Unclaimed Veterans' Remains

VA OIG Report

Recommendation #2 Response Report

October 1, 2022
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**Executive Summary**

**Background**
In response to the OIG Report - Improvements Needed to Ensure the Final Disposition of Unclaimed Veterans' Remains Project No. 2019-09592-BI-0004 (OIG Report), the VA recognizes the need for improved coordination across the enterprise to ensure dignified burials for Veterans whose remains are unclaimed. VA has since developed and implemented an Integrated Project Team (IPT) led by a senior leader to create actionable plans to ensure that the OIG's recommendations are fulfilled and that an enterprise-wide approach is taken to develop long-term solutions.

**OIG Recommendation #2**
"Conduct a program evaluation of all VA benefits and services for deceased Veterans whose remains are unclaimed in compliance with applicable laws and VA regulations. This evaluation should consider the extent to which existing law requires the VA to conduct outreach on behalf of deceased Veterans whose remains are unclaimed. This evaluation should also ensure the benefits and services are assigned to the appropriate VA program offices, and the offices are given authority to administer these programs."

**VA Response**
VA senior leadership drafted a memorandum outlining what the VA will do in response to the OIG report recommendations. VA’s response to recommendation #2 is found in the subject report on pp. 1-2 and stated:

“VA will form an Integrated Project Team (IPT) responsible for integrating and implementing the recommendations in this report and designing and conducting the program evaluation in accordance with 38 CFR § 1.15, standards for program evaluation. The overall scope of the program evaluation will include an assessment from stakeholders on current practices and recommendations for optimizing processes, quantitative assessment of existing data, qualitative and mixed-methods assessment of current business processes, surveys of stakeholder experience, and legal and policy analysis of regulations.”
**Integrated Project Team (IPT)**

**Integrated Project Team Development**
An IPT was established under the leadership of a senior accountable official. The IPT comprises subject matter experts and leadership throughout each administration to ensure cross-functional collaboration to enact the actionable plans directed by senior VA leadership.

**IPT Charter Development & Approval**
The IPT charter was approved on August 2, 2022 providing the IPT with the authority and responsibility to carry out the requirements of the OIG Report Recommendation #2.

**Workstream Responsibility**
The Recommendation #2 Workstream designed and conducted the program evaluation along with making recommendations for optimizing processes. The Recommendation #2 Workstream will coordinate with other teams to integrate and implement the recommendations from this report.

**Program Evaluation**

**Program Evaluation Design**
The IPT designed and conducted the program evaluation in accordance with 38 CFR § 1.15, standards for program evaluation. Most notably, the program evaluation conforms to the four systematic research design principles outlined in 38 CFR § 1.15: rationale, relevancy, validity, and reliability. These four principles were used throughout the program evaluation as guidelines.

**Rationale.** The research design for each evaluation should contain a specific rationale and be structured to determine possible cause and effect relationships.

**Relevancy.** It must deal with issues currently existing within the program, within the Department, and within the environment in which the program operates.

**Validity.** The degree of statistical validity should be assessed within the research design. Alternatives include evaluating the cost of data collection vs results necessary to support decisions.

**Reliability.** Using the same research design by others should yield the same findings.
Program Evaluation

Stakeholder Assessment of Current Practices

The Veterans Experience Office (VEO), in close collaboration with the Unclaimed Veteran Remains (UVR) IPT, identified and mapped vital UVR processes for all three VA Administrations. The process maps were developed and validated through several interactions with critical stakeholders, including a series of comprehensive interviews with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) across the enterprise designed to gain a deeper understanding of current processes, associated pain points, and gaps.

Key findings from that assessment are outlined in detail in Appendix 1. The following findings are noteworthy:

**Need for a Singular Oversight Entity**

This was outlined in the OIG findings and identified throughout the program review. It is being addressed by Recommendation 1.0 Governance of this report.

**Increase Support Between VA Admins**

It was determined during the program evaluation that increased collaboration between the three VA administrations is critical to meeting external stakeholder expectations, developing robust internal processes, and complying with applicable laws and regulations.

**Statute Interpretation**

Each administration makes policy determination on how the laws will be applied within the regs, policies, and directives. This can result in duplication of effort or gaps in who is responsible for different process phases. See appendix 1.

Conduct Quantitative Assessment of Existing Data

During the program evaluation, it was determined that each administration collected and analyzed data associated with the UVR process. Below, we discuss the quantitative data and associated reporting that was reviewed during the program evaluation, along with the intention of the report and any key insights gathered from reviewing the data.

**VHA Decedent Affairs Overview Report**

This report displays several key metrics associated with UVR including:

- **Total Cases.** This includes claimed and unclaimed remains.
- **Total - Within VHA Custody.** This includes claimed and unclaimed remains within VHA custody.
- **Total - Claimed Within VHA Custody.**
  - Average Days Pending - the report displays the average days pending for a claimed case.
  - Longest Pending Days - the report displays the longest pending claimed case.
- **Total Unclaimed Within VHA Custody.**
  - Average Days Pending - the report displays the average days pending for an unclaimed case.
  - Longest Pending Days - the report displays the longest pending unclaimed case.
Program Evaluation

This report tracks the status of claimed and unclaimed remains by VISN and VAMC. Having the function to drill down to the VISN level allows VHA to determine where the outliers are and assist with root cause analysis and corrective action. Each VISN validates the data collected for this report monthly to ensure accuracy and reliability. During the program evaluation, the data in this report was trending in the right direction.

- Annualized FY22 total decedents is **trending lower** than FY21 total decedents: 23,887 in FY21 vs 21,249 in FY22.
- Annualized FY22 total unclaimed decedents is **trending lower** than FY21 total unclaimed decedents: 377 in FY21 vs. 353 in FY22.
- Annualized FY22 decedent pending days is **trending lower** than FY21 decedent pending days: 25 in FY21 vs. 16 in FY22.

NCA Unclaimed Remains with Funeral Home Contact Report

This report contains information regarding requests for national cemetery burial eligibility made to NCA in which remains are unclaimed.

This report tracks the number of unclaimed Veteran remains that are eligible for national cemetery interment.

From Sept 2011 -July 2022, 13% of requests to determine the eligibility of an unclaimed decedent resulted in a determination that the decedent had qualifying service for national cemetery interment.

NCA Unclaimed Remains with Funeral Home Contact-MASTER Report

This report is internal to NCA, and tracks cases marked as unclaimed to final disposition.

Key insights gained from this report allow for monitoring of interment and geographic analysis of interment by NCA region and cemetery.

VBA Training Report – Processing Unclaimed Remains

This report tracks the annual completion of assigned TMS training for all Regional Office Directors and Indigent Veteran and Unclaimed Remains Coordinators (IVURCs). This report ensures that key internal VBA stakeholders are informed of the UVR process.
Program Evaluation

Stakeholder Experience Survey
This workstream conducted and analyzed surveys with internal and external stakeholders, with the intent of determining the current processes, policies and procedures, outreach, and overall satisfaction with UVR processes. These are distinct from the surveys developed in response to Recommendation #5 of the OIG Report, which are intended to estimate the number of deceased Veterans whose remains are unclaimed awaiting burial.

