

National Cemetery System

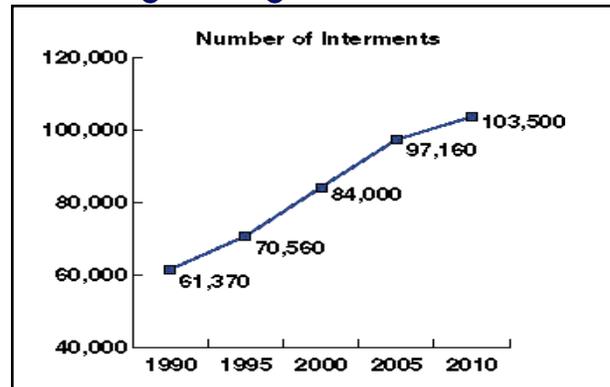
Mission and Vision

The mission of the National Cemetery System (NCS) is to serve our Nation's veterans by meeting their final needs with compassion and dignity. Our vision is to provide a lasting tribute to our Nation's veterans.

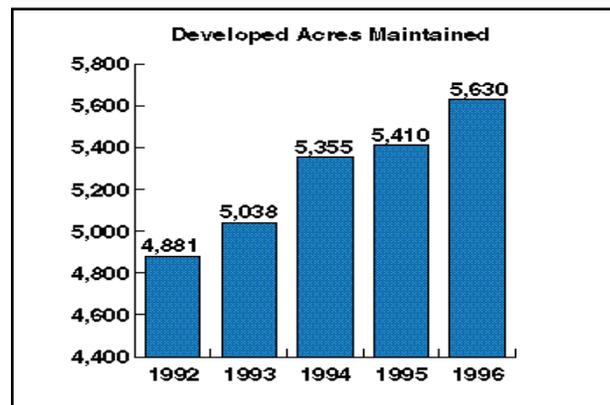
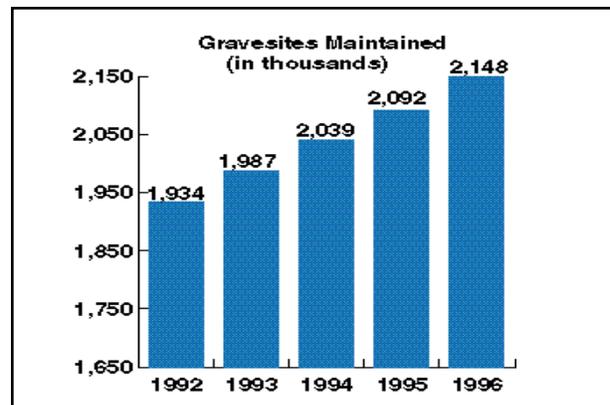
Program Description

The National Cemetery System is comprised of 114 national cemeteries, as well as 34 other cemeterial installations, including soldiers' lots and monument sites. NCS buries eligible veterans and their family members in national cemeteries and maintains the graves and their environs as national shrines; provides aid to states in establishing, expanding, or improving state veterans' cemeteries; provides headstones and markers for graves of veterans in national, state, and private cemeteries; and provides Presidential Memorial Certificates to family and friends of deceased veterans, recognizing the veteran's contribution and service to the Nation. NCS's budget authority for FY 1996 amounted to \$72.5 million with an FTE employment level of 1,287.

The National Cemetery System provides interment of veterans and eligible family members upon demand. With the aging of the World War II and Korean Conflict veterans, VA expects the number of annual veteran deaths to increase from 525,000 in 1996 to 572,000 in 2000, and then peak at 620,000 in 2008. The number of interments performed by NCS in 2008 will be 47 percent higher than in 1996.



Currently, NCS maintains over two million gravesites and over five thousand acres of land developed for burial purposes. Each year, the numbers of gravesites and developed acres continue to increase, requiring greater effort to maintain the cemeteries in a way that is expected by the American public.





