

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials
Meeting Minutes
June 15-16, 2022
8:30 am - 4:30 pm

Committee Members Present:

- Heather Braatz, Committee Chair
- Paul Adkins, Committee Member
- Eric Brown, Committee Member
- Amerophan Callahan, Committee Member
- James Earp, Committee Member
- Thomas Hernandez, Committee Member
- Michael Hoplight, Committee Member
- William Kennedy, Committee Member
- Kathleen Moakler, Committee Member
- James Rudolph, Committee Member
- Floyd Watson, Jr, Committee Member
- Donn Weaver, Committee Member

Ex-officio Members Present:

- Karen Durham-Aguilera, Office of Army Cemeteries
- Tom Sole, American Battle Monument Commission
- Gia Wagner, National Park Service

Office of Cemetery Army Cemeteries Present:

- Lieutenant Colonel Maxwell Pappas
- Major Judith Phinn
- Cynthia Riddle
- Renea Yates

Office of the VA Secretary Attendees:

- Jeffrey Moragne, Director, VA Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO)
- Jelessa Burney, Program Specialist, ACMO

National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Attendees:

- Matthew Quinn, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
- Gerardo Avila, Acting Chief of Staff
- Steven Markowski, Speech Writer
- Tanya Turner, Special Assistant to the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
- Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary, Field Programs and Cemetery Operations
- Willie Clyde Marsh, Acting Executive Director, Cemetery Operations
- Jerry Sowders, Executive Assistant, Cemetery Operations
- Artis Parker, Executive Director, Office of Field Programs
- Eric Powell, Director, Memorial Products Service
- Daniel Devine, Executive Director, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations (OEMI)
- Les' Melnyk, Chief of Partnerships and Outreach, OEMI

- James LaPaglia, Digital Service Chief/VLM Program Manager, OEMI
- Richelle Taylor, Public Affairs Specialist, OEMI
- Lisa Hollenbeck, Program Manager, NCA Web Services, OEMI
- Faith Hopkins, Designated Federal Officer (DFO), OEMI
- Antonio Addressi, Alternate DFO and Education Specialist, OEMI

Other VA Staff

- Julia Fugate, Conference Management Supervisor, Enterprise Service Desk (ESD)
- Sharon LeMaistre, Conference Management Supervisor, Development Security and Operations
- Richard Starliper, Conference Management Specialist, ESD

Also Present:

- John Kelley, Private Citizen
- Claire McKinney, Private Citizen

Wednesday, June 15, 2022

The semi-annual meeting of the Veterans Affairs (VA) Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials (herein referred to as the ACCM or Committee) was held in Washington, D.C. The session was open to the public; and the meeting information and teleconference number were published in the Federal Register announcement.

Opening Remarks

The Committee Chair, Ms. Heather Braatz, called the meeting to order at 8:30 am. The Chair opened the meeting by thanking the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) for allowing ACCM the use of their facilities for the meeting. The Chair provided a brief overview of the Committee's role and activities, and discussed the agenda for this meeting, particularly focusing on American Indian and Alaskan Native recommendations. Chair Braatz introduced Matthew T. Quinn, the seventh Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs.

Overview of National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Mission, Vision, and Goals

Mr. Quinn welcomed attendees and thanked them for their guidance and assistance in creating the environment in which National Shrines can exist, as well as the partnership with the states, tribes, and territories on the grant program. He expressed full faith and confidence in Chair Braatz's leadership of the committee and its ability to provide guidance on how best to serve Veterans and their family members.

The Under Secretary provided a brief history of the NCA, provided for by the 1862 Omnibus Act during the Civil War, which authorized the President to purchase grounds in order to honor those fallen in service to the United States. That responsibility continues in perpetuity at sites such as Arlington National Cemetery.

- There are 155 national cemeteries, as well as 120 state, tribal, and territorial grant-funded cemeteries.
- 95% of Veterans should have a national or grant-funded cemetery within 75 miles of their residence.
- NCA has 2,182 team members, with the highest rate of Veterans in the federal government at 70.9%; 9.26% are women Veterans.
- NCA has the greatest customer satisfaction rating of any private or public entity, according to the American Customer Satisfaction Index survey.

Eligibility Criteria

- A 2022 law makes National Guard Reserve members that are not federal Veterans eligible for interment within the state, tribal, or territorial grant cemeteries.

- Some states are more active in this regard than others. Mr. Glenn Powers has done a lot of work with the states. Mr. Quinn stated that it is an appropriate recognition of those individuals who just never got the call to active-duty service, but still can be interred in a national shrine in state grant cemeteries.
- In eligibility criteria, NCA does an incredible job and there is no lag for determination at the time of need. A reduction in the lag in pre-need eligibility notifications is needed to match time-of-need eligibility notifications more closely.

Veterans Legacy Program

- Grant program launched in 2021 to provide young Americans with learning opportunities on the service of Veterans.
- The team has done an incredible job ensuring ways for family members, friends, and fellow service members to pay tribute to Veterans so that they are never forgotten.