Internal Stakeholders
A thorough survey was conducted with 12 separate internal stakeholders that are SMEs in their respective areas of responsibility with the UVR process. The survey was conducted as a series of detailed interviews focused on the following areas:
- Policy and procedures for UVR findings
- Outreach for UVR findings
- Process mapping of the current state with a focus on five phases:
  - Receiving notification of remains
  - Verifying remains are veterans
  - Verifying next of kin
  - Identifying eligibility for burial benefits and reimbursement
  - Interment planning and execution
See Appendix 2.

External Stakeholders
A comprehensive survey was conducted to measure the overall satisfaction of resources and support available by the VA to the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME), the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), and the Cremation Association of North America (CANA). With a total of 225 respondents across the United States this survey provided VA with valuable insights on the UVR program. A series of questions and open text comments were collected during the survey and analyzed post-survey with a few apparent themes.

Training - It was clear from the survey results that the external stakeholders would like to see more training and outreach focused on available VA resources and support.

Centralized Contact - The stakeholders would benefit from a more centralized intake function. They would prefer a central dial-in number and website where they can contact the VA.

Proof of Eligibility - Many stakeholder comments requested a more efficient way to obtain eligibility verification for burial benefits.

Reimbursement for Burial Services - Many respondents expressed interest in VA providing adequate reimbursement of incurred costs and a more efficient process for submitting reimbursement claims. See Appendix 2.
Qualitative & Mixed-Methods Assessment

The qualitative and mixed-method assessment was completed with a focus on outreach and policy and procedures.

Outreach

The outreach section of the assessment covers how each administration thinks about and participates in outreach to the various stakeholders involved in the UVR process. A few key findings from the evaluation are as follows:

- Each administration (medical centers, cemeteries, national offices) is doing its form of outreach to Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), custodians, Veterans, national stakeholder organizations like the National Funeral Directors Association, and the general public. Different processes are used for conducting this outreach and the communication information. As a result, it is unclear where external UVR stakeholders should be referred inside VA when seeking assistance.

- NCA and VHA note that overall responsibility for conducting outreach to the community is assigned to VBA by statute (38 U.S. Code § 7703) and that NCA and VHA’s ability to conduct any reinforcing outreach (outside of broadcast through communication channels) is limited to the specific locations where VHA and NCA have facilities and qualified personnel that can conduct UVR outreach.

VBA indicates that they need additional resources due to the number of external stakeholders and their current staffing model.

- The lack of specific guidance around community partner outreach can result in coroners and funeral homes reaching out to VSOs and non-VA entities who may not have the most correct or pertinent information.

See Appendix 1.

Policy and Procedures

The Policy and Procedures section of the assessment explains how each administration pursues and reviews policy or directive considerations based on their needs in the UVR process. A few key findings from the assessment are as follows:

- Each VA Administration makes policy recommendations on how the laws will be applied within their respective regulations, policies, and/or directives, which can result in a duplication of effort or gaps in who is responsible for different process phases.

- State and local laws create due diligence procedures for searching for next of kin and timeliness for interment.

- Some SMEs attributed the absence of an oversight office to the lack of awareness of actions taken and policies/directives followed between VHA, VBA, and NCA.

See Appendix 1.
Program Evaluation

Legal and Policy Analysis of Regulation

A legal and policy analysis of regulations was performed in two phases during the program evaluation.

Phase I focused on conducting a sample audit of standard policies and procedures used in the UVR process to identify the validity and relevancy of those procedures, along with key findings.

Phase II focused on a deeper dive into identifying all applicable statutes, VA regulations, and VA directives associated with UVR processes across all three administrations. The deep dive utilized a comprehensive policy crosswalk document that lists all of the applicable statutes, VA regulations, and VA directives and noted whether there is sufficient oversight in place, whether compliance and consistency were low/medium/high, and a gap analysis that captures any gaps identified during the crosswalk.

- 87% of the laws, regulations, and directives have oversight, and 13% do not.
- 87% have high compliance, and 13% have low compliance.
- 75% have high consistency, 12% have medium consistency, and 13% have low consistency.

The deep dive results will set the framework for a robust document control process led by the newly formed National Program Office and UVR Council. See Appendix 3.

Develop Recommendations for Optimizing Processes

VEO and the Recommendation #2 Workstream conducted additional process mapping workshops focused on developing the future state that addressed many of the pain points identified in the Phase I process mapping workshops. As a result, the workstream identified and agreed that the following recommendations would yield positive results and address many of the deficiencies identified in the program evaluation.

1.0 Governance

As a result of the program evaluation, the workstream recognized the need for improved governance and program oversight. The workstream recommends establishing a robust governance structure that consists of a National Program Office (NPO) an Unclaimed Veterans Remains Council (UVRC), and central oversight in VHA. The new governance structure will create a mechanism to identify and address the issues identified in the OIG Report. See Appendix 4.
1.1 National Program Office (NPO)
Create an NPO that will act as the oversight governing body for all three administrations to include the full scope of benefits and services provided on behalf of deceased veterans whose remains are unclaimed. A program director will oversee the NPO and act as the senior accountable official. The NPO will rely on the UVR Council for guidance, direction, and decision making. The NPO will be responsible for legislative compliance and implementation along with authority to work on cross-administration solutions such as IT, regulations, and directives. Separate from this report, the creation of an NPO will be further discussed in upcoming responses to Recommendation #1 of the OIG Report.

1.2 UVR Council
The UVR Council will comprise Executive Leadership Team members from each administration to provide oversight, provide direction, and promote cross-cutting collaboration. The UVR Council will monitor the program’s health, analyze program data, and foster ongoing collaboration between the administrations.

1.3 VHA Central Oversight
VHA will create a central oversight program office to ensure all UVR processes associated with VHA are standardized. This program office will update and maintain policies, program metrics, and knowledge management content (job aids for field staff). In addition, it will institute quality assurance monitoring, compliance, and field engagement based on analysis of program metrics. Based on the analysis of work to be performed, this IPT recommends that VHA perform a feasibility review for aligning a DAPO within VHA Patient Care Services (PCS), Care Management and Social Work (CM/SW) or other appropriate VHA office. See Appendix 5.

2.0 Outreach
As a result of the program evaluation, the IPT concluded that each administration was performing outreach to key stakeholders, but VA lacked a consistent and integrated approach. It was determined that the outreach communication materials are different, and sometimes unclear or confusing, for the VA customers/stakeholders. It was also occasionally unclear who VA customers should be routed to when they reach out to the wrong administration. Changes in how VA conducts outreach, to the extent of the law, are necessary to ensure the stakeholders have the most accurate information.

2.1 Stakeholder Communication
Establish clear communication with external stakeholders on how to work with the VA and ensure all communication materials are consistent throughout each VA administration.

2.2 Stakeholder Resources
Provide reference materials to stakeholders. The reference materials will be consistent across the three administrations to ensure a unified voice from the VA to the stakeholders.