The Department of Veterans Affairs ensures through the National Cemetery System that each veteran's grave is marked. In FY 1996, the Memorial Programs Service provided 319,758 headstones and markers for veterans interred in national, state, and private cemeteries. NCS also provided 257,366 Presidential Memorial Certificates to family and friends of deceased veterans.

Program Highlights

As an outgrowth of its participation in a pilot project on the implementation of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), a case study on NCS's use of strategic planning and performance measurement was developed. The case study is being used as a training tool to guide other agencies in their development efforts. Since beginning its strategic planning efforts, NCS has continually expanded the process to include increased participation at all levels of the organization. Strategic plans, linked to and in support of the overall NCS Strategic Plan, were developed by teams of cemetery directors and foremen for the Northeast and Western Areas. Cemeteries in these two areas have developed business plans containing specific objectives and strategies to be accomplished at the national cemetery in support of national and area goals. In FY 1996, the Southern Area initiated its strategic planning process by creating mission and vision statements, and expects to publish its plan in FY 1997. In Central Office, NCS established two new quality councils to integrate the quality management effort throughout the organization and to provide a link to NCS's top-level Executive Quality Council.

NCS's success in the area of customer service is evidenced by the recent presentation of the Robert W. Carey Quality Award to Calverton National Cemetery. The award recognizes the highest level of excellence in quality management among all VA facilities and offices.

Fiscal Year 1996 marks the first time the top award has gone to a national cemetery. Calverton was cited for its exceptionally strong leadership in quality performance and initiatives to improve customer service through self-directed work teams and focus groups involving both internal and external customers.

During the course of the year, VA management presented six "Scissors" awards to National Cemetery System recipients. National cemeteries were recognized for initiatives that saved money and improved customer service, such as the design and installation of special flower holders for the columbarium structure at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, the in-house development of a turf stabilization mat expressly tailored to the needs of Willamette National Cemetery, and the modification of a commercially available propane heater to "defrost" frozen ground to expedite winter interments at Ft. Snelling National Cemetery.

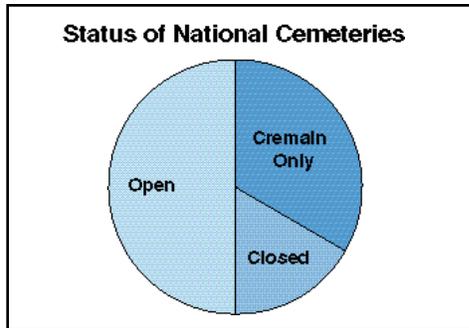
Program Goals and Objectives

The goals of NCS are to: (1) assure that a burial option is available to all eligible veterans; (2) assure that the burial options provided are preferred by veterans through providing quality service and maintaining the cemeteries as national shrines; and (3) provide quality headstones and markers efficiently, accurately, and in a timely manner.

Goal 1. Assure that a burial option is available to all eligible veterans.

One of the primary goals of NCS is to assure that all eligible veterans have reasonable access to a burial option. At the end of FY 1996, 57 of the 114 national cemeteries contained available, unassigned gravesites for the burial of both casketed remains and cremated remains. Such cemeteries are able to accommodate all requests for interment of eligible veterans and family members as well as to host visitation, patriotic, and commemorative

events. Some 38 national cemeteries have exhausted the supply of unassigned gravesites for the interment of casketed remains but are able to accommodate requests for burial of family members in the same gravesite as a previously deceased family member. These cemeteries are also able to accommodate all requests for interment of cremated remains. During FY 1996, Zachary Taylor National Cemetery and Jefferson City National Cemetery closed, bringing to 19 the number of national cemeteries that are able to accommodate only subsequent family members in occupied gravesites. Such cemeteries also remain important locations for visitation, including patriotic and commemorative events.



served by a burial option within a reasonable distance of place of residence, NCS continues to expand existing national cemeteries where appropriate and develop more effective use of available burial space.

