2009, NCA has hired more than 250 Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom Veterans, with almost 50 being hired since June 2011.

NCA is also committed to contracting with small businesses, especially businesses owned by Veterans and service-disabled Veterans. In FY 2011, NCA far exceeded the Secretary’s goals for awards to small businesses: NCA awarded 77 percent of

contracts to service-disabled Veteran owned small businesses, which was significantly above the Secretary's target of 10 percent. In addition, NCA met all goals in every contracting set-aside. We expect to achieve similar results in FY 2013.

#### **Apprenticeship Training and Compensated Work Therapy Programs**

Regarding the goal to end Veteran homelessness, NCA will provide employment opportunities through the establishment of a new, paid Apprenticeship Training Program serving Veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The program will be based on current NCA training for positions such as Cemetery Caretakers and Cemetery Representatives. Veterans who successfully complete the program at national cemeteries will be eligible for full-time permanent employment at a national cemetery or may choose to pursue employment in the private sector.

Through VA's Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) program, homeless Veterans earn pay while learning new job skills, relearning successful work habits, and regaining a sense of self-esteem and self-worth. NCA currently has 138 CWT Veterans that work in VA national cemeteries around the country assisting with interment operations as well as grounds and facilities maintenance activities. Since 1994, NCA has hired 72 permanent employees through the CWT program.

#### **Increasing Efficiencies and Adapting to Meet Veterans' Changing Needs**

NCA continues to apply several system-wide efficiencies such as the use of pre-placed crypts, water-wise landscaping, alternative energy and headstone and marker foundations to optimize resource usage. For example, NCA has applied system-wide use of crypts to preserve land and reduce maintenance/operating costs; applied "water-wise" landscaping that conserves water and other resources; installed alternative energy products, including solar panels and a wind turbine, that supply power to facilities; installed innovative headstone/marker foundations to ensure long term height and alignment and to reduce maintenance needs; and is using memorial walls to reduce the land used for gravesites for individuals whose remains are not available and save land for in-ground cremains. In 2011, NCA received several national awards for water and energy management and conservation.

In 2009, NCA assumed responsibility for the VA's First Notice of Death program, through which we ensure timely discontinuation of payments to deceased Veterans. By issuing timely notices of death, the office frees up other VA staff to provide additional Veterans' benefit services, and has enabled VA to avoid over \$100 million in overpayments to deceased Veterans. Further, we are seeing reductions in both costs associated with collection actions and stress experienced by family members responsible for repayment. Working in partnership with OIT, we are also issuing notices to stop automatic shipment of prescriptions from the VA pharmacy program and to cancel medical appointments at VA Medical Centers, so those slots can go to other Veterans.

Building upon our success, we look toward the future and the needs our Veterans and their families will have in the years to come. In 2011, NCA initiated an independent study of emerging burial practices including "green" burial techniques, such as biodegradable urns, underwater cremation reefs and other environmentally sensitive options, to identify those that may be appropriate and feasible for planning purposes. The study will be completed in fall 2012 and will include a survey of Veterans to ascertain their preferences and expectations for new burial options. The completed study will provide comprehensive information and analysis for leadership consideration of new burial options.

#### **Conclusion**

One hundred fifty years ago this July, Congress authorized the establishment of the first national cemeteries, and entrusted the care of those who fell in battle to the cemeterians who preceded us. We continue to maintain that sacred trust, caring for Service members, their survivors, our Veterans and their families, in their hour of need.

We have done a lot and there is more to do. We will continue to address challenges in a people-focused, results-driven way that reflects our core values: Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence ("I CARE"). We are committed to expanding our cooperation with the funeral industry, Veterans Service Organizations, our colleagues in the Departments of Defense and Interior, at the American Battle Monuments Commission, and at state and tribal Veterans cemeteries, for the expressed purpose of improving service to Veterans; in other words, to serve them as well as they have served us.

This concludes my remarks. I am happy to answer any questions.

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### Prepared Statement of Kathryn A. Condon

Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member McNerney and distinguished Members, thank you for the opportunity to update you on our recent progress and highlight the investments needed for the future of the Army National Cemeteries Program (ANCP). Our efforts to date have allowed us to re-build the solid foundation that our veterans, Congress and the Nation can and should expect of its premier military cemeteries. These standards, controls and systems are also allowing us for the first time to understand the cost—in people, money and time—to maintain our operations and hallowed grounds in a professional, efficient and sustainable manner. This year's request for additional resources is critical to fix a long ignored, antiquated and inefficient infrastructure, while also initiating burial expansion efforts before our veterans' need outpaces prepared land. By practicing sound and transparent fiscal stewardship, we will also ensure our future priority needs, guided by our strategic plans, are captured and reviewed in future years within the standard Army budget process.

#### *A REBUILT FOUNDATION*

Since I last appeared before this sub-committee in October 2011, we have continued to make rapid and sustainable progress across the organization. Building upon the increased workforce, training and standards about which I previously discussed, I want to highlight five strategic efforts currently underway. First, our accountability efforts steadfastly continue. By this summer, we will produce Arlington's first ever single, authoritative and digital database using repeatable processes that deliver predictable results. Second, our efforts to extend the burial life of the cemetery are advancing, including the Columbarium Court #9, Millennium Project and Navy Annex, all being captured in our ongoing Master Plan. Third, our Enterprise Architecture (EA) and Technology Acquisition Roadmap development is on track for an early summer completion, aligning our priorities and information technology (IT) investments with my vision. Fourth, we continue proactively engaging with partner organizations, including those with whom I am testifying today, leveraging and sharing each others' capabilities and expertise. Finally, my unwavering commitment to fiscal stewardship and contracting excellence is enabling the ANCP for the first time to plan, program and budget for our requirements and then ensure we are using our resources responsibly and transparently for our immediate and long-term needs. These efforts are all components of our strategic Campaign Plan, our overall roadmap aligning and focusing our key efforts on the mission and my vision for the ANCP.

#### *Accountability*

Creating an accountable data set of all gravesites serves at the base of all our efforts. The Gravesite Accountability Study Findings report, submitted to Congress in December in accordance with Public Law (PL) 111-339, outlined the repeatable processes we are using to produce Arlington's first ever single, authoritative and digital database. By this summer, we will complete this effort to account for every service and family member resting in solemn repose from over 14 decades of burials. While no one is more eager than I to conclude this effort, our experienced team is painstakingly reviewing and validating records to confirm the disposition of the most historic burials at ANC. In the past ten weeks, we validated 22,435 additional gravesites, now totaling 218,183 or 84% of those identified at Arlington. We are working diligently to close the remaining 16% of the cases to bring our efforts to completion by this summer.

As we validate records, we have also created a solid foundation of standards and processes. We have an auditable chain of custody in place using standards that exceed that of the industry. Our workforce is using the best practices developed by Gravesite Accountability Task Force to ensure all future records remain aligned with our accountability standards. As I will discuss later, our use of geospatial application system (GIS) based technology is also reinforcing this accountability, allowing us soon to launch internal scheduling and operations systems operating from a single digital ANC map.