Recalling a question during his Congressional confirmation about any difference between state grant and national cemeteries, Under Secretary Quinn noted that he had numerous family members interred in state grant cemeteries and he did not notice a difference, though some tribal grant cemeteries would benefit from more VA attention. One of the problems when receiving grant applications from smaller tribes and localities is examining how many Veterans will be served by the cemetery. This is a point of particular importance for the Undersecretary, addressing issues related to tribal grant cemeteries.

Kathleen Moakler asked about the peer-to-peer mentor program. Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations explained it had not been enacted due to technical and regulatory difficulties, but that remedial training has been applied where it was needed. The Under Secretary and Donn Weaver discussed the importance of leadership in a Cemetery Director, and Michael Hoplight inquired about the death of two Veterans in western New York. Mr. Quinn discussed the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) benefits process with Thomas Hernandez, and Chair Braatz explained that the ACCM had helped with recommendations in the past when there was a backlog in pre-need eligibility. Under Secretary, Quinn offered his thanks to the Committee and there was a brief recess to present the Certificates of Appointment to the ACCM.

Administrative Announcements, Introduction of Committee Members

After a recitation of the pledge of allegiance and a moment of silence, Chair Braatz introduced Faith Hopkins, Designated Federal Officer (DFO) and the ACCM's Advisor to the Committee on Women Veterans, provided administrative announcements, and discussed the scope of the meeting. Chair Braatz called for introductions of members of

the Committee and other attendees. Chair Braatz re-emphasized NCA's stature as the highest-ranked customer service organization in the United States and noted the standards it adheres to in order to earn that distinction.

Overview/Update on Cemetery Operations

George Cannizzaro, Deputy Director of Cemetery Operations, provided a presentation on the NCA's operations.

- Three-quarters of the workforce is in the field, extremely customer-focused.
- 10% of the workforce is made up of women Veterans.
- Succeeding in the mission to inter, overseeing a rise in interments year-over-year.
- As of the end of May, trending towards 150,000 or more interments in 2022.

VA is seeking congressional approval to make green burials an authorized operation, recognizing the cultural and demographic trend fueling a rising preference among Veterans. Green burials are generally burials of non-cremated remains that are not embalmed or treated with any other chemicals that could have longstanding environmental impacts, in a receptacle that is compostable or biodegradable. VA included a legislative proposal in its Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23) budget proposal to Congress and will continue to include it in future budget proposals if it is not approved. The proposal asks Congress to amend the current statutory authority that permits the Secretary of VA to provide burial benefits to allow the Department to do so in green burial sections, which have different dimensional aspects to the layout of grave sites. There were questions about the maintenance of green burial sites after decomposition and the status of spouses that are traditionally interred with the Veteran. Mr. Cannizzaro said he would return to the Committee with more information on these topics.

Urban and Rural Initiative Cemeteries

- Two initiatives for the 5% of Veterans that did not have reasonable access to a burial option from a VA national cemetery or a VA grant funded cemetery, defined as being located within 75 miles of their home.
- Intent for the rural initiative: find communities where access was not already available and be able to provide a burial option for Veterans and their families there.
- Intent for the urban initiative: make a burial option available to Veterans living in an urban core or urban center, for whom getting to a current VA national cemetery outside the city would not be practical.

- Six rural initiative national cemeteries are open, with two currently in design. Two urban sites are open or soon to be open, with three in development to serve New York, Chicago, and Alameda, California.
- The Crown Hill National Cemeteries' Urban Initiative Site will be dedicated on July 1st, allowing for the reopening of a burial option within Indianapolis for the first time in nearly 60 years.

NCA has a policy that sets out criteria for determining when and whether to expand a national cemetery depending on context. First examined is how depletion or closure of a currently open national cemetery without expanding it will impact a Veteran community's access to a burial option. Also examined are the demographics of utilization, whether the circumstances have changed for a community that was once thriving or close to a military installation, and whether a new or expanded cemetery will truly be meeting a need, as well as real property options. Operationally, NCA is now on a 15-year build cycle where if a burial option will be depleted within 15 years, it triggers a discussion about expansion and putting into place the next phase of developable acres in a cemetery.

Briefing on American Battle Monuments Commission

Thomas Sole, Chief of Engineering and Strategic Plans for the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), delivered a briefing on the organization, beginning with a quote from Archibald MacLeish engraved in stone at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii: "We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning." The ABMC was created after World War I and was first chaired by General John Pershing. Its mission is to keep alive the memory of the deeds of Veterans of past American wars. After World War I, the ABMC had nine cemeteries and 15 monuments. By the time of World War II, President Roosevelt combined cemeteries with monuments as a piece of civic art, exemplified by the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial in France.

ABMC Monuments are primarily overseas and publicizing their existence to Americans who tend to travel within the United States is a challenge facing the organization. There are ABMC monuments and cemeteries in Panama, The Philippines, England, France, Mexico, and The Netherlands.

