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News Release

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Washington, D.C. -- In a White House Veterans Day ceremony, the President yesterday signed legislation changing the name of the National Cemetery System (NCS) to the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) and the title of the director to Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs.

The National Cemetery System has always operated at the same level within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as the Veterans Health Administration and the Veterans Benefits Administration, but NCS's name and the title of its director did not properly reflect the equivalent organizational level.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Secretary Togo D. West, Jr., said, "This change gives the former National Cemetery System and its dedicated employees the recognition they deserve for their exemplary service to veterans, their families and this Nation."

The legislation, known as the Veterans' Benefits Enhancement Act of 1998, includes changes and additions to various VA programs for veterans. The legislation also authorizes the following changes in VA burial benefits and NCA programs:

- Modifies VA's State Cemetery Grants Program to allow VA to pay up to 100 percent to establish, expand or improve state veterans cemeteries. The act also authorizes VA to pay for the operating equipment when a cemetery is established. As a complement to VA's system of national cemeteries, the State Cemetery Grants Program has helped establish, expand or improve 38 state veterans cemeteries by providing matching funds on a 50-50 basis. Since establishing the program in 1980, VA has awarded 137 grants totaling more than \$57 million to 22 states and the Commonwealths of Guam and the Northern Marianas. In Fiscal Year 1998, VA awarded 11 grants totaling more than \$6 million;
- Extends eligibility for burial in VA national cemeteries and other burial benefits to certain veterans of the Merchant Marine who served from Aug. 16, 1945, to Dec. 31, 1946; and,
- Permits VA to furnish a memorial marker in national, military post/base or state veterans cemeteries for eligible dependents whose remains are unavailable for interment and who predecease the eligible veteran.

Nationwide, VA operates 115 national cemeteries. Most can accept cremated remains, and all are able to inter the spouse or eligible children of a family member already buried. More than 76,000 veterans and eligible family members were buried in VA national cemeteries in Fiscal Year 1998.

Veterans with discharges other than dishonorable, their spouses and dependent children are eligible for burial in a VA national cemetery. VA also provides grave markers or headstones for the unmarked graves of eligible veterans even if they are not buried in a national cemetery. VA does not reserve space in national cemeteries prior to the time of need. Information on VA burial benefits is available from national cemetery offices and VA regional offices.

For more information, call 1-800-827-1000, or visit the VA Homepage on the World Wide Web at <http://www.va.gov> or the National Cemetery Administration Homepage at <http://www.cem.va.gov>.