NCS took a number of significant steps during the course of the year to maintain the level of service provided at existing cemeteries. For example, the transfer of 12.1 acres of land to the Biloxi National Cemetery from the adjacent medical center will allow NCS to maintain a full range of service at this Mississippi cemetery until the year 2015. Construction contracts to provide over 13,000 gravesites at four national cemeteries were awarded in 1996. The Defense Authorization Act provided for three land transfers from the military to VA: 150 acres from the Navy to Calverton National Cemetery in New York; 53 acres from the Army to Ft. Sam Houston National Cemetery in San Antonio, TX; and 22 acres from the Army to Ft. Bliss National Cemetery in El Paso, TX.

Objective 1.A. Increase the percentage of veterans served by a burial option within a reasonable distance of place of residence.

NCS data show that, historically, almost 80 percent of interments conducted in national cemeteries have been from families living within 75 miles of the cemetery; therefore, NCS has consistently used 75 miles as the benchmark in determining “reasonable distance from residence” that people are willing to travel for burial purposes.

The percentage of the veteran population served by the existence of a burial option within a reasonable distance from place of residence reached 65.4 percent in FY 1996 with the opening of two State veterans’ cemeteries in Wisconsin and Minnesota. As the veteran population ages, and veteran deaths increase, annual interments and total gravesites used increase. In order to maintain the current level of cemetery service capabilities and to increase the percentage of veterans

In FY 1996, NCS continued to make progress in the development of five new cemeteries planned to bring service to areas that are not currently served. Tahoma National Cemetery is scheduled for dedication in the fall of 1997. The first phase to be developed at Tahoma National Cemetery will include over 13,000 interment sites and provide service for over 400,000 veterans in the Seattle area.

NCS also plans to open new national cemeteries in the metropolitan areas of Dallas, Albany, Cleveland and Chicago before the turn of the century. These new cemeteries will significantly enhance NCS’s ability to assure that a burial option is available to all eligible veterans by providing service for an estimated 2.1 million veterans.

NCS also administers the State Veterans Cemetery Grants Program, which provides grants to states of up to 50 percent of the cost



of establishing, expanding, or improving state veterans' cemeteries. State veterans' cemeteries, which may be located in areas not served by a national cemetery, provide service to veterans in those areas in which it is not feasible to operate and maintain a national cemetery. In FY 1996, the State Veterans Cemetery Grants Program awarded eighteen grants, totaling \$4,757,513, to assist in establishing two new veterans' cemeteries and to expand and improve other existing state-owned cemeteries for veterans. These 18 grants will provide more than 54,000 new gravesites.

Objective 1.B. Reduce the unit cost of an interment.

As planned new national cemeteries open, the demands upon NCS resources will increase dramatically, and the government-wide budgetary demands to do more with less mean that NCS must be as efficient as possible in using resources that are available. In FY 1996, NCS developed a draft methodology to determine the unit cost of an interment. This methodology will be tested at six cemeteries prior to system-wide approval and implementation.

Efficiency is also measured by the number of interments performed per wage grade FTE. From FY 1992 to FY 1996, the number of interments increased 11.1 percent from 64,602 to 71,786. In FY 1996, the number of interments per wage grade FTE was 248, which is consistent with the planned level of 250.

While the total number of cremains was close to plan (20,234 vs. 20,400), the number of columbaria niches used exceeded the planned level by 26 percent. In FY 1996, the Houston National Cemetery opened a columbarium,

creating additional capacity for this burial option.

NCS plans to further measure its efficiency by reporting on the number of interment requests processed per general schedule FTE, and by providing details on the number of interments performed per wage grade FTE for full casket, in-ground cremain, and columbaria niche interments.

Goal 2. Assure that the burial options provided are preferred by veterans through providing quality service and maintaining the cemeteries as national shrines.

The second goal is to assure that the burial options provided are preferred by veterans, NCS's primary customers. This is accomplished by providing high quality, responsive service in all contacts with veterans and their families and friends. These contacts include scheduling the interments, greeting the corteges and bereaved families for the committal services, and providing information about the cemetery and the location of specific graves. This is also accomplished by main-

taining the cemeteries and graves as national shrines, so that bereaved family members are comforted when they come to the cemetery for the interment, or later to visit the grave of their loved one(s).