Mr. Sole described several current and developing ABMC projects, and particularly emphasized the construction underway for a national World War I memorial in the nation's capital, which began to receive attention around the centennial of the war's ending in 1917. Congress had also directed ABMC to build an interpretive center to explain to visitors the story and significance of what those who served had achieved in a particular campaign or conflict, the first of which was the Normandy American

Cemetery. Following Mr. Sole's briefing, there was a discussion of the evolution and distinctions of headstones at ABMC cemeteries, the efforts and financing by locals for American monuments and graves, and the potential for a more solid partnership between ABMC and NCA.

Briefing on National Park Service

Gia Wagner, Superintendent of Andersonville National Historic Site, gave a briefing on the National Park Service (NPS). There are over 400 national parks, and using Andersonville National Cemetery as an exemplar, Ms. Wagner indicated all the historic elements, including monuments, headstones, rostrums, and plantings, which go toward creating the reverent and peaceful atmosphere characteristic of national cemeteries. Policies found in the director's orders provide guidance on taking care of national cemeteries with instructions on operations, burials, disinterment, ceremonies, and responsibilities.

With the advanced age of most national cemeteries, historic research is required to create and maintain authentic plantings and structures. NPS is working towards preservation maintenance plans with specific directions on tasks such as cleaning and landscaping and has a funding request for FY23 for Maintenance Action Teams (MATs) comprising trained turf experts and arborists to better care for historic trees. NPS also has a historic preservation training center, which hosts historical masons, carpenters, and others to teach trades and train future experts. NPS is conducting five MAT team scopings this summer, where experts conduct air spading, tree trimming, herbicide use, and resodding, as well as assess damages in the national cemetery.

Ms. Wagner briefly discussed several national cemeteries, including Andersonville, a Confederate Prisoner of War (POW) Camp, which held 42,000 Union soldiers on about 24 acres of land. 22,200 wreaths were placed on headstones in the park last Christmas and they are currently developing a plan for planting in October. The last open section of the site will be opening with room for about 700 interments. Vicksburg National Cemetery is working with the Tribal and State Historic Preservation Offices in Mississippi to build temporary housing for 80 disinterred Veterans after erosion caused a catastrophic geological failure of a hill on the site.

Update on Urn and Commemorative Plaque Benefit

Eric Powell is NCA's Assistant Director of Memorial Products Service, which provides headstones and markers for the unmarked graves of eligible Veterans and their dependents. He spoke about Public Law 116-315, the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020, which authorizes the VA to provide two additional memorial products, an urn, and a commemorative plaque for cremated remains not interred. The selection of either the

plaque or the urn precludes the Veteran from later interment in a VA national cemetery or receiving a government headstone or marker anywhere. The law takes effect in January of 2023, giving NCA and the VA time to acquire these products and work through issues with the statute. In the discussion which followed, the paramount concern among members was to be forthright with Veterans and their families, honoring their service while complying with the law.

In June of 2021, the Committee was asked to provide recommendations on the design and materials of the urn and plaque, including what is called a folded flag insignia, an inscription, and either a walnut or pine finish. They will be shipped to the next of kin or family member who requests it. Information will be conveyed through communication channels such as GovDelivery, as well as through family funeral homes, social media, the NCA website, and outreach events. The hope is that they will be able to be sent to the family within 48 hours of receiving the application.

The committee then recessed for a lunch break.

Overview of Office of Inspector General (OIG) Report on Unclaimed Veterans' Remains

Jerry Sowders, Division Chief of the Eligibility Verification Division at the National Cemetery Scheduling Office, gave a briefing on the Inspector General (IG) report, "Improvements Needed to Ensure Final Disposition of Unclaimed Veterans' Remains." NCA has three major areas of responsibility in terms of unclaimed Veteran remains:

- Determining eligibility and scheduling interments.
- Conducting interments in VA national cemeteries.
- Overseeing VA's Casket and Urn Program for unclaimed Veterans.

Until recently, many people in VA have thought of NCA as the only VA administration concerned with unclaimed Veteran remains. When the VA was tasked with reporting to Congress on this subject in 2018, three years before the OIG report, the task was assigned to NCA, which produced a report acknowledging that NCA needed to make improvements, particularly in outreach, tracking, and reporting. NCA at that time had no reliable way of knowing how many unclaimed interments it was completing, or who had the remains they had scheduled for interment but never brought to the cemeteries.

A subsequent report in 2021 contained information on:

- The number of unclaimed Veterans that died in VA hospitals.
- What those hospitals did with the remains.

- Data about burial benefits and other monetary benefits paid for the final arrangements of unclaimed Veterans.
- Improved, better-designed process, tools, and training for employees tasked with handling unclaimed remains
- More outreach targeted to those most likely to be in possession of unclaimed remains.
- The ability of NCA to identify cases for unclaimed Veterans, gather data on them to continue to improve processes and track them to final disposition.
- Steady growth in the number of unclaimed interments year over year, about 22% over five years. There have been more unclaimed interments in January-May of 2022 than any other January-May to date.

