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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS LACKS LONG RANGE PLAN FOR NEW CEMETERY CONSTRUCTION AND CEMETERY MAINTENANCE

REPORT TO THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
BY ITS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC, June 15, 1999.

Hon. BOB STUMP,
Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
House of Representatives, Washington, DC.

DEAR MR. CHAIRMAN: We herewith submit a report of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, "National and State Cemeteries for Veterans," including its findings and recommendations regarding new national cemeteries, the maintenance needs of national cemeteries, and concerns of state cemeteries.

Your support of the activities of the Subcommittee is most appreciated.

Sincerely,

TERRY EVERETT,
Chairman,
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

CORRINE BROWN,
Ranking Democratic Member,
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS LACKS LONG RANGE PLAN FOR NEW CEMETERY CONSTRUCTION AND CEMETERY MAINTENANCE

INTRODUCTION

On May 20, 1999, the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, held a hearing on national and state cemeteries for veterans, including Arlington National Cemetery. The topics addressed included planning for new cemeteries and cemetery maintenance.

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA), Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), provides and maintains national shrines honoring those who served in uniform. These national shrines should be maintained as places of high honor, dignity, and respect. Currently, 115 cemeteries in 41 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico comprise the NCA. Since establishment of national cemeteries in 1862, approximately 2.6 million veterans have been interred in national cemeteries and approximately 6.7 million headstones and markers have been furnished.

From 1995 to 2010, annual veterans deaths are expected to increase by 42 percent. Consequently, NCA faces an increasing workload because many of the remaining veterans of the World War II and Korean War generation wish to be buried in a national cemetery. The NCA's workload per full time equivalent employee (FTEE) will continue to grow in all areas of operations. For example, the total number of gravesites and acreage maintained will increase every year. The number of headstones and memorial certificates furnished also will increase. In fiscal year 1998, VA interred 76,718 veterans and family members. In fiscal year 2000, VA expects to inter 80,300 individuals, and by the year 2004, the number of interments is projected to increase to 98,700. VA also expects to process 342,000 grave marker applications in fiscal year 2000. Similarly, the number of gravesites maintained is estimated to exceed 2.3 million in fiscal year 2000. NCA requires both human and material resources to accommodate these increases.

CEMETERY CONSTRUCTION

The country is at a point where it has one of the greatest demands in history for national cemetery space. The average age of the veteran population is rising. The death rate of World War II veterans is more than 1,000 per day and accelerating. By 2008, veterans will die at a rate of 1,700 per day. Despite the demographic trend, the VA has no plans to construct new cemeteries beyond the year 2000. In the past decade, the NCA has built or initiated construction of new cemeteries in six areas identified in 1987 as most in need. But the NCA has not addressed how it will meet the increased demand for burials at national cemeteries over the

next decade. The VA's proposed budget for fiscal year 2000 requests no new funds for planning new cemeteries, expansion, or land acquisition.

The demand for burial space comes at a time when burial space at national cemeteries is at a premium. Of the 115 national cemeteries administered by the VA, only 57 are able to provide the full range of burial services; 25 are closed to new burials; and 33 are only open for cremated remains. Although four new cemeteries will open during the next twelve months, in Texas, New York, Illinois and Ohio, there are no plans-either current or future—to address the burial needs of major population centers such as Atlanta, Miami, Detroit and Sacramento. These major population centers were identified as most in need of a national cemetery by two congressionally mandated studies over the past twelve years. These needs are based on demographics—where the veterans are-not on when existing cemeteries will close. These new cemetery needs assume a reasonable travel radius of 75 miles from the family home.

For fiscal year 2000, the Administration is proposing an increase of $4.89 million to fund veterans burial needs. This includes funds for 23 additional FTEE to accommodate increased workloads throughout the system as well as to support operations and activation requirements at the Jolliet, Illinios, Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas and Saratoga, New York National Cemeteries, and the new national cemetery in the Cleveland, Ohio, area.

VA's construction needs for new and existing cemeteries are addressed through major and minor construction appropriations. Until recently, NCA has focused construction planning on creating new cemeteries in areas of the country with the greatest unserved veteran population, as well as on extending the life of existing cemeteries through gravesite development, and repairing and maintaining the infrastructure of the system.