2.3 Outreach Cadence
Develop standards on outreach cadence to regional partners and stakeholders. The materials will be clear, concise instructions across all administrations, and include specific POCs and localized content.
3.0 Training
To implement the improvements recommended in this report, VA must ensure that all stakeholders associated with the UVR process are appropriately trained and competent to perform the assigned tasks. VA has effective training and certification programs and procedures, so the changes to the UVR process will need to be integrated into the existing training plans to include new-hire orientation and annual training plans.

3.1 New Employee Orientation Training
Develop collective awareness of all three agencies and their relationship to decedent affairs. New hires associated with UVR processes will review the policy and procedure changes resulting in the new UVR processes during their employee orientation.

3.2 Annual Training
Annual training for all administrations will be conducted to include demonstrated proficiency and competency. Training proficiency and competency measurements will be established to ensure effective training.

4.0 Operations
During the program evaluation, operational efficiencies were identified and reviewed by the IPT. UVR operations across all administrations are in place; however, consolidating some of them will improve operational efficiency. The IPT recommends the following to streamline the UVR processes further:

4.1 Centralized Financial Processing
In conjunction with OIG Recommendation #6, VA will explore centralizing benefit payment processing related to unclaimed Veteran remains. It is crucial that the Recommendation #6 Integrated Project Team (IPT), which is tasked with implementing controls for payments on behalf of such Veterans, examine opportunities for more centralized financial processing within VA's legal authority and to the extent that essential infrastructure can be put in place prior to implementation of such changes.

4.2 VHA Warm Hand-Off to VBA
When VHA receives community inquiries regarding VBA-administered burial claims for unclaimed remains, they will provide them authoritative publicly available resources and conduct a warm hand-off to VBA for further information regarding Veteran's burial benefits and provide options to the stakeholder.
Program Evaluation

4.3 NCA and VBA Joint Collaboration

4.3.1 NCA is always ready to schedule an interment if a custodian of remains is ready to inter and does not need unique assistance. When NCA receives UVR inquiries other than requests for burial eligibility or scheduling the interment, such as inquirers do not have possession of the remains or are searching for next of kin, NCA will conduct a warm hand-off to VBA to gather additional information and provide options to the inquirer.

4.3.2 When VBA has made a preliminary determination that a decedent may be a Veteran or an individual entitled to Veteran’s benefits, VBA will coordinate with NCA for burial eligibility determination and act as a liaison between the stakeholder and NCA if needed or between the stakeholder and a closer VA grant funded cemetery to achieve dignified interment. NCA processes interment requests for NCA cemeteries, requests from State and Tribal cemeteries for headstones and markers and all requests for casket and urn monetary reimbursement. VBA processes all other monetary benefits related to burial.

4.4 Service Level Agreements (SLAs)

Develop and monitor SLAs to ensure the program functions based on the law’s intent. The SLAs will be monitored by the NPO and UVRC and become a key component of the governance structure.

4.5 Data Sharing

Improve data sharing and shared resource directories across administrations. Improved data sharing will enhance the VA’s ability to identify adverse trends so that meaningful corrective actions can be taken. IPT for Recommendation #3 addresses data sharing between administrations within the VA and other federal, state and local partners.
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Visit our website VA.gov

Don’t know what number to call?
1-800-MyVA411 (800-698-2411)

White House VA Hotline
1-855-948-2311

Veterans Crisis Line
1-800-273-8255 and press 1, Chat, or Text 838255.

Download the VA Welcome Kit
https://www.va.gov/welcome-kit/

VA events calendar
https://www.va.gov/outreach-and-events/events/

Sign up for #VetResources weekly emails
https://www.va.gov/vetresources/
Appendix 1

VA Unclaimed Veterans Remains Report_508_041122
VA PROCESS MAP

Unclaimed Veteran Remains (UVR)
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INTRODUCTION

Process Map Background:
The Veterans Experience Office (VEO) Enterprise Measurement and Design (EMD) team, in close collaboration with the Veteran Unclaimed Remains Integrated Project Team (IPT), identified and mapped key Veteran Unclaimed Remains processes for all three VA Administrations:

- National Cemetery Administration (NCA)
- Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)
- Veterans Health Administration (VHA)

The process map was developed and validated through several interactions with key stakeholders:

- 12 Subject Matter Expert (SME) interviews
- 2 workshop sessions
- 3 content reviews with each Administration

Process Map Purpose:
The process map was developed to provide an integrated, unified perspective that was intended to enlighten the IPT and other vested VA Administration stakeholders to find common ground when pursuing updates to this process from a collaborative perspective.

The information captured throughout this document is based on data provided by the designated SMEs for this effort and may not be reflective of process improvement efforts that have taken place after March 2022.

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

The process map is divided into five phases that were identified to take place across NCA, VBA, and VHA regarding the processing of handling unclaimed Veteran remains.

Phase 1: Receiving Notification of Remains
Phase 2: Verifying Remains are Veteran
Phase 3: Verifying Next of Kin
Phase 4: Identifying Eligibility for Burial Benefits and Reimbursement
Phase 5: Interment Planning and Execution

Two additional phases that take place continuously throughout the process, Policy and Procedures for UVR and Outreach for UVR, are also considered within the process map, but fall outside of any timeline considerations.

How the Information is Displayed

- Each phase will be represented one at a time on their own page
- Each phase is briefly described and includes key findings noted across all three VA administrations
- Within each phase, the various tasks to be performed by each administration are clearly represented in boxes
- The main tasks on the top, indicated by a solid horizontal line, typically follow one after the other on a timeline
- Beneath each main task are actions or considerations associated with that task
- For purposes of viewing this process map note that each administration completes their tasks on a separate timeline that may be distinct from the others

Example for how information is displayed within the process map.

Icons

- Pain points that create challenges or obstacles within the process
- Important information within a particular action or task
- Service gap or something that leads to a gap in responsibility or tasks within the process
- Hand-off between two entities either internal or external to VA
- Collaboration occurrence between two entities either internal or external to VA

Other Tips

How to Zoom

The breadth of information displayed at each phase required the use of a smaller font size throughout the process map. If you’re having trouble reading any of the texts, please use these zoom features within the PDF to more clearly view the information:

- Use the plus (+) and minus (-) symbols on the top tool bar of the PDF to customize the level of zoom in the document.
- Next to the plus (+) and minus (-) symbols is a drop down that will allow you to manually enter or choose from the pre-determined percentages regarding the level of zoom.
- If your keyboard has a trackpad, you may pinch two fingers together to manually zoom out or reverse that same motion to manually zoom in on the document.
THE NEED FOR A UVR PROCESS MAP

DESIGN WORKSHOP 1 OVERVIEW
Members of the IPT group, through a series of design exercises, collaborated to identify what types of information they are most interested in learning and what their expectations were for the process map. The discussion resulted in a more unified understanding for content and design considerations to be included in the process map and why it would be useful to their respective administrations.

THE LACK OF PROCESS CLARITY IMPACTS ALL VA ADMINISTRATIONS
- Administrations are duplicating or creating extra work because they don’t know what other stakeholders have already completed for a specific UVR case.
- Often issues have become emergencies by the time the relevant team learns about their existence.
- It’s hard to know who is responsible for certain tasks.
- It’s difficult to consistently deliver and keep track of a service that is not standardized.