The IG report indicated three key areas for attention. First, in outreach, it cited a lack of collaboration with other agencies in locating unclaimed Veterans. The second was financial oversight, noting that the VA's three administrations work separately and were divided by separate processes and technologies with payment systems unable to talk to each other, leading sometimes to them all paying claims for the same services for the same unclaimed Veterans. Finally, it highlighted a lack of department-level oversight, with no single entity in VA having the responsibility or authority to oversee all of the various functions the different administrations are performing or not performing with respect to unclaimed Veterans.

The 57-page OIG report was critical to the VA generally, and in response, VA charted an Integrated Project Team (IPT), consisting of executives and subject matter experts from all three administrations, as well as the Veterans Experience Office and the Office of Enterprise Integration. The IPT is charged with responding to the 11 specific recommendations in the OIG report and creating a seamless process to determine the correct personnel and actions to find solutions, with NCA playing a major leadership role.

OIG recommendations include:

- Designate a senior accountable official or program office for the full scope of services provided on behalf of unclaimed Veterans.
- Assign and conduct a program evaluation of all VA benefits and services for unclaimed Veterans across the VA, laying the groundwork with mapping exercises
- Comb through data maintained by the Department of Justice (DOJ) called the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, which contained information on 9,283 unclaimed individuals.

- Primarily entered into the system by coroners, medical examiners' offices, funeral homes, and law enforcement agencies.
- NCA determined there were 466 Veterans eligible for burial in national cemeteries and conducted outreach to the custodians of those remains to attempt positive identification and their whereabouts.
 - 90% were already interred in national cemeteries or state Veteran cemeteries, with some claimed by next of kin, some buried in private cemeteries, and some buried at sea.
 - Three eligible Veterans were interred in national cemeteries and one in a state Veteran cemetery as a result of this work.
 - No information was received from the custodians of 46 Veterans' remains.
- Charge NCA with tracking and reporting unclaimed Veterans' remains. NCA has a new system in development, the Memorial Benefits Management System (MBMS), along with the Burial Operation Support System (BOSS), with the functionality to perform these operations automatically.
- Coordinate with the Secretary's Center for Strategic Partnerships to develop relationships with wholesalers to provide caskets and urns directly to funeral homes with unclaimed remains rather than reimbursing those who purchased them.
- Although the NCA agreed the Casket and Urn program is underutilized and needs improvement, this suggestion was found unsatisfactory with everyone involved for several reasons, citing costs, paperwork, and that many caskets would be shipped from China and are often delivered damaged.

A discussion followed on the challenges and recommendations for cooperation among federal, state, county, and local officials to share information and work together to inter unclaimed Veterans' remains when they are discovered, and to streamline the process for reimbursements and allowances.

Overview/Update on Veterans Cemetery Grants Program

Glenn Powers presented on behalf of George Eisenbach, Director of the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program, who was unable to attend. There have been 733,000 interments since the program's inception and 45,000 in FY21. There are 120 cemeteries in 45 states, three territories, and 13 tribes. The grants are under the construction-related umbrella of expansion, establishment, improvement, and operations and maintenance. Except for raising and realigning headstones, states must fund their employees after being given a grant for construction.

The program takes pre-applications from states or tribes that are interested in the expansion, establishment, or improvement of cemeteries. If submitted before July 1st of a given year, they are prioritized according to regulations, with expansion being

prioritized above establishment. By October 1st, staff would determine award opportunities for states that had submitted pre-applications based on the budget awarded to the program by Congress. By the end of the year and the completion of a full application, the grant could be awarded. A triennial review is conducted every three years following construction in what is called the Compliance Review Program, with states and tribes submitting annual data reports to track how many interments they have completed. Expansions consume most of the budget; only one new cemetery has been established since 2021.

In the past, funding for the program had been around \$45 million but has increased to \$48.5 million in FY22. Carryover funding, allowing money not spent from the previous year to be used in subsequent years, gives the program some flexibility. A recent report commended the program on its use of resources.

Burial Equity Act for Guards and Reserves

- Based on this new law, grants provided by the VA for Veterans' cemeteries cannot restrict a state from allowing the burial of non-Veteran National Guards and Reservists in that cemetery.
 - Previously such burials were not allowable as a condition of receiving the grant and future grants.
- The states may choose to opt-in. New Hampshire, Virginia, and North Dakota have done so.
- Although VA does not provide operational funds for states and tribes to run their cemeteries, hire people to maintain them, or handle its contracts, States and tribes can receive a federal benefit from VBA in the form of an \$828 plot allowance for each Veteran that they bury
- VA will not be providing plot allowance for Guard members or Reservists buried in VA grant-funded cemeteries, nor will VA provide a headstone or marker.
- In national cemeteries, VA eligibility remains the same; Guard members and Reservists without active-duty service other than their basic training/advanced training are not eligible to be buried in national cemeteries.
- This Act also amended the statute so that tribes could receive the \$828 plot allowance that states received
- VA will soon be able to use grant funds to reimburse states and tribes when they send their employees to train with NCA. (Unrelated to the Burial Equity Act.)