In its report to the Budget Committee on its fiscal year 2000 Budget Views and Estimates, the Veterans' Affairs Committee recommended adding to the NCA's budget $3.6 million in major construction planning funds, i.e. planning and site acquisition. The additional funding would be used to create at least two new national cemeteries that appear on VA's list of geographic areas having the greatest need for a national cemetery. Veteran deaths will peak in fiscal year 2008 at about 620,000. Prudent planning is essential because by the year 2004, only 55 of the 115 existing VA national cemeteries will be open for both casketed and cremated remains.

The rapidly aging veteran population and accelerating death rate of World War II veterans have intensified the resource challenges facing NCA. According to the Independent Budget for fiscal year 2000 developed by veterans service organizations, the veteran death rate is projected to increase by 25 percent over the period from 1995 to 2005. During this same time, the interment rate for NCA is projected to increase by 40 percent. The increased burial rate also requires additional financial resources for the cemeteries so that they receive the high level of maintenance befitting national shrines.

Veteran service organization and military association witnesses who testified at the Subcommittee hearing included: Philip Wilkerson, Deputy Director, Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation,

The American Legion; Joy Ilem, Associate National Director, Disabled American Veterans; Rick Weidman, Director, Vietnam Veterans of America; Colonel Robert F. Norton, USA (Ret.), Deputy Director, Government Relations, The Retired Officers Association; and Larry Rhea, Deputy Director, Legislative Affairs, Non Commissioned Officers Association. All witnesses from these organizations testified that unless NCA immediately begins work on construction of new cemeteries, veterans who wish to be buried in a national cemetery will be denied this final honor.

The Subcommittee finds that NCA's ability to meet the increasing demand for burial benefits in future years is contingent on a long-term planning strategy. The lack of an articulated long-range strategy and proposed funding for new national cemeteries is of great concern to veterans.

Recommendations:

The Subcommittee recommends that the Veterans' Affairs Committee consider development of legislation that would require the NCA to submit a cemetery construction plan and identify new national cemetery locations, based upon demographic priority. The Subcommittee also recommends that the NCA be required to use its Advance Planning Fund account to begin this process.

CEMETERY GROUNDS AND FACILITIES MAINTENANCE

One of the most visible benefits a veteran can receive is a burial plot in a national or state veterans cemetery. These cemeteries are tangible evidence of the country's appreciation for the sacrifices made by these men and women. It is the Nation's duty to maintain these shrines at the highest standards.

Successive years of restrained resources have made it impossible to address NCA's long-term operational and field management needs. Budgetary shortfalls have forced the system to address interments and only the highest priority maintenance projects while deferring important preventative maintenance. The maintenance standard at all national cemeteries should be high and the appearance similar to the American Battlefield Monument Commission cemeteries.

The Subcommittee finds that the increasing number of interments is absorbing funds faster than NCA's budget has grown. Consequently, cemetery staff levels have not increased to meet the increasing interment workload. Routine and preventative maintenance and infrastructure repairs have been delayed or not done. Aging equipment, such as trucks, backhoes, trimmers and mowers, has not been replaced due to a lack of funds.

Recommendations:

The Subcommittee recommends that the Veterans' Affairs Committee support increasing the fiscal year 2000 NCA budget by the following amounts: 1) $400,000 for interments; 2) $2.2 million for daily maintenance and staff increases; 3) $750,000 for new equipment; 4) $1 million for long term deferred maintenance projects; and 5) $2.2 million for equipment replacement.

STATE CEMETERY GRANTS PROGRAM

The state cemetery grants program provides funds to s states in establishing, expanding, and improving state-owned v ans' cemeteries. Increasing the availability of state veterans' c teries is one way to serve veterans who do not reside near a tional cemetery. State cemeteries augment, but do not supp VA's national cemetery program. The Veterans Benefits Imp ments Act of 1998 made the state cemetery grants program attractive to the states by increasing the maximum federal s of the costs of construction from 50 percent to 100 percent, ar making initial equipment costs eligible for grant funding. states remain responsible for providing the land and for payin costs related to the operation and maintenance of the state c teries, including the costs for subsequent equipment purchases.