CLARITY MAY BE ACHIEVED BY IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC TOPICS OF INFORMATION
- Information about other administration’s unclaimed remains procedures.
- Information about existing efforts to collaborate with external stakeholders and where they fit into the overall process.
- Information about their own team’s processes.
- Information about where hand-offs can/should be taking place.
UVR PROCESS MAP VALUE CONSIDERATIONS

DESIGN WORKSHOP 1 FINDINGS CONTINUED

VALUE DERIVED FROM CLARITY

• **Process Clarity**: Milestones, tasks that need to be accomplished from beginning to end, and what others are doing during different phases.

• **Relationship Clarity**: A better understanding of what other administrations are doing during certain phases and where there might be areas of duplication or gaps.

• **Silo Breakdown Clarity**: Finding opportunities to simplify the process, rethink who is responsible for different tasks to reduce duplication of efforts and create clearer moments for handoffs.

• **External Partner Clarity**: Understanding how the actions of external partners impact the process from VA’s perspective, so that outreach and education can be done to reduce confusion.

• **Providing Higher Quality Services to Veterans**

NECESSARY FEATURES OF THE UVR PROCESS MAP

• Defining all necessary tasks, milestones, and corresponding responsibilities.

• A depiction of the full process of handling unclaimed remains from death/notification that remains exist to final interment and benefit payout.

• A list of the internal and external stakeholders and their roles and responsibilities.

• The amount of time it takes to complete each task/phase/milestone.

• Points in the process where an action needs to take place (hand-offs, research, payment).

• Required technology systems used throughout this process.

• Areas of potential risk or resource constraint.

• Explanation of which policies and procedures influence different parts of the process.
POLICY AND PROCEDURES FOR UVR FINDINGS

The Policy and Procedures section for UVR explains how each administration pursues and reviews policy or directive considerations based on their needs in the unclaimed Veteran remains process.

This section does not align to a particular point in time, but is continuously updated and refined as required throughout this process.

VHA FINDINGS

- Various Codes of Federal Regulations (CFRs) exist with responsibilities related to handling unclaimed Veteran remains at VA Medical Centers (VAMCs). However, the current VHA Directive from 2017 does not fully outline standard processes, which has created a lack of consistency across the enterprise.
- The process established for policy review by VHA’s Office of Regulations, Appeals and Policy (RAP) is useful for bringing together relevant stakeholders, but the lengthy coordination procedures can make it difficult for the VHA Program Office to implement changes in a timely manner.
- VHA Member Services issued VHA Directive 1601B.04 (Decedent Affairs) in 2017 but has not been resourced to serve as the VHA Program Office for Decedent Affairs. Without dedicated oversight staff in place, it is difficult for VHA to map processes that can vary across the enterprise.

NOTE: The VHA information captured throughout this document is based on data provided by the VHA SMEs available for this effort and may not be reflective of processes at all VAMCs.

VHA Policies and Procedures for UVR include:

- 38 CFR 3.1605 - Death while traveling under prior authorization or while hospitalized by the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- 38 USC 2303 - Death in Department Facility; Plot Allowance.

VBA FINDINGS

- Policy is distributed through the Web Automated Reference Manual System (WARMS), calendar notifications via email, and leadership meetings to communicate changes to the applicable personnel.
- Training is updated when policy or procedures change. Policy changes are based on legislation while procedures are updated as needed or through annual reviews.

VBA Policies and Procedures for UVR include:

- 38 CFR 3.1706 - Burial allowance for a veteran who died while hospitalized by VA.
- 38 CFR 3.1707 - Plot or interment allowances for burial in a State veterans cemetery or other cemetery.
- 38 CFR 3.1708 - Burial of a Veteran whose remains are unclaimed.
- 38 CFR 3.1709 - Transportation expenses for burial in a national cemetery.
- 38 USC 7703 - Functions of the Administration - assigns responsibility for outreach.
- Procedural manual M21-1, Part XI, Subpart iii, Chapter 1, Section B - Burial benefits.
- Procedural Manual M27-1 Benefits assistance service procedures, covers outreach that is coordinator specific.

NCA FINDINGS

- Cemeteries follow a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) that was developed by the VA Central Office (VACO). Individual cemeteries create their own business processes, but not their own forms, to suit their site’s specific needs.
- State or county offices may create SOPs that inform how funeral homes and coroner’s offices in different states handle remains, which is sometimes in conflict with NCA procedure.
- There is a desire for custodians and VA to be on the same page about rules and regulations, so that everyone is following the same protocol on the same timeline.

KEY FINDINGS

- Each VA Administration interprets how the laws Congress creates will be applied within their regulations, policies, and directives, which can result in a duplication of effort or gaps in who is responsible for different process phases.
- State laws about due diligence in searching for next of kin (NOK) or timeliness for interment apply unless superseded by or in the absence of federal law for handling unclaimed remains.
- Some of the SMEs that were interviewed attributed the absence of an oversight office to the lack of awareness for actions taken and policies/directives followed between VHA, VBA, and NCA.

NCA Policies and Procedures for UVR include:

- NCA 41-SOP-004 - Reimbursement for Caskets and Urns for Unclaimed Remains of Veterans Interred in National, State, or Tribal Cemeteries.
- NCA 41-SOP-005 - Eligibility Requirements.
- NCA 41-SOP-011 - Unclaimed Decedents and Unaccompanied Decedents.
- 38 USC 2402 - Persons eligible for interment in national cemeteries.
- 38 CFR 38.620 - Persons eligible for burial is a corresponding regulation to 38 USC 2402.
- 38 CFR 38.628 - Reimbursement for caskets and urns for unclaimed remains of Veterans.
- Interment Operations Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)-41-005 is the eligibility SOP for NCA.
Policy and Procedures for UVR by Administration

Recommendation #2 Report Appendix

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VETERANS EXPERIENCE OFFICE
OUTREACH FOR UVR FINDINGS

The Outreach section for UVR covers how each administration thinks about and participates in outreach to the various stakeholders involved in the unclaimed Veteran remains process.

This section does not align to a particular point in time, but is continuously updated and refined as required throughout this process.

VHA FINDINGS
- There can be lack of coordination and understanding between national and field offices about best practices and responsibility for outreach, but community partnerships tend to fall to local VA facilities who know the local funeral home ecosystem and which ones are amenable to working with VA.
- VHA interacts with funeral homes and other community partners through vendor contracts, but in some areas struggle to establish contracts with funeral homes based on pricing and a low frequency of service.

VBA FINDINGS
- The individual regional offices are responsible for conducting UVR outreach, they sometimes collaborate with NCA and VHA to do so. The need to collaborate may be amplified due to the high number of potential community partners and the fact that there may only be one primary and one alternate Indigent Veterans and Unclaimed Remains Coordinators (IVURC) outreach coordinator for each state.
- In January 2022, the M27 manual was revised to establish policy to be more proactive in building relationships regarding UVRs, data tracking, and establishing the IVURC as the first point of contact instead of NCA.

NCA FINDINGS
- National cemeteries conduct outreach to community partners to ensure they know what to do if they become aware of unclaimed Veteran remains. This outreach, however, is limited to the geographic areas of the cemeteries, and NCA is not in many areas of the country.
- NCA also conducts outreach by attending national funeral industry events and conferences at the “strategic level.”
- NCA responds to numerous inquiries from VHA hospitals and VBA offices regarding how to direct external customers.