Chair Braatz asked if the training grants were coming from the same fund that tribal and state cemetery grants draw from. Mr. Powers answered that it would but is likely to be an insignificant amount. The \$45 million in grant has been the funding cap for some time, and its buying power has reduced in the past ten years under inflationary pressure. Responding to a question from Mr. Kennedy about tribal cemeteries, Mr. Powers re-emphasized those current regulations prohibit the secretary or any VA employee from exercising any administrative or operational control over any decision made at a state or tribal cemetery and closed with some thoughts on prioritization and funding.

Briefing on Arlington National Cemetery (ANC)

Karen Durham-Aguilera, Executive Director of the Office of Army Cemeteries (OAC), provided the briefing. OAC has been completing its rulemaking for the revised eligibility criteria in order to improve how it gets its message out to Veterans' families. When families find out they are ineligible, they are to be transferred to NCA's Scheduling Center for assistance. OAC is also launching a cemetery locator on their website to determine the nearest military cemeteries, as well as Army and state military cemeteries. The website will include an eligibility determination tool. When the final rulemaking is completed, NCA will be part of the public announcement.

The OAC rulemaking campaign has transpired over several years after having first been announced in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act. OAC has adjudicated the comments it received and is trying to get the final rule completed and approved. It is currently with the Secretary of Defense and will next be sent to the Office of Management and Budget for interagency clearance. Once it is cleared it will be published in the Federal Register and will be implemented after 30 days.

There are thousands of families in the queue right now who have contacted OAC to schedule their day for ANC. If they are currently eligible, they will remain eligible and not subject to the new criteria. The revised criteria will only affect families who initiate a request after the implementation date. Full retirees with other eligibilities such as Purple Heart, POW, or Silver Star will remain eligible above ground. About a third of those interred in ANC are cremated and laid to rest above ground, a third are committed below ground, and the remaining third are traditionally casketed.

Carlisle Barracks

- In 1879, Carlisle Barracks, located on what later became the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, was the site of Carlisle Indian Industrial School operated by the Department of the Interior until 1918.

- More than 10,000 Native American children from about 50 tribes from across the U.S. came to the school for a Western education. Some students became ill and passed away and they were buried in the cemetery at Carlisle Barracks.
- In 2016, OAC began consultation with Native American families who had ancestral children laid to rest at Carlisle on the process of returning their children to them, at their request and upon establishing the closest living family link.
- Beginning in 2017, the first three children were disinterred with great archaeological rigor and under the supervision of Dr. Elizabeth Digangi, a top forensic anthropologist, of which there are only about 80 in the world. These three children were returned to their family and tribe at OAC expense for reburial.
- The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act does not apply because the children are already buried on Army land. The OAC makes the publication of their intent through the Federal Register Notice, and the effort is undertaken very slowly in order to accommodate the family's request for ceremonial events throughout the reburial process.
- This summer, OAC will be disinterring eight Native American and Alaskan Native children representing six tribes.

Public Comment

Chair Braatz opened the meeting to public comment. In response to Ms. Durham-Aguilera's presentation on the revised eligibility standards at ANC, John Kelley expressed concern for the living Veterans who earned the right to have their remains laid to rest at ANC, but whose eligibility may be changed under what Congress has put forth. He believes these Veterans should be grandfathered in on the strength of their existing rights. Chair Braatz stated that the rule makers had considered the rate of Veterans who die each year and the rate of interments each year to determine how to extend the longevity of ANC's lifespan as a national cemetery.

Open Discussion

Chair Braatz began an open discussion among Committee members on the meeting's presentations and briefings. Mr. Earp and Mr. Kennedy had a discussion clarifying the right of Reservists who had been called up to active-duty service in Iraq or Afghanistan to be buried in state and national cemeteries. Ms. Callahan explained the pre-need program, around which there is a large amount of rumor and misunderstanding, and which has reduced its backlog from two years to 30 days through her team's work. This led to a broader discussion about the needs of the organization as a whole to serve aged Veterans now and to prepare for Veterans from the Global War on Terror that will be making use of VA and NCA services in 10 to 15 years. Other topics covered include the Veteran's Legacy Memorial (VLM) Program, the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, and the VA's communication strategies.

Closing Remarks

Following a brief overview of plans for a visit to Alexandria National Cemetery the following afternoon, Chair Braatz adjourned the meeting at 4:06 p.m.

Thursday, June 16, 2022

Call to Order, Pledge of Allegiance, Moment of Silence

Chair Braatz welcomed members back for the second day of proceedings. Eric Brown led the committee in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Chair Braatz called for a moment of silence for the service members serving overseas and in America, for their families, their survivors, and those who sit in wait for them.

