

**STATEMENT OF
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OF THE
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SEPTEMBER 24, 2009**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to have this opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) to present our views on the current Department of Veterans Affairs Burial Benefits Program, its national cemetery policy, and the way that VA and the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) can better serve veterans and their survivors. In accordance with our congressional charter, the DAV's mission is to advance the interests, and work for the betterment, of all wounded, injured, and disabled American veterans.

As you know, the VA National Cemetery Administration (NCA) maintains more than 2.9 million gravesites at 130 national cemeteries and 33 additional installations in 39 states and Puerto Rico. Currently, there are more than 7,000 acres within established NCA installations. Just more than half of this land is undeveloped.

Including available gravesites and the undeveloped land, there is the potential to provide more than 4 million resting places. In addition to the maintenance of these facilities, the NCA administers four programs: the State Cemetery Grants Program, the Headstone and Marker Program, the Presidential Memorial Marker Program, and Outer Burial Receptacle reimbursements.

VA estimated in 2008 that approximately 24 million veterans were alive. These veterans served in wars and conflicts ranging from World War I to the global war on terrorism, as well as service in peacetime. The age of our veteran population has peaked and is starting to decline, and as a correlation to this peak, the annual number of veteran deaths is beginning to decline. In 2008, nearly 683,000 veterans were expected to die; this number is expected to slowly decrease over the years. However, with the anticipated opening of new national cemeteries and an increase to the State Cemetery Grants Program, annual interments are projected to increase to more than 105,000 in 2008 with an estimated peak of 115,000 in fiscal year 2009.

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.

DAV thanks the NCA staff for their continued dedication and commitment in providing the highest quality of service to veterans and their families despite funding shortfalls, aging equipment, and the increasing workload of new cemetery activations. We again call on the Administration and Congress

to provide the resources needed to meet the critical nature of NCA's mission and fulfill the nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country honorably and faithfully.

NCA must be allocated the resources it needs to meet the increasing demands of interments, gravesite maintenance, and related essential elements of cemetery operations. The NCA is responsible for five primary missions:

1. To inter, upon request, the remains of eligible veterans and family members and to permanently maintain gravesites;
2. To mark graves of eligible persons in national, state, or private cemeteries upon appropriate application;
3. To administer the state grants program in the establishment, expansion, or improvement of state veterans' cemeteries;
4. To award a presidential certificate and furnish a United States flag to deceased veterans; and
5. To maintain national cemeteries as national shrines sacred to the honor and memory of those interred or memorialized.

Some cemeteries face the need for immediate expansion through the acquisition of additional land. Puerto Rico has such a situation. We understand that the Puerto Rico National Cemetery (PRNC) has a project intended to start in 2010 that gives them burial space until 2017 for first interments. PRNC will remain open, of course, for second interments of spouses and veterans. After completion of the project, PRNC will remain open to first and second cremations until 2030. While cremations are an option for some, veterans and their survivors may hold certain religious beliefs that do not make this a viable alternative. The NCA is actively seeking land of 100 acres or more within a 25-mile radius of Route 22/Route 1. The rapid acquisition of this land is essential to Puerto Rico's veteran population.

The national cemetery system continues to be seriously challenged, though there has been progress made over the years. The NCA is working tirelessly to remove decades of blemishes and scars from military burial grounds across the country. Visitors to many national cemeteries are likely to encounter sunken graves, misaligned and dirty grave markers, deteriorating roads, spotty turf, and other patches of decay that have been accumulating for decades.

If the NCA is to continue its commitment to ensure national cemeteries remain dignified and respectful settings that honor deceased veterans and give evidence of the nation's gratitude for their military service, there must be a comprehensive effort to greatly improve the condition, functions, and appearance of the national cemeteries.

To address these concerns, the NCA has aggressively moved forward repairing the priorities that were detailed in "An Independent Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries," which was submitted to Congress in 2002. Although the five-year, \$250 million "National Shrine Initiative" was not adopted as we recommended, the NCA has spent \$150 million towards that original list of 928 projects as well as other emerging priorities over this past year. These projects include gravesite renovation, repair, upgrades, and maintenance. Headstones and markers must be cleaned, realigned, and set. Stone surfaces of columbaria require cleaning, caulking, and grouting, and the surrounding walkways must be maintained. Grass, shrubbery, and trees in burial areas and other land must receive regular care.

Additionally, cemetery infrastructure, i.e., buildings, grounds, walks, and drives must be repaired as needed. According to the study, these project recommendations were made on the basis of the existing condition of each cemetery after taking into account the cemetery's age, its burial activity, burial options and maintenance programs.

The NCA has done an outstanding job thus far in improving the appearance of our national cemeteries, but there is a long way to go to get our national cemeteries to where they need to be. By enacting a five-year program with dedicated funds and an ambitious schedule, the national cemetery system can fully serve all veterans and their families with the utmost dignity, respect, and compassion.

In addition to the management of the national cemeteries, the NCA has responsibility for the Memorial Program Service. The Memorial Program Service provides lasting memorials for the graves of eligible veterans and honors their service through Presidential Memorial Certificates. Public Laws 107-103 and 107-330 allow for a headstone or marker for the graves of veterans buried in private cemeteries who died on or after September 11, 2001. Prior to this change, the NCA could provide this service only to those buried in national or state cemeteries or to unmarked graves in private cemeteries.

The Administration requested \$181 million for FY 2009. Congress, understanding the sacrifices of the few for the freedom of the many, honored the fallen by granting NCA \$230 million and an additional \$50 million in stimulus funds. The NCA is requesting \$242 million for FY 2010. Granting that funding request will sustain the important progress NCA has made. We urge Congress to grant the NCA's request.

The next area to address is veterans' burial benefits. The burial benefit in 2008 was only 6 percent of what was provided when the NCA started paying this benefit. This must be increased to a level proportionate to the original benefit.

In 1973, the federal government started paying burial benefits to assist in the funeral cost for our veterans. Over the years, the value of these benefits has been greatly reduced due to inflation. It was never the intent of Congress to cover the full cost of burial; however, the benefits now pay only a small fraction of what was covered 35 years ago.

In 2001, the plot allowance was increased for the first time in more than 28 years, to \$300 from the original amount of \$150. This higher figure covers approximately six percent of funeral costs. The 108th Congress increased the allowance for service-connected deaths from \$500 to \$2,000. Prior to this adjustment, the allowance had been untouched since 1988. Clearly, it is time this allowance is raised to make a more meaningful contribution to the costs of burial for our veterans.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 212, we note that the VA provides a burial allowance for service-connected veterans of \$2,000. However, the amount of this burial allowance has been seriously eroded by inflation because it has not been regularly adjusted for increases in the cost of living and is not automatically adjusted for inflation. Therefore, the DAV supports legislation to increase the burial allowance payable in the case of death due to service-connected disability and to provide for automatic annual adjustments indexed to the rise in the cost of living.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I will answer any questions you or the Subcommittee may have.