KEY FINDINGS
- Each administration (medical centers, cemeteries, national offices) is doing their own form of outreach to Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), custodians, Veterans, national stakeholder organizations like the National Funeral Directors Association, and the general public — the process for conducting this outreach and the communication materials/talking points used across them are different and it is sometimes unclear who VA customer should be routed to when they reach out to the wrong administration.
- Each administration believes the responsibility of conducting outreach to the community should be the responsibility of a different administration or that they need additional support due to the imbalance between the number of potential external partners and their number of staff.
- Although formalized documents for creating hand-offs between the administrations were among the initial work of the IPT. Now we need to implement and execute those documents, and, if necessary, make changes.
- The lack of specific guidance around community partner outreach can result in coroners and funeral homes reaching out to VSOs and non-VA entities who may not have the most correct or most pertinent information.
Outreach for UVR by Administration

**VHA**

- The individual regional offices are responsible for conducting outreach regarding unclaimed Veteran remains (UVRs), but they do not always collaborate with NCA and VBA to do so.
- Coroners and funeral homes may be reaching out to Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) or other non-VA entities who may not know to reach out to VA for guidance.
- The lack of formalized procedures between the RO and IVURC also limits the coordination efforts for UVRs.
- There may be on-site or virtual VSO outreach coordinators for each state, making it difficult to inform and coordinate with all potential external partners.
- Outreach coordinators may be provided burial information materials (pamphlets, etc) for outreach. They may also be provided directives through the RO, but without policy and procedures it may be left up to them to determine how, when, and if to apply it.

**VBA**

- A rare case of remains not being handled in a timely manner may occur in between contract periods.
- As of January 2022, the governing M27 Manual is being revised to help coordinators solve for these pain points by establishing policy to be more proactive in building relationships regarding UVRs, data tracking, and establishing the IVURC as the first point of contact instead of NCA.
- Sometimes hearing about the casket reimbursement program is what motivates a funeral home to reach out to VA on their own.

**NCA**

- NCA conducts a great deal of outreach to local funeral homes, VSOs, county offices and hospitals to make sure they know what VA can offer them.
- NCA regularly provides information to make sure external stakeholders are aware of available benefits and the process for handling unclaimed remains for an honorable interment.
- NCA also reaches out to VHA hospitals and VBA to inform them on how to direct external custodians when they are the first point of contact instead of VA.
- NCA is sometimes contacted by the general public asking about VA benefits because they don’t know the difference between VBA, NCA, and VHA, and they often make mistakes in contacting the wrong person when NCA should contact their information administrators during these contacts.
- NCA may be limited on the benefit advice they can provide regarding VA benefits as this is not their area of expertise.

Recommendation #2 Report Appendix

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**PHASE 1: RECEIVING NOTIFICATION OF REMAINS**

The *Receiving Notification of Remains* phase highlights the different avenues and processes by which the administrations learn about the existence of unclaimed Veteran remains. It focuses on which external stakeholders the different administrations most often work with, how they handle hand-offs between administrations, and the initial challenges endured.

**VHA FINDINGS**
- VHA makes it a priority to assess whether a Veteran under their care has a next of kin before their passing, which can help with reducing surprises in the process.
- VHA decedent affairs staff work with external VA authorized care organizations to begin the unclaimed remains process. It’s unclear if this process is standardized across the country.
- VHA often receives notifications about Veterans who have passed away outside of VA authorized facilities, and staff don’t always know where to refer them. The national training usually teaches local facilities to contact VBA.
- VHA has been doing some assisting in helping to identify next of kin even when a Veteran passed away outside of VA authorized care.

**VBA FINDINGS**
- External stakeholders sometimes don’t know who to contact about UVRs, so they end up contacting VBA.
- VBA is not set up to share information other than burial allowances, which can make it hard for VBA to redirect calls they aren’t equipped to address. They will often refer to the M21 manual for guidance, which was updated in March 2022 in collaboration with NCA and VHA to help alleviate gaps in knowledge for addressing local procedures or information regarding the overall process for interment and funeral arrangements.

**NCA FINDINGS**
- NCA conducts a great deal of outreach to funeral homes and responds to inquiries from hospitals, VA and otherwise, to ensure that stakeholders know who to contact when unclaimed remains are received.
- Sometimes NCA relies on VHA hospitals or VBA to pass cases along to them, but it can sometimes be difficult to collaborate because it’s not clear who to contact.

**KEY FINDINGS**
- Each administration struggles with external organizations and the general public calling the wrong administration to address their need. There is also a lack of structure for cross administration communication that would allow facilitation of warm hand-offs across VA.
- The experience that custodians of remains and the general public have when contacting VA about unclaimed remains varies depending on the administration they contact first.
- The lack of guidance about who is responsible for different parts of the process or clear hand-off procedures means that sometimes administrations are taking on work that extends beyond their foundational capabilities.
If they expired inside a non-VA facility...

**Veteran Expires at VA Facility or Under VA-Authorized Care at a Non-VA Facility**

*VBA* has an end product that is a 90-day tracking mechanism for financial arrangements. When a request comes in for burial arrangements the new end product is created and must step up and it's completed. VA uses the case specific. If an end product is not yet, it's able to track where the remains are in the process.

The M21 Manual is based on 38 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 3.1708, paragraph b & d. The manual can be more robust as there isn’t specific information for VBA’s local procedures or what it does to support interment and burial arrangements from the NCA or VBA perspective. Which can make it hard for VBA to redirect calls about VAHs that aren’t equipped to address. It also can be unclear where within VBA should be responsible for managing UVR cases. Which can lead to mismanagement of remains.

Every regional office should have an IVURC who is responsible for managing unclaimed remains, but some aspects of UVR management might also be handled by a VBA claims processor. It can also be unclear who within VBA should be responsible for managing UVR cases, which can lead to mishandling of remains. TMC of unclaimed remains and let the cemetery know that the Veteran is not known to VHA. A nurse arranges for the body to be transported to the morgue, completes paperwork, and notifies the Business Office. If the Veteran passes within 24 hours of admission, the VA Medical Center (VAMC) will contact the local coroner/medical examiner (CME). The CME requests to conduct an independent examination of remains (or the NOK requests it), the remains will be delivered to the CME. After the above, the facility will retain custody of the remains. If the CME requests to conduct an independent examination of remains (or the NOK requests it), the remains will be delivered to the CME. If none of the above, the facility retains custody of the remains. The custodian calls the cemetery with unclaimed Veteran remains. Sometimes hospitals view as a connection between the connection of the remains, and NCA — If a city doesn’t have a national cemetery, the custodian strives remain may take them to a VA hospital who will then help them find a national cemetery. "Sometimes hospitals view as a connection between the connection of the remains, and NCA — If a city doesn’t have a national cemetery, the custodian strives to take them to a VA hospital who will then help them find a national cemetery." The Scheduling Office/Fafds coordinators sometimes have questions on development of veterans' care at hospitals, but that is a very recent development as of early 2022. Previously there was very little communication between NCA and VHA.
PHASE 2: VERIFYING REMAINS ARE VETERAN

The Verifying Remains are Veteran phase includes the responsibilities of each administration in verifying that the unclaimed remains they are notified of belong to a Veteran. It focuses on the varying standards of due diligence and the different tools and contacts used by each administration to conduct this research.