Administrative Announcements, Remarks, and Recap

Faith Hopkins provided administrative announcements and Chair Braatz commended Tuesday's speakers for their informative presentations and the wide-ranging discussions that followed. Mr. Devine expressed gratitude for the work of Ms. Hopkins as a new DFO and Antonio Addressi, the ACCM's Alternate DFO.

Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovation (OEMI) Update on Outreach

Les Melnyk, Chief of Public Affairs and Outreach for NCA, offered a presentation on OEMI's structure and efforts at outreach to Veterans and their families. OEMI consists of four branches:

- Public Affairs and Outreach, topics ranging from social media to new cemetery dedications, as well as attending trade shows, conventions, and professional conferences.
- Digital Services Team, VLM, and the OEMI website.
- Historians, background research, and conveying stories to the general public through various means, including waysides, plaques, teaching events, etc.
- PDF Conversion, converting Adobe PDF portable documents to webpages to ensure that NCA documents are in compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, which requires federal agencies to provide information and communications accessible to those with disabilities.

OEMI also writes articles in various publications as a form of outreach. Content from OEMI appeared in VSO magazine, Blind Veterans Association, the Enlisted Association of the National Guard, Association of U.S. Navy, Korean War Veterans, American Legion, and Jewish War Veterans. Much of the content focuses on the Veterans Legacy and Memorial site, corresponding to a rise in awareness which should lead to a rise in use. To date, OEMI has produced twelve videos in 2022 with Mr. Melnyk, Steve Elmore, Martin Wright, and Richelle Taylor. Chair Braatz commended the video's impressive and professional quality, and the extent that the organization has progressed in video production over the past three years. The Sounds of the National Cemetery is another OEMI project, with evocative soundscapes associated with national cemeteries to get beyond the surface of the mind.

Veteran's Legacy Memorial Program

- Launched in 2019 to create a dedicated webpage for individual Veterans interred in national cemeteries.
- In 2020, a tributes feature was instituted which would allow textual tributes to be written to any Veteran, which required policies in place to screen comments to ensure they were positive and uplifting in nature, rather than derogatory to the Veteran.
- Memorial Day of 2021, photos and documents could also be uploaded to a Veteran's VLM page, as well as an ability for loved ones to follow what was placed on a Veteran's page.
- Veterans' Day 2021, the Veterans in more than 90 Veteran Cemetery Grant Program Cemeteries were added.
- In 2022, upgrades were made in response to more than 70% of people accessing VLM through their phones to make the site more user-friendly and visually appealing.
- Future goals are to incorporate more and larger military cemeteries, as well as the Veterans buried in private cemeteries.
- Awards and Honors for VLM include the IABC Gold Quil, the FedHealth IT Innovations Award, and the Granicus Digital Government's Experience Award; Web Ops Team Leader James LaPaglia is the Disabled American Veterans Government Employee of the Year.

Carry the Load

- March celebrating the service and sacrifice made by members of the military, first responders, law enforcement, fire departments, emergency medical services, etc.

- In May of 2022, organized marches along five separate routes covering more than 20,000 miles and visited 50 national cemeteries, among other locations.
- Most participants march along a two-mile segment near them to symbolically carry the memory of the life given in service.
- NCA worked with the Travis Manion Foundation, which places a wooden token on top of Veterans' graves on behalf of loved ones who live too far away and are unable to visit and sends them a picture.

Chair Braatz opened the discussion with questions and Ms. Wagner asked Mr. Melnyk if OEMI's cemetery locator page includes all national cemeteries or only NCA cemeteries. He explained it was only NCA cemeteries and state, tribal, and territorial grant cemeteries currently, but adding the rest of the national cemeteries was the next step, although they must be currently open. She also asked about the Veterans Legacy Program (VLP). VLP is a program whereby VA collaborated chiefly with colleges and high schools to teach students about Veterans in national cemeteries in various ways. It is instituting a grant vehicle for the training this year. Also discussed were diversity, equity, and inclusion; the roadside national cemetery legacy program; and Larry Provost's extensive contributions as an outreach professional for OEMI.

American Indian and Alaskan Native Work Group

James Earp reported on the American Indian and Alaskan Native Work Group, a population group that impacts nearly every condition within the Veterans' cemeteries programs. The NCA specifically requested the working group to look at the cultural issues contributing to the lack of usage of tribal Veterans' cemeteries. The working group met on March 16, 2022, to further discuss the expectations of its mission, and its goals are to continue to offer advice based on the needs of the nation's Veterans, and to help ensure that Veterans and eligible family members will have access to and make use of VA burial and memorial benefits.