In 1995 and 1996, NCS conducted a

series of customer focus groups. The intent of collecting focus group data was three-fold: (1) to collect nationwide qualitative data on levels of customer satisfaction, and indicators of customer needs and expectations; (2) to validate NCS Customer Service Standards and thus ensure that the standards publicized and

	Interments per FTE	Total Interments	Full Casket	In-ground Cremain	Columbaria Niche
1992	244	64,602	49,061	N/A	N/A
1993	250	67,329	50,285	15,259	1,785
1994	250	68,636	50,354	16,782	1,500
1995	248	70,557	50,758	16,703	3,096
1996 Plan	250	71,900	51,500	17,600	2,800
1996 Actual	248	71,786	51,552	16,720	3,514

measured describe the services most important to customers; and (3) to provide NCS management with valuable information for purposes of strategic planning to ensure that performance goals, objectives and measures are consistent with desired customer outcomes. NCS convened focus groups of several distinct customer groups that included relatives of those recently buried in national cemeteries, funeral directors, and members of various veterans' organizations. These sessions provided a record of the experiences, opinions, beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of people who have recent or ongoing contact with the national cemeteries. Participants in each of these focus groups consistently indicated a high level of satisfaction with the appearance and maintenance of national cemeteries.

In August 1996, NCS began placing visitor comment cards at the 72 staffed national cemeteries to measure the satisfaction of veterans, family members, and the visiting public regarding the quality of service provided by the cemeteries, as well as the appearance and maintenance of these national shrines. The surveys also ask respondents to prioritize and rate five key components of cemetery service delivery: grounds; headstones and markers; individual gravesites; cemetery facilities; and cemetery staff. Information gathered from the comment cards will be reported in the next annual performance plan.

Objective 2.A. Increase the percentage of those veterans served actually using a burial option.

No matter how fine a service NCS provides, and no matter how well the cemeteries are maintained, not every veteran served will actually choose to be buried in a veterans' cemetery. For example, they may have a family plot in a private cemetery. This objective, however, postulates that there are veterans who would decide to use or not use a nearby veterans' cemetery based upon its appearance and its reputation for providing compassion-

ate, quality service. Each year, from 1992 to 1996, about ten percent of all deceased veterans nationwide used a burial option provided by NCS. However, in areas served by a national cemetery within a reasonable distance from place of residence, the percentage can be much higher. For example, Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery interrs over 40 percent of all veteran deaths within a 75 mile radius. As burial options within a reasonable distance from home become available to more veterans as a result of opening new veterans' cemeteries, it is anticipated that the percentage of veterans choosing a burial option provided by NCS will also increase.

Objective 2.B. To have the quality of service provided by national cemeteries rated as excellent by our customers.

As stated above, NCS has begun periodically collecting feedback from the families of individuals who are interred in national cemeteries and of other visitors, to judge how the public perceives the service provided. This is a critical measure, as NCS must be sure that it is addressing that which is important to its customers.

There are also two objective measures of the efficiency of the service NCS provides in its contacts with families and funeral directors. NCS verified 99 percent of burial eligibility requests within 48 hours. When a veteran or family member dies on the weekend, the family may experience a stressful delay if interment arrangements cannot be made until the following Monday. To accommodate and better serve its customers, NCS has designated three hub cemeteries to provide weekend scheduling of the interment in a national cemetery for a specific time in the ensuing week. Of the 5,239 weekend requests for scheduling received in FY 1996, NCS accommodated 92.5 percent with scheduling during the ensuing week.