#### *Extending the Burial Life of the Army National Cemeteries*

With the land currently ready for burials, ANC will exhaust first interment space by the year 2016 and first interment space by 2024. Working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Norfolk District, and using no-year funds we recovered, we began construction on the ninth court of our Columbarium in November. This will extend our above ground burial space by eight years (to 2024), providing us a short



window of time before we must begin construction on our two other expansion areas—the Millennium Project and the Navy Annex—to ensure there is no lapse in first burial operations. As we speak, the Army National Cemeteries Advisory Commission is meeting for the second time, and one topic on which they are advising the Secretary of the Army is a recommended design for the Millennium Project expansion. The Navy Annex buildings are scheduled to be demolished soon, after which construction efforts can begin to allow ANC to extend first burials through the mid-2050s. We continue to work closely with Department of Defense (DoD) and Arlington County officials on these efforts.

We are incorporating all of our expansion efforts within our recently begun effort to update our Master Plan for ANC and the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery (SAHNC). Last updated in 1998, our Master Plan will ensure we maximize the available land for burials, coordinate future construction plans and subsequent technology requirements, and retain the solemnity and historic presence of this national shrine. Our ANCP Master Planner is leading a concept design conference in two weeks, bringing together ANCP leaders with those from governmental and historic, fine arts and other public agencies. Aligned with our Campaign Plan, updating the Master Plan is another critical step forward for us.

#### *Using Information Technology to Achieve our Vision*

Harnessing state-of-the-art technology to conduct our burial operations, family outreach and other activities has remained central to our progress since I arrived 21 months ago. While still working through technology and security constraints, the ANCP is employing leading edge technology to operate the cemetery and communicate with our families. For instance, we will soon launch the ANCP's internal geospatial application system (GIS). By producing a single electronic map of ANC, we can assign, manage and track gravesites with an authoritative digital map, a first for a cemetery. We will also be able to synchronize in real-time these burial operations with the ongoing ceremonies, visitor outreach, infrastructure repair, grounds upkeep and public safety efforts we have ongoing daily across the cemetery.

Additional advances in technology at Arlington allow funeral service representatives to certify burials electronically, confirming the services occurred as scheduled and recording needed details about the service. This record will be electronically available for decades and will allow the ANCP to be more accurate, accountable and efficient in conducting our operations. As our digital accountability database is completed and integrated with the GIS system, we will have the capability to better identify and understand trends, obstacles and other ways to more effectively and efficiently conduct our mission.

By this summer, we will also release our public-facing GIS applications. Once launched, these applications will allow users to locate gravesites or other important sites throughout the cemetery, generate front-and-back pictures of a marker, and receive directions to these sites. These applications will operate across common web browsers, mobile smart phones and on-site kiosks, allowing families, loved ones and the general public to access Arlington from web browsers on our state-of-the-art Web site.

We are also using technology to better support our military families preparing to lay to rest their loved ones. We are testing our online Headstone Formatting Tool, working with a small set of families to enable them to review and approve headstone markers remotely on a password-protected section of the ANCP Web site. Once testing is complete, this tool will allow the ANCP to better support our families in their time of need while also increasing the accuracy of this permanent tribute to our Nation's military heroes and families.

Just as the Master Plan synchronizes and guides our expansion, we remain on track to complete our EA and Technology Acquisition Roadmap in May. Developed in accordance with the DoD's Architecture Framework (DoDAF) model, once complete the EA will ensure our future IT investments are aligned, prioritized and programmed according to identified business needs.

#### *Leveraging our Many Partners*

We appreciate the deeply vested interests that so many organizations and individuals have in ensuring our efforts restore the trust and confidence in the Army National Cemeteries. The Secretary of the Army's guidance and detailed recommendations from the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Army Audit Agency (AAA) and the Department of the Army Inspector General (DAIG) have helped us focus our efforts, many serving as the basis for our Campaign Plan's objectives, subtasks, metrics and milestones. Our expansion and Master Plan efforts previously mentioned could not be completed without our partners. We are also leveraging ex-

perts within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Army National Cemeteries Advisory Commission to make progress more efficient, accurate and timely.

Arlington's partnership with the VA continues to develop. For instance, we work cooperatively and share best practices with the VA National Cemetery Administration (NCA), including sending our personnel to the NCA National Training Center in St. Louis to receive training on various aspects of burial operations. Last week we hosted the VA Deputy Undersecretary for Field Programs and staff from VA's Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER) Program Management Office (PMO) to demonstrate our GIS system and discuss our case management methodology as it applies to call centers. We are also now reviewing ways to incorporate lessons learned from this meeting, helping the ANCP continue improving our own processes and procedures.

The Army National Cemetery Advisory Commission concludes its second meeting today. As a Federal Advisory Commission, these distinguished members are reviewing some of the ANCP's most important and sensitive topics to provide independent recommendations to the Secretary of the Army and Secretary of Defense. The Commission's three Subcommittees are examining how best to extend the burial life of ANC, address the cracks in the Tomb of the Unknowns, and capture and convey the Army National Cemeteries' history, including the long-term implications of ANC Section 60 mementos and improving the experience for those who visit ANC. Seven of nine members have been appointed, and we are working diligently to fill the two vacant positions. The ANCP is honored to have the depth and breadth of experience and expertise of our distinguished commission members, each volunteering his or her time to support the Army National Cemeteries Program.

#### *Responsible Stewards of our Nation's Resources*

Practicing sound fiscal stewardship builds upon the progress we have made across the organization, including gravesite accountability, infrastructure modernization, capital investments, IT transformation, training, contracting and business process transformation within our budget authority. We have identified, reconciled and recovered \$26.8 million from prior year transactions that we were able to re-obligate against projects to resolve deficient areas. We continue to monitor our spending plan and reconcile our accounts to ensure we make the most efficient and effective use of our funding. We are also using our strategic Campaign Plan to prioritize our resources—including people, money and time—to ensure we are investing the funds provided in a deliberate, transparent, and prioritized way to our most critical projects in the near- and long-term.

In partnership with our Army acquisition stakeholders, we have made significant progress addressing GAO's remaining contracting recommendations: establishing a centralized contracting database, the Army Contracting Command's Virtual Contracting Enterprise (VCE) tool, about which I discussed last testimony; clearly defining support roles and responsibilities within support agreements; and determining the acquisition skills needed to support operations.

The Mission and Installation Contracting Command (MICC) completed the personnel hiring process for our on-site Contract Support Element (CSE). We will request GAO close this report recommendation, as this finalizes the analysis and determination of the acquisition skills required to support Arlington operations.

We are also beginning significant efforts to implementing a green procurement approach. Last month we provided the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Installations, Energy and Environment an overview of our energy, environmental and sustainment procurement initiatives, which include the implementation of the VCE Paperless Contract Files (VCE-PCF) and transition to Purchase Card Online System (PCOLS). Our sustainability initiatives extend across our activities, including use of electrical vehicles, solar power, recycled materials for sidewalks and native plants and perennials to maintain the long-term beauty and natural environment of our Cemeteries.

#### **RESPONSIBLY USING AND FORECASTING OUR RESOURCE NEEDS**

The fiscal year 2013 President's Budget outlines the ANCP's resources needed: \$45.8 million funding requirements to support current operations; \$103 million in investment for capital improvements projects to convert land to future burial sites; and \$25 million for modernization projects to repair and maintain our aging infrastructure.