One of the primary resources used as a foundation of the working group's research was a report prepared by former ACCM chair Joseph Strickland and advisory member Ed Saunders entitled *American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans: Burial Ceremonies and Customs in U.S. National Cemeteries*. NCA seeks to create cemetery guidelines for a number of American Indian burial ceremonies using procedures with respectful communication, and compromise and enforce the national regulations ensuring dignified burial honors for Veterans of all religious beliefs. There are many factors to consider when looking at Native American traditions and how they differ between tribes along with the expectations of the national shrine standards expected at national, state, and grant funded cemeteries. NCA should create outreach programs to American Indian tribes describing cemetery operations, in order to compromise as much as possible

based on American Indian beliefs and burials. There has been some collaboration locally to provide support and training to tribal Veterans' cemeteries.

The working group utilized information from the U.S. Department of Defense, the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Census Bureau and concluded:

- Tribal grant cemeteries need funding to operate and maintain the facilities to NCA's standards after the initial building.
- There are challenges associated with the requirements of Veterans who receive other than honorable discharge and have served at least two years.
- The VA should support a forum for tribes participating in this program to share successes and lessons learned with other interested tribes.

Limitations and barriers for interring Native American Veterans in the national, state, and tribal grant-funded cemeteries:

- Many tribal members prefer family plots, whereas NCA is currently restricted to the Veteran, spouse, and minor dependents.
- Time constraints and restrictions on ceremonies.
- Distance to the Veteran cemeteries from the tribal reservation.
- Lack of funding for continued operations and perpetual care.
- Lack of training for cemetery personnel.

Working Group Resources

- NCA Intranet
- NCA Directive 7545, Cultural Resources Management at VA National Cemeteries
- American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA)
 - Requires federal agencies to consult with Indian tribes and other Native Americans about agency actions that may affect religious practices, places, and sacred objects used in religious practices.

Working Group Recommendations

- Local and national cemetery leadership to pursue outreach with tribal leaders and tribal grant funded cemeteries and personnel.
- Conduct needs assessment survey for tribal grant funded cemeteries to collect data from tribes, sharing their concerns so NCA can make an educated response.

- Train cemetery leadership on specific needs of American Indian burial.
- Develop specific educational materials and books for tribal grant funded cemeteries.
- Create and publish a handout brochure specific to American Indian Veterans and family members regarding burial benefits.
- Coordinate with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to explore funding assistance for the current operation.

Mr. Hoplight commented on changing the committee's terminology from American Indian to Native American, or to identify the specific tribe. He also asked what the status of benefits would be for Native American Veterans who moved back to their nations located within Canada.

Funeral Director and Missing in America Program Work Group

Chair Braatz presented on the Funeral Director and Missing in America Program (MIAP) Work Group, established at the Committee's fall 2021 meeting to review the OIG report on unclaimed Veterans' remains and to explore ways to increase communication for funeral service professionals. At Fort Sill, a funeral director selected an outer burial container for an unclaimed Veteran typically used to encase a casket when it flies on a plane. NCA has existing guidelines for appropriate burial containers and an existing program for the final disposition of unclaimed Veteran remains. A funeral home or family can apply for reimbursement for a casket or urn. By law, VA has to ensure that deceased Veterans without any next of kin, surviving family, or with an estranged family that has not taken claim of that Veteran's remains to receive dignified and reverent burials by providing information about burial benefits to funeral homes and other entities that are likely to have custody of these deceased Veterans.

NCA's burial programs serve a diverse and varied group of stakeholders, primarily the direct beneficiaries of burial benefits like Veterans and their eligible family members. Other important stakeholders include Veteran's Services Organizations (VSOs) and funeral directors, who are directly involved in facilitating burials at VA national and state cemeteries and are often the only persons responsible for the remains of unclaimed Veterans. It is therefore imperative to make sure that these funeral directors and funeral homes are good allies to NCA and are serving Veterans with the utmost reverence and dignity at the time of their final rest. Some of the ways this can be done are:

- Enhance the processes and methods to assure an easy application for timely benefits and determinations.
- Create a certificate or training program to recognize the funeral homes that have performed well with NCA.
- Partner with VSOs.

- Ensure awareness of benefits for unclaimed Veterans' remains.
- Have funeral homes participate in the unclaimed Veterans' remains program, which is a reimbursement program.
- Teach funeral directors how to read DD-214s.
- Design and develop continuing education (CE) programs for funeral directors.
 - NCA could share CE program packets with national, state, and tribal cemetery directors as a fully functional kit that could be customized based on location.
- Increase awareness of funeral service symposiums; the National Funeral Directors Association Convention; the International Cemetery, Crematory Funeral Association; or the Cremation Association of North America.

Mr. Weaver spoke briefly on MIAP, which began in 2006 by a father who went to California to bury his daughter at a funeral home that happened to have the 20-year-old remains of a Veteran on their shelf. The program has spread, but its progress has been uneven, with many states not having MIAP project leaders. Notable exceptions include Virginia and especially Florida, where 2,000 Veterans have been laid to rest in five years. There is no way for VA to know how many Veterans' remains are left unclaimed but under most state laws, a funeral home has to retain them and MIAP has discovered remains that were six decades old. Like many volunteer organizations, and despite the glowing media coverage, MIAP has trouble getting volunteers. Mr. Weaver suggested approaching VSOs, American Legion Groups, Rolling Thunder, and VFW to get involved.