VHA FINDINGS
- VHA completes verification of Veteran status upon check-in to a VA facility or VA authorized facility before a death takes place, which simplifies the process should the remains be deemed unclaimed.
- There are some cases where a patient may have initially been labeled a Veteran, but during the course of their stay is deemed ineligible. In this situation VHA will collaborate with external organizations to identify other methods for funding interment.

VBA FINDINGS
- VBA’s M21 Manual indicates that VBA must verify Veteran status of unclaimed remains, but there is a sense that NCA is usually responsible for this task.
- There is a desire for more collaboration with NCA to better understand which parts of the process the respective administrations are responsible for and ensure more standardized hand-offs, but the process of establishing data coordination between the two is a concern.
- While VBA does have a process for verifying the Veteran status of unclaimed remains, there are no formal quality requirements to ensure that all steps are followed outside of an expectation of due diligence.

NCA FINDINGS
- Cemeteries sometimes do light research to make sure that remains are Veteran and can work with VSOs to do so, and although these responsibilities are clearly described within the SOP, there is still sometimes a lack of clarity about who is responsible for identifying unclaimed remains across the custodians, cemeteries, and NCA scheduling office.
- The NCA Scheduling Office also conducts research into the Veteran status of remains, often going back and forth between sources to piece together incomplete information.
- More requests for interment of unclaimed are denied than approved because many custodians request interment of all unclaimed remains without reason to believe the remains are those of Veterans. This creates resource issues for NCA because of the time and effort required before any case can be denied.

KEY FINDINGS
- A variety of stakeholders are conducting their own form of Veteran status verification without clear delineation of who should actually be in charge of this effort, a lack of shared standards for what due diligence standards are, and which resources should be used in this process.
Phase 2: Verifying Remains are Veteran by Administration

**VHA**

- Certification of Veteran status is complete upon check-in to a VA facility or VA authorized facility and before death takes place.
- This process can be completed using the Electronic System (ES) housed in the health eligibility center, but staff may also use the Veteran's Health Eligibility System (VHES), the VA's Information Solution (VIS) platform, and even partner with VBA, NCA, and VSOs to determine Veteran status.
- For those cases where the remains have been identified as indigent and would be treated on a humanitarian basis and not as a Veteran eligible status.

**VBA**

- Even though the manual states that VBA must verify the Veteran status of the remains, they have been informed that NCA usually handles this task.
- They may also verify the remains as a Veteran through the person making the claim for funeral arrangements by asking for a DD-214, certificate of discharge, or using Share, Veteran Health Management System (VHMS), Personal Information Exchange System (PIES), Veteran Information Solution (VIS), or the Defense Personnel Records Information Retrieval System (DPRIS).

**NCA**

- NCA verifies if the remains are Veteran, which happens immediately after or simultaneously with notification of the remains.
- If the coroner reaches out to the VA cemetery directly...
- NCA also verifies if the remains are Veteran if the remains are initially labeled a Veteran but during the course of their stay are found to be not eligible.
- Responsibilities of identifying Veteran status of unclaimed remains are also carried across the cemetery's, communities, and Scheduling Office.

**Process for verifying Veteran status...**

- In some cases, it is simpler for VBA to take care of this part of the process, such as when the individual whose remains are in question is already in the VA system and has received benefits at some point in their life.
- VBA may also verify the remains as a Veteran through the person making the claim for funeral arrangements by asking for a DD-214, certificate of discharge, or using Share, Veteran Health Management System (VHMS), Personal Information Exchange System (PIES), Veteran Information Solution (VIS), or the Defense Personnel Records Information Retrieval System (DPRIS).
- There are no formally established quality requirements to ensure that all steps were followed, but there is an expectation of due diligence.
- Some cases...local county coroners...are...)...

**Collaborating with NCA to Verify Veteran status...**

- There are some concerns as to whether or not cases should be referred to NCA at this point because it is unclear if VBA is able to verify the Veteran status of unclaimed remains if it is unclear if NCA is eligible for burial in a national cemetery.
- NCA's...collaborate with NCA when identifying if the remains are that of a Veteran. The goal is to standardize hand...is it unclear if NCA is able to verify the Veteran status of an unclaimed remains if it is unclear if NCA is eligible for burial

**Unclaimed requests are often time consuming...**

- Researchers often have to go back and forth with sources when presented with incomplete information, which can be very time consuming.
- Declined requests are often the most time consuming, because the initial lack of information regarding the individual's military service...
PHASE 3: VERIFYING NEXT OF KIN

The *Verifying Next of Kin* phase covers the responsibility of each administration in searching for a next of kin to claim the Veteran remains. It focuses on who this responsibility belongs to, how it is completed, the complexities that can arise when timeliness standards vary, and the challenges that arise when a next of kin comes forward later in the process or are identified but are unwilling to claim the remains.

**VHA FINDINGS**
- VHA has to balance the importance of conducting due diligence and searching for NOK in a timely manner.
- Decedent affairs staff collaborate with external stakeholders like VSOs, County Clerk’s Offices, non-VA hospitals, as well as VBA to identify NOK when they are not listed in a Veteran’s medical records.
- In some cases VHA has to be prepared for NOK being identified but not wanting to claim remains for personal or financial reasons.

**VBA FINDINGS**
- In cases where remains are brought to VBA, the funeral director or other custodian of the remains has often identified NOK already.
- As of March 2022, in cases where the custodian of the remains has not identified a NOK, IVURCs at VBA are now directed to conduct a search of the VBA records in an attempt to identify one.

**NCA FINDINGS**
- In cases where remains are brought to NCA, it is the custodian of the remain’s responsibility to identify NOK in accordance with their state’s laws.
- NCA relies on the certification of the custodian in accordance with the laws of their own states.

**KEY FINDINGS**
- There is a possibility of the Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS) software being used across VA collaboratively to manage unclaimed remains cases.
- A common challenge that all administrations face is that sometimes a Veteran’s NOK can be found but they don’t want to be involved in the process, or want to be involved but can’t afford burial costs so they don’t come forward.
- The responsibility and timeline for due diligence required to identify a NOK varies across administrations, which can create a challenge in cases where NOK try to claim remains after burial or when there is public interest in how long Veteran remains have spent in storage.
Phase 3: Verifying Next of Kin by Administration

Process of Identifying NOK

The decedent affairs coordinator conducts and documents due diligence to identify NOK. The Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS) is the decedent affairs tracking tool software, which is reviewed once monthly by their VISN director.

1. Remains are brought to NCA, it is the custodian of the remains responsibility to identify NOK in accordance with their state's laws.
2. If no NOK is identified, the crematory staff is responsible to notify the VHA, if NOK has not been identified, the remains are marked as unclaimed.
3. The remains are technically "unclaimed," but the funeral director is responsible to transport the remains to the designated funeral home or cemetery.