Witnesses testifying regarding the state cemetery grants gram included: Raymond Boland, Secretary, Wisconsin Departi of Veterans Affairs; Charles Smith, Assistant Secretary, N Carolina Division of Veterans Affairs; and Lieutenant Col Robin Higgins, USMC (Ret.), Executive Director, Florida De ment of Veterans Affairs.

Testimony from the three directors of State Veterans Affairs partments expressed the need for financial assistance from I for recurring maintenance costs. The testimony of the directors requested an increase of the burial plot allowance. Currently, plot allowance of $150, available to state veterans cemeteries is wartime veterans only. The witnesses recommended increasing plot allowance benefit to $300 and expanding eligibility for the lowance to all veterans who would be eligible for burial in a tional cemetery.

Recommendation:

The Subcommittee recommends evaluation of an increase in plot allowance amount. The Subcommittee is aware of requests financial assistance to the state governments for recurring mai nance costs at state veterans cemeteries. However, the Subcom tee recognizes that any increase of the plot allowance or finan assistance for maintenance costs would likely have pay-go imp tions under the Budget Act, requiring an offset of increases aga existing veterans programs. Also, Subcommittee notes that the tent of the state cemetery program is a division of state ceme costs between the federal government and the participating st

ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

Arlington National Cemetery is the most revered resting-p for those who have worn the uniform of our country. More t 250,000 remains are interred at Arlington. In fiscal year 2000, lington officials estimate they will add about 5,900 remains to total, conduct 2,800 non-funeral ceremonies, and host four mi visitors. Arlington is the only national cemetery under the juri tion of the U.S. Army.

Similar to the situation at NCA, reduced budgets have forced lington National Cemetery to address only the highest pri

maintenance projects, while deferring routine maintenance needs and important preventative maintenance projects.

The Subcommittee finds from its own observations that maintenance needs at Arlington include: a leaky reception building roof at the Memorial Amphitheater that is causing the deterioration of the building; roads in need of resurfacing; equipment in need of replacement at the Kennedy gravesites; uneven and hazardous walkways near the Tomb of the Unknowns; broken and cracked flagstone walkways at the columbarium; and exposed storage of heavy equipment. Some of these deferred maintenance needs pose unsafe conditions for the millions of visitors to the cemetery annually, and they are wholly inconsistent with public expectations for this national shrine.

Recommendations:

The Veterans' Affairs Committee has previously recommended in its fiscal year 2000 Budget Views and Estimates increasing the construction, and the operations and maintenance accounts for Arlington National Cemetery by $3 million. A construction account increase of $2 million would fund: 1) design and construction of a vehicle storage garage building at Arlington's facilities maintenance complex, and 2) studies for repair and renovations of the reception building at the Memorial Amphitheater and of the Kennedy gravesites.

An increase of $1 million to the operations and maintenance account would fund repairs to the roads and the columbarium walkways. Any increases above $1 million would fund the expansion of contracts for tree pruning, raising and realigning headstones, and tamping and top-dressing gravesites within one week of burial. The Subcommittee's findings add support to the previous recommendations of the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

CONCLUSION

America's national cemeteries are not adequate to serve the needs of veterans over the next decade. The demand for burial space in national cemeteries will be one of the greatest in the country's history as World War II veterans reach the end of their lives. Unless new national cemeteries are funded and planning for them begins soon, veterans in major population areas will be effectively denied the final honor of burial in a national cemetery.

State veterans' cemeteries participating in the VA's grant program are having difficulty in meeting recurring maintenance costs and such costs are a deterrent from participating the grant program for some states.

Funding for maintenance of America's national cemeteries, including Arlington National Cemetery, is inadequate. Unless national cemeteries receive increased funding adequate to their maintenance needs, necessary work will continue to be deferred, and their appearance will not meet public expectations for these na-

tional shrines as places of honor for the men and women who have defended our freedom.

Respectfully Submitted,

TERRY EVERETT,
Chairman

CORRINE BROWN,
Ranking Democratic Member

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