Outreach Work Group

Kathleen Moakler from the NCA Media Products and Communication Strategy Workgroup conducted a review of the Outreach Workgroup's progress. Ms. Moakler described the cross-collaboration between NCA and Mr. Devine at OEMI with an example from the State Department's virtual students Federal service program, which is an education program conducted by NCA/OEMI. An undergraduate named Nalia Warmack, History Intern, National Cemetery Administration, with Richard Hulver, Ph.D., Historian, National Cemetery Administration developed a webpage on the POW experience she told through the stories of 16 POWs from World War I through Vietnam (viewable at [American prisoners of war: Honoring those in National Cemeteries - VA History Office](#)). Ms. Warmack was mentored by NCA historians as she developed the project and the committee has expressed an interest in receiving a presentation on her work.

Ms. Moakler attended a meeting attended by Senator Elizabeth Dole of the Veteran's Family, Caregiver, and Survivor Federal Advisory Committee, which held a meeting on March 29, 2022. There have been problems with services to legacy caregivers stopping

without notice, which was a major concern. NCA's highly regarded customer service and its focus on helping survivors maintain their Veteran's legacy was recognized in that meeting as well. The advisory committee made three recommendations in reference to caregivers becoming survivors:

- Veteran caregiver survivors have expressed their critical need for assistance in assessing, understanding and successfully using the many sources of information on care benefits and memorial services that they need and are eligible for and entitled to.
- Navigating the tens of thousands of public, private, and nonprofit sector sites; finding verified resources and services; and applying for their assistance is overwhelming, especially as they transition from their role as the caregiver to their role as a survivor.
- Consider how to provide clear, relevant, and timely information, legal and financial assistance, and eligibility for benefits to all caregivers before the death of their Veteran and to all caregiver survivors after death.

Ms. Moakler reiterated that knowing what is important in what survivors are conveying to the Veteran's Families, Caregivers, and Survivor advisory committee is a major component of meeting them where they are and that it is crucial to invite survivors to review what ACCM is doing as well. The Outreach Work Group's recommendations were as follows:

- Realize that benefit education for caregivers and survivors is the work of VBA.
- Encourage the continued cooperation of NCA and OEMI with developing the survivor journey map, and present information on new NCA products, such as the urn and commemorative plaque benefit, building on the success of VLM and VLP.
- Continue to expand on interactive tools for family members and others who have loved ones interred in national cemeteries, such as the National Cemetery Locator.

Committee Recommendations

Chair Braatz began a discussion of the recommendations to be voted on by the Committee. There were no outstanding recommendations from 2021. Chair Braatz issued a reminder that although the Committee may come to a consensus on several ideas in the course of the discussion, the recommendations must ultimately be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound.

After discussion, amendments, and deletions, the ACCM recommends that NCA:

- Continue to conduct interviews with tribal leaders and the Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs to better determine the needs of VA grant-funded tribal cemeteries.
- Continue to provide support to tribal cemeteries with a focus on an acknowledgment of traditional practices and cultural sensitivity to increase utilization by the tribal membership.
- Develop customizable funeral director CE training program tools to be provided to national, state, and tribal Veterans cemeteries to use as they are able.
 - The training program tools are intended to increase awareness, enhance the knowledge of our funeral service professionals, and to encourage funeral homes to better support American Veterans and their families.
- Continue to expand on the success of the Veterans Legacy Program to increase the number of grantees and enhance awareness of the legacy of our Veterans.
- Continue to expand the success of the Veterans Legacy Memorial to include all eligible Veterans.

Work Group Assignments

With Ms. Moakler leaving, Chair Braatz expressed her desire to assign Floyd Watson as the lead of the Outreach Work Group, with Mr. Adkins and Mr. Kennedy to support. James Earp is to lead the VA Grant-Funded Cemeteries Work Group with Ms. Callahan, Mr. Brown, and Mr. Kennedy to support. Michael Hoplight will lead the State and Tribal Work Group as well as the MIAP Work Group, and Chair Braatz will lead the Funeral Director Work Group with Mr. Rudolph and Mr. Hernandez supporting.

Closing Remarks and Adjournment

Chair Braatz expressed gratitude to the entire Committee for the attention and service that they have dedicated to the nation's heroes and to the NCA. She also praised the work of Ms. Hopkins and Mr. Addressi for keeping the Committee on track and covering logistical concerns. She closed her remarks by reminding everyone in attendance that they all have the same goal, which is to care for those who have served our nation. The meeting was adjourned at 12:56 p.m.



Heather Braatz
Committee Chair

Note: The complete transcription of the verbatim discussion may be available upon request. Questions may be forwarded to vaadvisorycmte@va.gov.