These are significant requests, especially in comparison to our previous budgets. In addition, these requests include our urgent need to support overdue infrastructure repair and modernization before more costly, publically reported, visibly detracting and potentially hazardous catastrophic failures occur. These funds will allow us to make needed repairs to our roads, HVAC systems, deteriorating and

aging underground utilities and crumbling boundary wall around the cemetery. This will also allow us to begin in FY13 our Millennium Project expansion, long under study and to which we are completing an additional environmental and archeological assessment. Given the extensive construction required to complete a site appropriate for these grounds, delaying construction after FY13 will increase its costs and risk not completing this project before the ANCP requires use of additional burial space. Our stewardship efforts to date will also ensure that Army addresses the Navy Annex project, and plans to request those resources in future budget submissions. We are prioritizing, forecasting and planning for all future budget needs within the Army's standard budget process.

#### **CONCLUSION**

We have accomplished a great deal at the ANCP, and many strategic efforts are still ongoing. Our Campaign Plan is guiding our priority efforts and resource prioritization, including completing an accountable dataset of gravesites, the Master Plan, Enterprise Architecture, public-facing application and Virtual Contracting Enterprise in coordination with partners across and outside of DoD. As the hearing is aptly titled, we remain committed to improving the Army National Cemeteries, ensuring we honor America's fallen heroes and their families with the upmost respect and dignity they have earned and deserve, now and for decades to come.

#### **Executive Summary of Ms. Kathryn Condon**

**Hearing Subject:** To testify on the state of Army National Cemeteries Program (ANCP) as part of broader testimony on upkeep and areas for improvement by leadership from various Veterans' cemeteries.

The ANCP continues to make progress across all areas of cemetery operations. Nearly complete, the accountability efforts have informed implementing standard operating procedures by which leadership will effectively manage ANCP for many years to come.

- **Accountability Efforts:** In accordance with PL 111-339, ANC has continued to make progress in closing gravesite cases. Specifically, in the past 11 weeks since submitting the Gravesite Accountability Report to Congress, we have validated 22,435 additional gravesites for a total of 218,183 or 84% of those identified at Arlington. As part of validating gravesites, we photographed the front and back of each grave marker and entered them into a single, authoritative database along with specific burial data for each marker. By this summer, we will produce Arlington's first ever single, authoritative, digital database using repeatable processes that deliver predictable results. This month, we will begin the same accountability effort at the Soldier's and Airmen's Home National Cemetery in Washington, DC.
- **Extending the Life of ANC:** Our efforts to extend the life of Arlington continue and include the Columbarium #9, the Millennium Project and the Navy Annex projects. As it stands today, ANC will exhaust its first interment space by 2016 and first interment space by 2024. Construction on the Columbarium #9 Project began in January, and once it is complete in 2013, it will extend above-ground burials to the year 2024. Together the Navy Annex and Millennium projects will extend first burials into the mid-2050's.
- **Information Technology:** Harnessing state-of-the-art technology to conduct burial operations, family outreach and other activities remains at the center of our progress at ANCP. Our efforts in the area of Geospatial Information (GIS) operations will provide greater operational efficiency as well as provide increased family and public outreach capabilities. By producing a single authoritative digital map of Arlington, for instance, we can assign, manage and track gravesites digitally, a first for a cemetery. We will release our internal, operational GIS capability this month, and we plan to release our public-facing GIS application in the summer.
- **Partnership:** Arlington's partnership with the VA continues to develop. We established a working group with the National Cemeteries Administration (NCA) at the VA designed to share best practices and learn from one another's experiences. Last week we hosted a meeting where we discussed ANC expansion plans, chain-of-custody procedures and ANC IT advances in managing Arlington.
- **Responsible Stewardship:** Practicing sound fiscal stewardship supports the progress we have made across the organization. Over the past 21 months, we have identified, reconciled and re-obligated \$26.8 million from prior years' transactions. This use of funds has enabled many of the advances we have made such as construction on Columbarium #9, and we will continue to monitor our spending plan to ensure we make the most effective use of our funding.

## Prepared Statement of Raymond J. Wollman

### *Introduction*

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee . . .

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the cemeteries administered by the American Battle Monuments Commission. As we reported to you previously, honoring our Nation's fallen has been our purpose since the Commission's creation in 1923.

It is our responsibility to honor America's war dead and missing in action, where they have served overseas. We maintain 24 cemeteries and 25 memorials, monuments and markers worldwide. Most of our commemorative sites are in Europe; others are in North Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific. But it is not geography that defines the American Battle Monuments Commission—it is purpose.

ABMC's core mission is one of commemoration—honoring service and sacrifice by maintaining memorial shrines to our Nation's war dead and preserving their stories. We execute that mission by striving to maintain our commemorative sites to a high standard and by providing historical context for why our overseas monuments and cemeteries were established, why those memorialized within them died, and the values for which they died. Those whom we honor deserve nothing less.

Our maintenance standard is "like new." Most of our sites are 52 to 98 years old, with the Mexico City National Cemetery being nearly 161 years old. Maintaining these sites in a "like new" condition is challenging, but that is our objective. The following paragraphs illustrate the types of projects required to maintain our infrastructure.

### *Memorial Improvements*

A significant amount of work is required at our memorials to keep these beautiful centerpieces of our sites in excellent condition.

At *Florence* cemetery in Italy, the roofing system above the chapel and memorial was replaced and additional work is in design to level the terrace, repoint the Wall of the Missing, and realign stonework.

At *Ardennes* cemetery in Belgium, a project to improve waterproofing and drainage of the memorial's stone terrace is under design with award later this summer. The work includes removal then replacement of all stonework, including the Tablets of the Missing, and replacement of damaged interior wall stones.

At the *Epinal* cemetery and *Montsec* monument in France, and at the *Luxembourg* cemetery, cleaning and repointing of the memorial buildings will begin soon.

Also at *Epinal*, work will be completed this year to replace the asphalt terrace around the memorial and improve drainage.

And at *Sicily-Rome* cemetery in Italy, restoration of the fresco painting of battle maps is underway and restoration of the bronze and ceramic relief map will be awarded soon.

### *Headstones*

With two robots capable of refurbishing and engraving eight headstones per day each, we have made much progress in improving the overall appearance at our sites. We refurbished 1,100 headstones and engraved 650 new headstones in FY 2011. Projects are underway to replace a significant number of headstones in our *Brookwood* (England), *North Africa* (Tunisia), and *Manila* (Philippines) cemeteries, as well as ongoing refurbishment and replacement projects at most other sites, in particular at our World War I cemeteries.

### *Horticulture*

Just as our memorial cemeteries are enobled with great architecture and art, so too are they enriched with beautiful landscape architecture—some 900 acres of flowering plants, fine lawns and meadows; 3 million square feet of shrubs and hedges; 85,000 rose bushes, and 11,000 ornamental trees. All of these plantings, including lawns and to some extent the meadows, must be cut and shaped, fertilized and treated with insecticides and fungicides at regular intervals. Occasionally, more ambitious horticultural planting projects are required, such as one at *Meuse-Argonne* cemetery, where we will restore tree plantings to the original landscape plan by replacing beech trees with sycamores. And, since 2005, we have improved 12 irrigation systems.

### *Roads and Paths*

Work also is required in and around the cemetery plot areas to improve the horizontal surfaces and associated drainage.