Pain Points

- Occasionally, the remains do not arrive at the hospital in a timely manner, which can cause delays in the identification process.
- Sometimes the remains are unidentifiable due to decomposition or other factors, which can make it difficult to identify NOK.

Points

- Occurrence or event that leads to a gap
- An administrator of the court takes over the investigation to conduct legal research in terms of VA's authority to compel custodians of remains to have their remains interred in national cemeteries but may likely be blamed for Veteran remains left in storage.

Legend

- NCA has no way of knowing a custodian correctly identified letter, notify the PACT and Pharmacy Service of Veteran's death.
- VHA may also contact the Social Security Administration (SSA) through the Health Eligibility Center (HEC) to help identify a NOK.

If NOK is not listed

- Some facilities use state appointed probate examiners to conduct a cursory review, but there is a fee associated that can be covered if the Veteran made a deposit at admission to their patient funds.
- Not all NOK want to be identified, sometimes neighbors or significant others may request to claim remains.

All of these tactics may also be used by NCA to help identify NOK...

If NOK cannot be found or is not able to be involved in the interment of the remains

- The remains are technically "unclaimed," but the funeral director is responsible to transport the remains to the designated funeral home or cemetery.
- Some facilities use state appointed probate examiners to conduct a cursory review, but there is a fee associated that can be covered if the Veteran made a deposit at admission to their patient funds.
- Not all NOK want to be identified, sometimes neighbors or significant others may request to claim remains.

If NOK or someone else to claim the remains is identified...

- If a Veteran established a do not want to be involved but can't pay, the funeral director will perform due diligence and the remains are technically "unclaimed."
PHASE 4: IDENTIFYING ELIGIBILITY FOR BURIAL BENEFITS AND REIMBURSEMENT

The Identifying Eligibility for Burial Benefits and Reimbursement phase highlights the responsibility of each administration in explaining and allocating burial benefits to the custodians of the Veteran remains, next of kin, and the general public. It focuses on who pays which benefits, the methods used to educate stakeholders about what they are eligible for, and the challenges of tracking reimbursement.

VHA FINDINGS
- If a NOK is identified, VHA will work with VBA to help them apply for reimbursement of burial benefits they may be eligible for. Because VHA staff are not able to make determinations about benefits, it is important to ensure a seamless hand-off.
- If a NOK is not identified, the VAMC pays the allowable amount under 38 USC 2303 and the invoice is paid by the business office to the funeral home once interment is complete.
- VAMC staff may not be aware of the allowable amount under 38 USC 2303 and receive an invoice above the amount. These situations may require the Office of General Counsel (OGC) to intervene and/or provide guidance.

VBA FINDINGS
- VBA pays out burial benefits for unclaimed remains as long as they didn’t pass away in a VA hospital or under VA care.
- VBA’s manual states that VHA must provide documentation to VBA when they have paid reimbursement in order to avoid duplicate payments, but this does not always happen.
- The type of reimbursement that a claimant receives can be influenced by the state and county that the remains are located in.
- IVURCs and claim processors within a regional office help to educate claimants about the benefits they are eligible for, but these two might not coordinate throughout the process.

NCA FINDINGS
- Once remains have been approved for burial in a national cemetery, NCA reaches out to custodians to inform them of quality standards required for casket and urn reimbursement and to inform them of other available benefits. Custodians may opt not to utilize these programs.
- All VA factsheets concerning unclaimed Veteran remains have been recently updated, but the complexity of the various programs and application processes through different administrations are confusing for custodians of remains.
- NCA sometimes finds it difficult to convince funeral homes to apply for the casket reimbursement program because of the perceived complexity of the application and the fact that VA only reimburses at wholesale prices.
- NCA has been challenged when custodians decide not to use the casket reimbursement and present remains in a container perceived by the community attending as less than dignified.

KEY FINDINGS
- There is some concern that if VHA, VBA, and NCA are not actively communicating about which claims have already been paid, that a funeral home could potentially be reimbursed twice.
- It may seem like there is double dipping for payout from NCA and VBA but this may be due to both administrations reimbursing different claims within burial allowances.
Phase 4: Identifying Eligibility for Burial Benefits and Reimbursement by Administration

**VHA**

- Determine eligibility for reimbursement or burial allotment for UVRs that are administered by VBA or NCA.
- VBA determines eligibility for reimbursement or burial allotment for United States Flag for burial purposes.
- If VHA is not involved, VBA will also reimburse for transportation of remains if the remains are buried in a national cemetery.

**VBA**

- If already buried, VBA will still consider eligibility for burial benefits for up to 2 years.
- If the decedent is determined eligible for burial...
- **Eligibility determination**
  - The VAMC pays the costs of funeral services and transportation services up to $3,200.27, and in a particular order for each Unclaimed Veteran who does not qualify for burial in a National Cemetery, for interment at a Veterans Administration National Cemetery.
  - There are future plans to create a process to contact VBA about notifying VBA.

**NCA**

- **Eligibility determination**
  - The cemetery will send casket and travel agreements via VA Form 2237 or a purchase order.
  - The plot or interment allowance of up to $807 will not be administratively paid for.
  - The cemetery may accept the application for the burial lot but should refer NOK to the appropriate office for payment. 

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- **Recommendation #2 Report Appendix**
PHASE 5: INTERMENT PLANNING AND EXECUTION

The Interment Planning and Execution phase includes the ways in which each administration contributes to the preparation and interment of unclaimed Veteran remains. It focuses on how external stakeholders are managed, cross administration communication and the hand-off of remains during the planning process, and how these cases are tracked and closed out once interment has been completed.

VHA FINDINGS
- VHA will collaborate with NCA to determine if remains are eligible for burial in a national cemetery.
- VHA coordinates with the funeral home to make sure that the body is prepared for interment.
- VHA will monitor the preparation and treatment of the remains until after the ceremony to make sure that all the proper protocols are upheld.

VBA FINDINGS
- As of March 2022, the responsibility of working with custodians has been reassigned to IVURCs and is no longer the responsibility of Regional Office (RO) directors.
- IVURCs work with funeral homes on funeral arrangements and ensuring they understand burial, plot, and interment allowances.
- If VBA is working with a coroner, they will help them identify a licensed individual/funeral home to prepare the remains for interment.

NCA FINDINGS
- NCA sometimes learns about scheduled unclaimed remain burials without enough time to coordinate with VSOs or ensure that custodians are going to bring the remains in appropriate containers.
- When custodians hold onto the remains for long periods of time it creates a staffing burden for NCA because they are required to call the custodian once a week to check in from the time the remains are identified through interment.
- NCA cemeteries have specific processes to ensure that all checks are done between the remains arrival at the facility and the final interment, but processes and level of specificity vary across locations.
- Making sure that unclaimed Veteran ceremonies are conducted professionally and honorably is important due to the heightened attention they receive from the press and the public.
- Occasionally a NOK may come forward during or after the ceremony to claim the remains.