	Interment Requests Taken on Weekend	Percentage of Weekend Requests Accommodated
1992	N/A	N/A
1993	5,558	91.0%
1994	5,528	90.9%
1995	5,755	90.0%
1996 Plan	5,785	90.0%
1996 Actual	5,239	92.5%

	In-ground Gravesites Maintained	Columbaria Niches Maintained	Occupied Graves Maintained	Developed Acres Maintained
1992	1,918,750	14,922	1,933,672	4,881
1993	1,970,166	16,553	1,986,719	5,038
1994	2,020,946	18,433	2,039,379	5,355
1995	2,070,673	21,010	2,091,683	5,410
1996 Plan	2,125,500	22,900	2,148,400	5,624
1996 Actual	2,123,573	24,166	2,147,739	5,630

As data collection and reporting mechanisms are developed and implemented, NCS also plans to report on how quickly graves are marked after an interment, a service which is very important to the bereaved when they come to visit the grave.

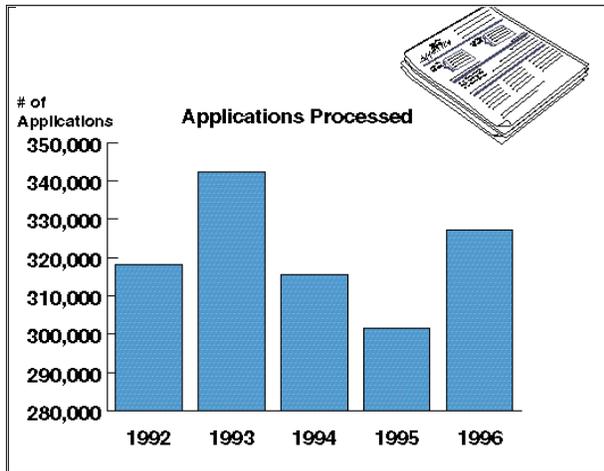
Objective 2.C. To have the appearance of national cemeteries rated excellent by our customers.

National cemeteries are national shrines, a tribute to our gallant dead, and all are important locations for visitation, including patriotic and commemorative events. Maintenance of the national cemeteries as national shrines meeting the highest standards of public expectation has long been an indicator of the honor, recognition, and commemoration afforded those who have served in the military and are now interred in national cemeteries. NCS will use the results of the visitor comment cards to judge how the public perceives the appearance of the cemeteries. Occupied in-ground gravesites and columbaria niches maintained are important measures of a workload that increases significantly each year. The number of columbaria niches maintained was six percent higher than the planned total because of the increased rate of cremations, the greater accessibility of columbaria, and the acceptance of this burial option by the veteran community.

Goal 3. Provide quality headstones and markers efficiently, accurately, and in a timely manner.

The third goal is to provide quality and timely service when a headstone or marker is requested, whether the grave is located in a national, state, or private cemetery. Delivery of this benefit is not dependent on interment in a national cemetery. In fact, most headstones and markers are provided for veterans' graves that are not in national cemeteries; less than 30 percent of all headstones and markers are provided for graves in national cemeteries.

There was virtually no variance in the difference between the projected number of headstone and marker applications processed (340,000) and the actual number (327,000) in FY 1996. However, the extended government furloughs and inclement weather had a significant impact on the administration of the headstone and marker workload handled by the Memorial Programs Service (MPS). When MPS resumed normal operations in mid-January, the total number of applications on-hand stood at more than 57,000. Through the use of overtime hours, incentives and the addition of temporary employees, MPS reduced this level to 10,000 at the end of the fiscal year.



In addition to developing objective(s) and supporting performance measures related to efficiency, timeliness, and accuracy of the services provided in the headstone and marker program, NCS is reviewing the application and procurement processes to identify potential improvements and is re-engineering automated systems to improve the ordering of these headstones and markers. During the fis-

cal year, NCS initiated the direct electronic transfer of marker ordering information for national cemeteries and began expansion of electronic ordering to state veterans' cemeteries and other Federal cemeteries. A pilot project was initiated at Nashville National Cemetery to test process re-engineering for ordering headstones and markers for private cemeteries from field stations where available space exists. NCS also began a program at the national cemeteries in which the second inscription is added *in situ* (i.e., at the gravesite) to the currently existing headstone following the death and interment of a subsequent family member. In addition to the direct savings to VA in terms of acquisition and transportation costs associated with replacing the original headstone, NCS avoids the labor cost of removing original headstones and installing replacements.