At *Luxembourg*, the entire network of pathways is being replaced to improve bearing loads on perimeter routes and realign border stones. Other work includes replacing the original drainage system in the burial plots, releveling the terrace and improving drainage around the memorial, and improving handicap access to the burial plots and General Patton's grave.

The perimeter road and associated drainage at *Sicily-Rome* cemetery is being replaced and improved, as is drainage in the plot areas. Improvements related to a visitor center project at Sicily-Rome will be made to the entrance, including additional bus parking.

#### *Handicap Accessibility*

We completed a comprehensive accessibility study at our *11 cemeteries in France*. While the study included all areas that do not meet United States or host Nation codes, the focus was to ensure physical access to the plot areas, memorials, visitor centers, and restroom facilities. Studies will be conducted at our other sites, while projects are developed to correct deficiencies identified at the sites in France.

#### *Telling Their Story*

Maintaining our monuments and cemeteries is and will remain the Commission's core mission and top priority. But we also have a responsibility to tell the stories of those we honor. Accordingly, we have several improvement projects underway to do just that, which Secretary Cleland reported to you previously.

We expect to award three visitor center projects this year at Cambridge American Cemetery in England, Sicily-Rome American Cemetery in Italy, and at the Pointe du Hoc Ranger Monument in Normandy, France; and we have a project in design at Meuse-Argonne. Cambridge and Sicily-Rome will be new facilities, while Pointe du Hoc and Meuse-Argonne will be renovations and modest expansions of existing facilities.

To ensure that all of our cemeteries have basic interpretive information available as soon as possible, we are producing "temporary" exhibits that will be deployed within the next 18 months. This is particularly important for our World War I sites, as we approach the August 2014 beginning of the World War I Centennial.

#### *Manila American Cemetery and Pacific Memorials*

The story of World War II in the Pacific is the bookend to the story of World War II in Europe. In FY 2010, the Commission began efforts to bring the Manila American Cemetery and Pacific memorials up to the same standards we maintain in Europe.

The Manila American Cemetery in the Philippines is the Commission's largest cemetery and our only commemorative cemetery in the Pacific. It contains 17,201 graves of our military dead of World War II, most of whom lost their lives in operations in New Guinea and the Philippines. On rectangular limestone piers within the hemicycles are inscribed the Tablets of the Missing containing 36,285 names.

During FY 2010 and 2011, ABMC invested in horticulture projects to modify existing irrigation and pump systems and replace landscape and horticulture features. The Manila cemetery requirements beginning in FY 2012 are two-fold: improve the infrastructure of the cemetery and establish an enhanced interpretation program.

In order to combine interpretation and infrastructure efforts in a thoughtful process, a master plan was funded in FY 2011 to evaluate the need for major facility upgrades, assess current conditions and infrastructure priorities, and address the Commission's interpretive program.

Manila is the only ABMC cemetery in the Far East and where we have the ability to tell the story of the war in the Pacific. The cemetery honors by burial and by name on tablets of the missing more than 53,000 service men and women, nearly 24 percent of the 225,000 individuals honored at ABMC commemorative sites worldwide.

The master plan is not yet complete, and to the extent out-year funding is available, infrastructure and interpretation projects will be allocated and prioritized accordingly. However, early indications are that the Commission needs to address serious cemetery requirements. Two of those requirements will be addressed in FY 2013:

*Perimeter Wall:* There are serious encroachment and boundary issues at the cemetery. To protect the cemetery and to address security concerns, the Commission will replace the current chain link fence around the site with a robust perimeter wall. Unless marked by a substantial "permanent" wall, local culture ascribes a "temporary" definition to the boundary that will continue to subject our commemorative site to degradation by such intrusions as local highway

projects and infiltration by squatters. The new perimeter wall will be constructed in FY 2013 and should protect ABMC land from future intrusion.

*Quarters:* The design of our quarters will be funded in FY 2013. The existing two quarters are aging and are deficient in structure (walls are not insulated) and air conditioning (low efficiency window units).

*Pacific Memorials:* The Cabanatuan Memorial in the Philippines and the Guadalcanal Memorial in the Solomon Islands were built to lesser standards with inappropriate materials. The Commission plans to renovate the Cabanatuan Memorial in FY 2013. At the Guadalcanal Memorial, seismic activity is causing degradation of the granite and we have encroachment and vandalism concerns. In addition, at the Honolulu Memorial, located within the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, a handicap accessibility project was completed last year, new Vietnam War battle maps will be dedicated in November, and significant memorial renovations are scheduled.

#### *Heritage Assets*

Our commemorative memorial cemeteries are completed works of art. As we perform the work described above—be it routine maintenance, restoration, replacement, or new construction—we are sensitive to the Commission’s responsibility to preserve the historic fabric of our sites. New interventions, in particular, must be carefully planned so as not to denigrate these magnificent shrines to service and sacrifice, in keeping with their status as important national heritage assets.

#### *Conclusion*

The essence of our mission does not change from year to year: (1) keep the headstones white; (2) keep the grass green; and (3) tell the story of those we honor.

We are a small agency—about 400 people in total. But whether United States citizen or foreign national, our people remain committed to executing those three objectives with the sole purpose of fulfilling the promise made by our first Chairman, General of the Armies John J. Pershing, that “time will not dim the glory of their deeds.”

#### **Executive Summary of Hon. Raymond J. Wollman**

The core mission of the American Battle Monuments Commission is commemoration—honoring America’s war dead and missing in action by maintaining 24 cemeteries and 25 memorial shrines to their service and sacrifice and preserving their stories. The Commission’s maintenance standard is “like new.” Most of our sites are 52 to 98 years old—Mexico City National Cemetery is nearly 161 years old.

A significant amount of work is required at our memorials to keep these beautiful centerpieces of our cemeteries in excellent condition, from restoring works of art to repointing and realigning stonework to improving drainage. Just as our cemeteries are ennobled with great architecture and art, so too are they enriched with beautiful landscape architecture. Landscaping requirements range from routine maintenance to restoring original species of trees.

Within the plot areas, using robots to refurbish and engrave headstones has allowed us to improve the appearance at our sites. We refurbished 1,100 headstones and engraved 650 new headstones in FY 2011. Work also is required in and around the plot areas to improve the horizontal surfaces and associated drainage. And we completed a comprehensive accessibility study at our 11 cemeteries in France. Additional studies will be conducted at our other sites while projects are developed to correct deficiencies identified in France.

Maintaining our monuments and cemeteries is the Commission’s core mission and top priority. But we also have a responsibility to tell the stories of those we honor. To improve this program, we expect to award three new visitor center projects this year, and we have other projects in design to renovate or modestly expand existing visitor facilities.

Manila American Cemetery is our largest cemetery, which honors nearly 25 percent of the 225,000 individuals honored at ABMC sites worldwide, and our only commemorative cemetery in the Pacific. A master plan was funded in FY 2011 to evaluate the need for facility upgrades, assess infrastructure priorities, and address the Commission’s interpretive program. The master plan is not yet complete, however, early indications reveal that the Commission needs to address serious requirements in FY 2013: a new perimeter wall is needed to address serious encroachment and boundary issues and the design of our quarters which are deficient in structure and impacted by new high-rise construction.

Additionally, three memorials in the Pacific—Cabanatuan in the Philippines, Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, and the Honolulu Memorial—require much work to bring them up to standard.

Our memorial cemeteries are completed works of art. As we perform our work—be it routine maintenance, restoration, replacement, or new construction—we are sensitive to the Commission’s responsibility to preserve the historic fabric of our sites. New interventions must be carefully planned in keeping with their status as important national heritage assets.

The essence of our mission does not change from year to year: (1) keep the headstones white; (2) keep the grass green; and (3) tell the story of those we honor. We are a small agency—about 400 people in total—but our people remain committed to executing those objectives.

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### Prepared Statement of Raymond C. Kelley

#### MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THIS COMMITTEE:

On behalf of the more than 2 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and our Auxiliaries, the VFW would like to thank this Committee for the opportunity to present our views on our National Cemeteries.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) National Cemetery Administration (NCA) currently maintains more than 3 million graves at 131 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico. Of these cemeteries, 71 will be open to all interment; 19 will accept only cremated remains and family members of those already interred; and 41 will only perform interments of family members in the same gravesite as a previously deceased family member. The NCA also maintains 33 soldiers’ lots and monument sites. All told, the NCA manages 20,021 acres, half of which are developed.<sup>1</sup>

Today, there are nearly 22.4 million living veterans who have served our Nation as far back as World War II and every conflict and peacetime era since. However, it is estimated that approximately 653,000 veterans died in 2010. VA interred more than 111,000 veterans in 2010 and they expect that number to slowly climb and peak at 116,000 in 2013 and maintain that level through 2015. VA expects to maintain 400,000 more graves during that same period of time.<sup>2</sup>

The most important obligation of the NCA is to honor the memory of America’s brave men and women who served in the armed forces. Therefore, the purpose of these cemeteries as national shrines is one of the NCA’s top priorities. Many of the individual cemeteries within the system are steeped in history, and the monuments, markers, grounds, and related memorial tributes represent the very foundation of the United States. With this understanding, the grounds, including monuments and individual sites of interment, represent a national treasure that deserves to be protected and cherished.

The VFW would like to acknowledge the dedication and commitment of the NCA staff who continue to provide the highest quality of service to veterans and their families.

To keep a finger on the pulse of how well they are serving veterans across the agency, each year VA publishes a Performance and Accountability Report. There are 16 performance measures that fall under NCA. These measures range from how quickly gravesites are marked after interment to how many people would recommend a national cemetery to a veteran in need. More than half of these measures come very close or perform better than their strategic targets.

There are four of these performance measures that the VFW would like to discuss today. First is accessibility to veterans’ cemeteries. NCA has made a commitment to provide burial options for 94 percent of all veterans living in the United States. They are currently at 89 percent. Their success in providing these options is based on them having a solid metric that account for where there is or will be burial needs and where NCA doesn’t have an accessible cemetery. In FY 2012, NCA reduced the veteran population threshold from 170,000 veterans to 80,000 veterans living within a 75 mile radius as a new guideline to establish cemetery placement. This will allow NCA to provide National Cemetery access to an additional 500,000 veterans.

NCA has also been investing in state cemetery grants program, and between 1998 and 2010, 75 state veterans’ cemeteries have been established. The NCA is currently holding 104 state cemetery grant applications, 61 of which the state or Nation or Tribe has committed their portion of the funds. The NCA will have to invest \$152 million in architectural and engineering funds to meet their obligated match for these state cemeteries. This is cost effective way to ensure that areas that don’t con-

<sup>1</sup>Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration Fact Sheet (July, 2010). <http://www.cem.va.gov/pdf/facts.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>FY 2011 Budget Submission Summary Vol. III. P. 1A-6

tain the threshold of veterans will have burial options. These states have made a commitment to veterans; VA must match that commitment and fund these cemeteries as quickly as possible. The VFW, in partnership with the Independent Budget, is requesting appropriations of \$51 million for FY 2013 to accommodate the grant program.

NCA latest strategy to provide access to veteran's cemeteries is to purchase land from private cemeteries in rural areas where there are less than 25,000 veterans in 75 radius, and who don't have a national or state cemetery option. This will provide burial options for an estimated 136,000 veterans. There are eight states that currently meet this criteria; Idaho, Montana, Utah, Maine, North Dakota, Wisconsin, Wyoming and Nevada. These are all very positive steps and as they move forward with closing these access gaps, Congress must be prepared to fund these projects.

The next two performance measures can be combined. The percent of headstones, marker and niche covers that are clean and free of debris and the percent of headstones and marker that are at the proper height and alignment. These two measures represent the aesthetic appearance of our national cemeteries. In 2002, the Independent Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries identified nearly 1,000 deficiencies nationwide that will need to be corrected to reach their goal of improve cemetery appearance. This is not a static number of deficiencies, as some deficiencies are fixed, others, due to climate and time, become in need of correction. A lack of funding has led to this decline in appearance.

Over the past few years, NCA has done a commendable job of addressing these deficiencies by taking funds from its Operational and Maintenance budget, but targeted funding is the only way NCA will be able to reach its strategic goals. The goal for these two performance measures are 95 percent and 90 percent, however, they are currently at 82 percent and 73 percent respectively. That is why the VFW, in partnership with the Independent Budget, believes that NCA's Operational and Maintenance budget should be increased by \$20 million per year until their goals are reached. Currently, NCA estimates that \$208 million will have to be invested to eliminate the appearance gaps.

The fourth issue of concern is the capital infrastructure of NCA. The VFW believes NCA is a model administration, not only within VA but throughout the government. However, without proper resources it will continue to fall victim of VA's glaring concern, deteriorating infrastructure. Just like the rest of VA's infrastructure, NCA's buildings are deteriorating. Between 2010 and 2011, NCA's annual Facilities Condition Assessment (FCA) reported a 10 percent decline, from 84 percent to 74 percent in what is considered "acceptable" conditions for their structures. It will take an investment of more than \$62.5 million to fill all the condition gaps that have currently been identified. To continue to put off repairing VA's infrastructure issues is irresponsible. VA and Congress must make a commitment to improve VA's infrastructure, and that commitment starts with increased funding.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony and I will be happy to answer any question you, or the Committee may have.

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#### **Prepared Statement of W. Ashley Cozine**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this afternoon. I am Ashley Cozine, a third-generation funeral director in our family-owned mortuary that began operation in 1913. I began my career as a licensed funeral director in 1995. Currently we operate one mortuary, as well as a cemetery and crematory that we established in 1997. We serve approximately 350 families a year at our mortuary and employ 10-12. I currently serve on the Executive Board of the National Funeral Directors Association, and I am a past president of the Kansas Funeral Directors Association.

I am testifying today on behalf of the more than 19,000 funeral directors and funeral service personnel who are members of the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA). The average NFDA member is an independently owned and operated business with fewer than 10 employees and has been in the same family for over 60 years. NFDA is the leading funeral service organization in the United States, providing a national voice for the profession.

NFDA has a great interest in the national cemetery system as our members provide both funeral and burial services for our veterans and their families on a daily basis. Every day funeral directors offer comfort and support to families who are dealing with the loss of a loved one. When a family is dealing with the loss of a veteran, funeral directors help the family organize a personalized funeral and burial



that both celebrates the life of their loved one and honors their service to our country. The VA estimates that roughly 648,400 veterans died in the U.S. in 2011. Each one of these service men and women has a family or friends who grieved their loss, and in each case a funeral director helped ensure that every veteran received the care, honor, and dignity they earned because of their sacrifice for our country.

According to the National Cemetery Administration, the VA maintained more than 3.1 million gravesites at 164 properties, including 131 national cemeteries and 33 other cemetery installations, in 2011. The National Cemetery Administration is to be commended for their service to our nation's veterans. In preparation for my testimony here today, NFDA conducted a simple e-mail survey of NFDA members to obtain firsthand experiences from our members in relation to veterans cemeteries. We asked that our members recount their experiences, including service, upkeep and areas for improvement. Overall, our members were highly complimentary of the state of our veterans cemeteries. We received an almost unanimous response that our nation's national cemeteries operate efficiently, effectively, and with much compassion for those being buried there as well as their families. Our members have found the management and operation of these cemeteries to be courteous, flexible and accommodating to the needs of the funeral director and the family members of the deceased veterans.

One funeral director from Clawson, Michigan, stated; *"I would estimate that we average 30 services annually at Great Lakes National Cemetery. I must say that the cemetery is an example of how all cemeteries should function. The members of the staff are courteous and competent. The grounds are beautifully maintained and the services are appropriate to honor those who have sacrificed so much for our freedom. Additionally, their family members who are interred there are treated with the same respect and reverence as the veterans. Surviving family members are also shown every courtesy and kindness. We recommend Great Lakes National Cemetery to all our veterans' families who are in need of cemetery space both pre-need and at-need. It is a pleasure working with Great Lakes Cemetery. On a scale of 1 to 10, I rate them a 10 plus."*

An NFDA member from Illinois stated: *"We use Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery in Elwood, Illinois, and they do a great job. The cemetery is clean and the staff very professional. I have nothing but good things to say about our experience with them."*

A funeral director from Georgia stated: *"The veterans cemetery that we have in Milledgeville is a state and national cemetery together. We have a great relationship with the employees here and they have gone above the call of duty. The director here is retired from the Army so he brings some great skills to the table. If we have a question regarding a veteran he is always more than willing to jump in and help with whatever is asked. If the grounds keeper needs extra help the director and asst. director will change clothes and grab a shovel or lawn mower and start work."*

According to the National Cemetery Administration, 89 percent of veterans are served by a burial option within a reasonable distance (75 miles) of their residence. NFDA believes the family of every deceased veteran should have easy and convenient access to a national cemetery. While NFDA members believe that the National Cemetery Association has improved access to veterans cemeteries, some of our members are still experiencing accessibility issues because of distance.

One NFDA member from Tennessee stated: *"We do not have a VA cemetery here in Jackson. One in Memphis (70 miles) and two in Nashville (120 miles). Therefore we do not go to VA cemeteries a lot. But I will say the one in West Nashville and the one in Memphis are first class. They do an excellent job on all fronts. Very respectful, very professional, very well kept, etc....Due to the distance we just don't go a lot."*

A funeral director from New Jersey also commented on distance issues: *"The closest VA cemetery to us in Northern NJ is a state veterans cemetery about an hour and a half away. The National VA cemeteries we seldom go to as they are located in the greater New York/Long Island area and are a challenge to get to and even a longer ride. The dignity and care received at the New Jersey veterans cemetery in Wrightstown mentioned above is fine. The only concern is one of scheduling as it is very popular among New Jersey residents and sometimes it can take an extra day or two to secure one of the available time slots to have the interment."*

Additionally, a funeral director from Maryland stated: *"Garrison Forest Veterans Cemetery is the one that our firm uses the most, by far. Their operation is very efficient. However, demand is simply so great that we are often forced to wait a week or more for burial from the time contact is first made. And since their policy is to not allow families out to the actual burial sites for the interment service, all services run through one chapel. So as long as their policies and procedures remain in place, there really is no feasible way to increase the number of interments on a daily or*

*weekly basis. Unfortunately, this disrupts what the family often has in mind as the natural progression of the service for their loved one. They either wait until the date of burial to have a service, in which case it may not be possible to have a viewing the day before. Or they go ahead with viewing and funeral service as they choose, but then have to wait and have another service, usually with just family, a week later. And since it is a military service at the cemetery, it is an event that they would have liked many to witness."*

I use these examples from around the country to illustrate that our national cemetery system and its operation and management from our members' standpoint is of the highest caliber. Most of my experience has been with the Kansas Veterans Cemetery in Winfield, Kansas. This cemetery is under the direction of the Kansas Commission of Veterans' Affairs. In my experience, it is a well-run and efficient cemetery operation. The staff is very friendly and helpful in assisting our mortuary and the families we are serving. The grounds and facilities are well maintained. It is a good option for veteran families that do not already have cemetery property. I have also had the opportunity to work with Ft. Leavenworth and Ft. Scott National Cemeteries, albeit on a much more limited basis. These two cemeteries are several hours away from Wichita, so there are fewer families that choose these options. However, my experience has been positive with them as well. They appear to be efficiently operated and are beautifully maintained. The families served seem to be very appreciative of their services. I have not had any negative feedback in my dealings with them.

While most of our members are satisfied with the services provided to them by the national cemeteries, there are some improvements that could be made to improve the service funeral directors can provide the families of our nation's veterans. In February of 2012, NFDA conducted a non-scientific study of our members to assess whether they are experiencing difficulties when dealing with the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) funeral reimbursement policies. Approximately half of the respondents receive reimbursements from the DVA in nine months or less while it takes 10 months or longer for the remaining half of respondents to receive reimbursement. In fact, 60 percent of respondents stated the VA owes them for outstanding veterans' funerals that are over six months past due. Of the 60.9% of members who stated the VA still owes them for outstanding veterans' funerals that are over six months past due, the average amount owed is \$5,951. However, one funeral director reported that the DVA owes him \$128,355.

Also, I would be remiss if I did not mention that there are hundreds of funeral directors in Washington, DC today. My colleagues and I have come to Capitol Hill to support our nation's veterans by working for passage of H.R. 2051, a bill to Repatriate Unclaimed Veterans' Cremated Remains.

Currently, many funeral homes across the country are holding the cremated remains of veterans that have been unclaimed by family members or relatives. NFDA strongly believes that these remains should be properly identified and given the proper burial or interment along with the appropriate military honors. The issue here is how best to identify these remains and see that they receive a proper burial or interment in a recognized veterans cemetery with appropriate military honors. In that regard, legislation has been introduced to repatriate unclaimed cremated remains of veterans held by funeral directors.

H.R. 2051 would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to work with veteran's service organizations and other groups in assisting funeral homes in possession of unidentified or abandoned remains in determining if the remains are that of a veteran eligible for burial at a National Cemetery. If remains are determined to be that of an eligible veteran, there is no next of kin, and there are no available resources to cover burial and funeral expenses, then the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall cover the cost of burial. In addition, the bill would call on the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a public database of the veterans identified in this project. NFDA strongly supports this legislation, and encourages Congress to pass this important legislation.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, on behalf of the members of the National Funeral Directors Association, I want to conclude my testimony today by thanking you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of NFDA. I hope my testimony has been helpful and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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**Prepared Statement of Melissa Lofaso**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to have the opportunity to submit this testimony on behalf of the families of America's fallen heroes and the program that compassionately cares for them, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS). TAPS is the national organization providing empathetic care for all those who are grieving the death of a loved one who died while serving in the Armed Forces. TAPS provides peer-based emotional support; grief and trauma resources and information; survivor seminars, retreats, and "Good Grief Camps"; casualty case work assistance; and the 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline, all provided to survivors at no cost to them. We do all of this without financial support from the government because TAPS is funded entirely by the generosity of the American people.

TAPS was founded in 1994 by a group of surviving military families following the deaths of their loved ones in a military plane crash. Since its founding, TAPS has offered comfort and care to more than 35,000 survivors and countless caregivers, casualty officers, chaplains, and civilian supporters. The journey through grief following a military death can be isolating and the long-term impact is often not understood in our society. Research tells us that on average, it takes a person experiencing a traumatic loss five to seven years to reach his or her "new normal."<sup>1</sup>

TAPS has extensive contact with the surviving families of America's fallen military servicemembers, making TAPS uniquely qualified to comment on issues affecting the survivors left behind. Since 1994, our 24/7 resource and information helpline has received approximately 184,260 calls from survivors. In 2010, TAPS received an average of 68 calls per day from military survivors and placed 264 calls per day to survivors. TAPS received 2,864 newly bereaved military survivors in a year and received 10,649 calls to our 24/7 resource and information helpline. In 2010, TAPS placed approximately 63,452 calls to survivors to let them know they were not alone, follow up on a case inquiry, or discuss needed services and support.

One hundred percent of our 42 professional staff members are survivors of a fallen military hero, military family members or veterans. Ninety-eight percent of our total workforce are volunteers, including active military servicemembers, who have donated 48,000 hours of their time in the last year to be trained in how to companion a child who is grieving and volunteer their time to support the children left behind by our fallen.

My name is Melissa LoFaso and I am the national director for care coordination at TAPS and the proud wife of active duty Navy PO1 Edward Porrey. As a professionally trained clinical mental health counselor specializing in grief and trauma, my job involves assisting families of our fallen military who are often deeply grieving a traumatic loss and encountering bureaucracies and paperwork that are challenging to navigate in this condition.

I routinely help families file paperwork requesting a correction for a headstone, assist families in moving a loved one to a VA cemetery after burial in another location, and bring family concerns to the attention of VA officials so they can address them. I have supported many surviving families of our fallen military and veterans in communicating with their local VA cemeteries and with the National Cemetery Administration.

TAPS has been asked by the Subcommittee to provide written comments on its views about national cemeteries administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs and make recommendations for improvement. In response to the Committee's request, my testimony will be segmented into two sections: (I) feedback about the national cemeteries that are administered through the VA's National Cemetery Administration and (II) recommendations for improvements.

#### *I. Feedback about the national cemeteries that are administered through the VA's National Cemetery Administration*

Our perspective at TAPS is anchored in our expertise – which is providing emotional support to surviving families of our fallen military. My role is to help facilitate resolutions to concerns that are raised by a family, while addressing the emotions that can happen when grieving. Whether it is a mis-marked headstone, a marker that has been moved without the family's knowledge or awareness, or some other type of concern, we believe that resolving these issues quickly, in close coordination with VA leadership at the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), helps survivors heal and find peace.

<sup>1</sup>Social Work in Health Care, 50:543–563, 2011 Copyright © Taylor & Francis Group, LLC  
ISSN: 0098–1389 print/1541–034X online DOI: 10.1080/00981389.2010.532050 Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom: Exploring Wartime Death and Bereavement, JILL HARRINGTON LAMORIE, DSW, LCSW, University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy & Practice, Alexandria, Virginia, USA

Since our founding in 1994, TAPS has worked cooperatively with the National Cemetery Administration administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The national cemetery system is the ultimate metaphor for the TAPS model of honoring the service and sacrifice of all those who died while serving in the Armed Forces, regardless of where or how they died. The national cemetery system – with its pristine cemeteries and identical headstones – truly honors all who have served and died and are part of our nation’s legacy of service and sacrifice.

NCA inters servicemembers and veterans, side by side, regardless of rank, cause of death, or station in life. Service is an equalizing factor in the VA cemetery system, and that is commendable, at a time when the military still presents different gold star pins based on cause of death and others reserve certain honors only for the families of those who are killed in action. The VA cemetery system recognizes all who have served their country and died and we applaud this spirit of equality and honor.

We regularly file requests to help families address errors on headstones and grave markers, talk with VA staff about family concerns, and offer feedback and family input to VA officials and staff. TAPS attends the quarterly briefings conducted by the National Cemetery Administration with veterans service organizations, where we are updated on activities within the cemetery system and can offer feedback.

In one case, TAPS contacted the local VA cemetery because a family was upset that their loved one’s gravestone had an error. We brought the matter to the attention of the National Cemetery Administration, which had a new stone cut immediately, express-shipped it, and installed it within 48 hours. The family was overjoyed to see their problem addressed and felt they were able to honor their son.

That case illustrates a core point I would like to make – addressing concerns raised by surviving families promptly and with honesty – can go a long way to correcting problems. In this case I just mentioned – a staff member from the VA listened to the family, admitted that a problem had happened with the grave stone and took proactive steps to address the family’s concerns.

In a more recent case, a family’s Marine son died in a public suicide in 2010. His family wanted for his headstone to mention his service in Iraq and Afghanistan, and was upset that his tours of duty to these war zones were not included on his grave marker. I contacted Gina White at the National Cemetery Administration about the family’s concern, and she immediately adjusted the headstone to reflect this combat service and honor this Marine, regardless of the circumstances of his death.

Having this change made so quickly and with such professionalism changed the tone of the family’s grief and allowed them to focus on healing, rather than on their frustration with red tape. By working in partnership with the VA, TAPS is often able to assist families in their healing.

In another case, a widow went to visit her husband’s memorial marker at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii. She was accompanied by their 15-year-old son. When they arrived his stone was missing, and they had to search to locate it. When the family asked the cemetery staff why the stone had moved, they were told that they “must be mistaken,” and that the stone had not moved. The family had photos demonstrating that the marker had been moved.

Eventually, the family found out that the memorial marker had been moved by contractors five years earlier during a renovation project at the cemetery. The widow commented, “Thank God he is not buried there – they are ‘renovating’ several other sections and I pray they do not relocate any of those markers away from their graves. What a nightmare as I was told by officials that ‘I did not remember where it was’, that NEVER happens.” She also said, “This should never happen to any one – even if it is, as they said, “Only a memorial marker.” How disrespectful and hurtful.”

For a family that has only a memorial marker to visit to remember and honor their loved one, a memorial marker’s location is just as important as a gravesite. It is not “just a memorial marker.” This case illustrates a second point I would like to make. When problems arise, it is always better to be honest with surviving families, than to avoid telling the truth. Over and over, we have seen families get upset and emotional, not when they are told difficult things, but when they are led to believe that someone is hiding information from them and not telling them the truth.

Sometimes people assume that grieving families are fragile and cannot handle difficult information or news that may be upsetting. These people fail to realize that these families have already gotten the worst news – which is that their loved ones have died and are not coming home. If they are given information in an honest and compassionate way, even if it is disturbing or difficult information, they often will respond with understanding. Offering compassionate response to survivor concerns is an effective strategy for addressing their needs.

In another case, a widow whose husband died by suicide went to the Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery to visit her husband's niche at the columbarium. His niche cover had an error and she was surprised. She asked the cemetery staff to open the niche. His remains were there, but the urn containing them was broken and open. The widow felt that the cemetery staff talked down to her because of her youthful appearance. She requested that the niche cover be corrected, and that the urn be replaced. She shared her concerns with TAPS and asked TAPS to get involved. TAPS called the National Cemetery Administration about the situation and we are hopeful a resolution will be reached shortly.

This is another case where had cemetery staff on the ground responded differently to concerns raised by a family, the situation could have been resolved quickly and with less pain to the family. A new urn could have been put into place immediately, and a new niche cover ordered. We continue to work with the VA to facilitate a solution for this family.

It should be noted that most of the families TAPS works with are very pleased with the level of care and service they receive from the National Cemetery Administration. When TAPS has received negative feedback about the National Cemetery Administration, it has been in cases like the two cited above. Thankfully, these cases are few and far between, but they are important reminders of the value of staff training.

## *II. Recommendations*

Based on its experiences working with surviving families of our fallen military since 1994, TAPS offers the following recommendations for improving the VA's national cemetery system.

(1) Provide sensitivity training for local VA cemetery staff. TAPS has conducted training for military casualty assistance officers in all services, chaplains, the USO volunteers at the Dover Port Mortuary, and other volunteers in partner organizations on how to provide compassionate and empathetic care for surviving military families. TAPS welcomes the opportunity to provide this training, at no cost, to VA cemetery staff who come in contact with grieving families.

(2) Encourage VA cemetery staff to connect with TAPS when emotional issues arise, so we can help them facilitate the solution the family seeks, while addressing the family's bereavement needs.

(3) Encourage VA cemetery staff to provide accurate and clear information to families from the start. For the family of a fallen servicemember or deceased veteran who is grieving, just visiting the cemetery is a major commitment of emotional energy and triggers their feelings and emotions about the death. This is when we see issues that could have been easily fixed, become emotionally-wrenching and disruptive of the family's grief journey. Even if families have to be told difficult information or be informed about a mistake that has been made, most families appreciate being treated with honesty, clarity, and compassion.

## *Conclusion*

Over the past year and a half, families of our fallen military and veterans have endured a series of major scandals and revelations through the news media about mis-management and mistakes at Arlington National Cemetery, the Dover Port Mortuary and the National Cemetery system administered by the VA. For some families, their trust in our nation's commitment to honor the service and sacrifice made by their loved ones has been shaken.

It is our perspective that we must work together to find a way forward beyond these scandals surrounding the care of our fallen military servicemembers and veterans. It will take a community of care and response to support surviving families of our fallen military and veterans. As the only national organization providing comfort and care to all who are grieving the death of someone who served in the Armed Forces, TAPS is ready and willing to work collaboratively with the military, the VA and other partners, as together we provide better care and more compassionate support to the families of our nation's fallen heroes.

Thank you.

## **Executive Summary of Melissa Lofaso**

### **Introduction**

Because of our role in caring for thousands of families of America's fallen military since 1994, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) is uniquely qualified to comment on this matter. In my role at TAPS, I have worked with several families to communicate their concerns with the VA.

### **I. Opinion on the Upkeep and Maintenance of the National Cemetery Administration and Cemetery System Administered by the VA**

The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) is the national organization providing empathetic care for all those who are grieving the death of a loved one who died while serving in the Armed Forces. Our perspective at TAPS is anchored in our expertise – which is providing emotional support to surviving families of our fallen military.

It should be noted that most of the families TAPS works with are very pleased with the level of care and service they receive from the National Cemetery Administration. We regularly file requests to help families address errors on headstones and grave markers, talk with VA staff about family concerns, and offer feedback and family input to VA officials and staff. Four case anecdotes highlighting experiences of surviving families with the VA cemetery administration system are highlighted in this testimony and provide insight. Addressing concerns raised by surviving families promptly and with honesty – can go a long way to correcting problems.

## II. Recommendations for Improvements in VA Cemetery Operations

(1) Provide sensitivity training for local VA cemetery staff. TAPS has conducted training for the USO volunteers at the Dover Port Mortuary, military casualty assistance officers in all services, chaplains, and other volunteers in partner organizations on how to provide compassionate and empathetic care for surviving military families. TAPS welcomes the opportunity to provide this training, at no cost, to VA cemetery staff who come in contact with grieving families.

(2) Encourage VA cemetery staff to connect with TAPS when emotional issues arise, so we can help them facilitate the solution the family seeks, while addressing the family's bereavement needs.

(3) Encourage VA cemetery staff to provide accurate and clear information to families from the start. For the family of a fallen servicemember or deceased veteran who is grieving, just visiting the cemetery is a major commitment of emotional energy and triggers their feelings and emotions about the death. This is when we see issues that could have been easily fixed, become emotionally-wrenching and disruptive of the family's grief journey. Even if families have to be told difficult information or be informed about a mistake that has been made, most families appreciate being treated with honesty, clarity, and compassion.

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## Questions for the Record

### Questions from Honorable Jon Runyan, Chairman, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs to AMVETS:

**Question 1:** Do you believe (IB/AMVETS) the NCA has sufficient funds to carry out its mission?

**Answer:** While AMVETS analysis was slightly higher than VA's request for the National Cemetery Administration, VA principals have testified that the President's budget request is sufficient to ensure that NCA maintains a high level of Veteran service and continues to be good stewards of national cemeteries.

**Question 2:** "Pertaining to your statistical analysis of the grave sites that we're going to need . . . but as the Under Secretary said in his testimony, they like to keep them close to home, on a more regional basis." **Where are we lacking in those abilities?** "And obviously yours was nationwide, and I'm sure there's some areas that, we could look into, where we could really give direction to the Cemetery Administration to really look at that you can anticipate through your VSOs and knowing where people live and where they reside, and where they would like to be buried. So I'd appreciate if you could get that to us."

**Answer:** Based on the National Cemetery Administration's (NCA) FY 2013 Budget Submission, NCA is demonstrating it is working diligently to increase access to burial options for unserved Veterans from 75% in FY 2004 to 90% in FY 2013. The NCA's FY 2015 strategic goal is to serve 95% of Veterans with a burial option.

In recognition of Veteran's growing burial needs, in FY 2011, NCA revised the Veteran population threshold needed to construct new national cemeteries from 170,000 to 80,000 within 75-miles of a proposed site. This new policy will result in the establishment of five new national cemeteries to serve an additional 500,000 Veterans. The NCA is also establishing five columbarium-only cemeteries to better meet the needs of urban Veterans. To meet the needs of rural Veterans, VA has developed a new policy to provide burial options for Veterans who reside in sparsely populated rural areas where the Veteran population is unserved by either a national or state Veterans cemetery.

AMVETS believes that NCA is cognizant of the needs of Veterans and their families, and is taking proactive steps to ensure that burial services are strategically

provided to serve our Veterans' needs. We will continue to canvass our members and provide any feedback to NCA so they are aware of Veterans' issues or concerns.

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