KEY FINDINGS
- According to VHA, the final disposition of remains must be completed or scheduled within 5 business days of the facility determining that the remains are unclaimed, but there are provisions in state law or the amount of notice the cemeteries need to adequately plan for interment that may challenge that timeline.
- While there are moments in this process where the administrations are currently sharing progress updates on cases or conducting warm hand-offs, it is unclear what systems are being used to track and document this information sharing.
Phase 5: Interment Planning & Execution by Administration

VETERANS EXPERIENCE OFFICE
FUTURE COLLABORATION BETWEEN VA ADMINISTRATIONS

DESIGN WORKSHOP 2 OVERVIEW
Members of the IPT group, through a series of design exercises, collaborated to identify potential forms of continued collaboration that may be necessary between the VA administrations. The IPT group also discussed how a singular oversight entity might find success within the UVR process.

THERE ARE SEVERAL AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY TO INCREASE SUPPORT BETWEEN VA ADMINISTRATIONS

- Consistent and more coordinated collaboration between each administration.
- Clear, concise instructions across all administrations with specific POCs and localized content.
- Methods to better understand how an oversight entity can foster collaboration without impairing or impeding the process.
- Ease data sharing and shared resource directories across administrations.
- Improve relationships and communication with external partners.

INCREASED COLLABORATION MAY BE CRUCIAL IN THE SUCCESS OF A SINGULAR OVERSIGHT ENTITY

- Success of a single oversight entity may require increased simplification and collaboration throughout the process.
- Success of a single oversight entity may require increased external relationship development.
- Success of a single oversight entity may require new forms of resource distribution for staffing and assistance to families who may be hesitant to claim remains due to financial reasons.
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Appendix 2

Survey of the Handling of UVR Results
Unclaimed Veteran Remains
Recommendation 5

Tamara Lee, OEI/DGA
Ernest Lawley, NCA
August 9, 2022
The survey was composed and fielded in a collaborative effort with National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME), and Cremation Association of North America (CANA).

This five-question customer service survey had four purposes:

1. To get a point in time estimate of total remains and those who are Veterans in custodians’ possession.
2. To help identify unclaimed Veterans and ultimately get them the dignified interments and honors they earned.
3. To promote awareness of and inform industry professionals about VA programs available to them.
4. To understand concerns of industry professionals and learn how VA can better assist them.
Q1. Please select the organization you are most closely associated with.

- **NAME**: 15%
- **CANA**: 4%
- **NFDA**: 81%
Q2. Overall, how satisfied are you with the resources and support available to you when it comes to handling unclaimed Veteran remains?
Q5. Do you have any suggestions as to how VA can better assist you to ensure the remains of unclaimed Veterans receive the dignified interments they deserve, such as additional resources, support, or training? We appreciate your candid and specific responses.

- Additional funds needed as the funds unclaimed take additional time. More, faster help with obtaining DD-214’s.
- At first the VA website is not user friendly. It takes a few times of accessing it to figure out how to navigate it. This makes it difficult to access the resources available on the website. It would be great if there was some literature on the step by step process of how to request burial benefits.
- Paid for transportation and service provided to get the veteran to the cemetery.
- Process the Claims in a timely and efficient manner. See my response on the survey that NFDA did. VA is terrible at processing claims. Recently had three unclaimed veterans and I had to redo paperwork because of VA error. NOT Buse Funeral Home error - bu VA error. No more unclaimed vets being buried by us until VA can prove they have straightened things out.!! Donna B XXX-XXX-XXXX
- Education of the Public that cremated remains can be Memorialized in a Veteran Cemetery /COLUMBARium or A Private COLUMBARium /Cemetery Change the death certificate from only cremation to read cremation and resting final resting place for the cremated remains as mandatory entry Conn has a good permit that shows that and makes the family responsible for the final resting place
- If there were a funeral director database we could link with the VA over... perhaps this database just simply allows the funeral home to input the social security number to confirm if the unclaimed remains are that of a veteran. I think the hardest thing to do is to confirm if cremated remains are of a veteran - because those leaving them perhaps know less about the person / are less attached. If the VA admin had a flow chart / guidance of how to deal with unclaimed vet remains that would be useful too.
- We struggle with understanding the various different channels for applying for benefits. A clear walk through video would be helpful.
• Q3 In an effort to better understand the extent of this issue, please share the number of unclaimed remains under your control and if applicable the number of these remains that are Veterans (for example: 10 Total Unclaimed/2 Veteran/1 Unknown).

• Q4 In what state do you do business?
Assumptions

- FHSs who answered that may have membership in both NFDA and CANA and non-FHSs who answered that may have membership in both NAME and CANA were assumed not to be double-counted because they would have received an identical survey from each organization; we assumed that a respondent who would have answered one survey would have seen an identical survey from the other organization and would have not to respond to the second survey.

- All members of NFDA, NAME, and CANA were based in the United States.

- Question 3 in the survey asks: “In an effort to better understand the extent of this issue, please share the number of unclaimed remains under your control and if applicable the number of these remains that are Veterans (for example: 10 Total Unclaimed/2 Veteran/1 Unknown).”
  
  - If the respondent chose not to answer in this format (i.e. only reported one or two numbers), we assumed the following:
    - If a single value reported was 0, we assumed 0 Total Unclaimed/0 Veteran/0 Unknown
    - If a single value reported was >0, we assumed this value was the Total, with the Veteran and Unknown totals left blank (i.e. item nonresponse)
    - If only 2 values were reported, we assumed the first value for Total Unclaimed and the second value for Veteran
    - Responses for the question that said “None” were recorded as 0 Total Unclaimed/0 Veteran/0 Unknown
    - Responses for this question such as “Unknown” or “Many” were recorded as item nonresponse.
• The methodology considered minimizing the impact of outliers in the data. Outliers were defined two different ways (thus two different sets of results):
  
  o Outliers that were classified as the greatest (i.e., largest) 10\textsuperscript{th} percentile of FHs and non-FHs when counting \textbf{Total Unclaimed} remains; and
  
  o Outliers that were classified as any FH or non-FH that reported more than 3 times the value of the upper bound of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} interquartile range (also known as the “outer band” outlier range) when counting \textbf{Total Unclaimed} remains.

• Results were also reported without minimizing the impact of outliers. These values resulted in gross overcounts.
### Results

#### TOTAL UNCLAIMED REMAINS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outliers identified as greatest 10th percentile</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Lower Bound</th>
<th>Upper Bound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outliers where total # of unclaimed remains &gt; 3 X IQR</td>
<td>85,967</td>
<td>80,351</td>
<td>91,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Outliers (gross overcount)</td>
<td>1,274,975</td>
<td>1,191,678</td>
<td>1,358,272</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### TOTAL VETERAN UNCLAIMED REMAINS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outliers identified as greatest 10th percentile</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Lower Bound</th>
<th>Upper Bound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outliers where total # of unclaimed remains &gt; 3 X IQR</td>
<td>19,861</td>
<td>18,563</td>
<td>21,158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Outliers (gross overcount)</td>
<td>109,624</td>
<td>102,462</td>
<td>116,787</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### PERCENT OF UNCLAIMED REMAINS WHO ARE VETERANS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outliers identified as greatest 10th percentile</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outliers where total # of unclaimed remains &gt; 3 X IQR</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Outliers (gross overcount)</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Note: 3 times the upper IQR is considered an “outer” statistical outlier, actual values were:
  - NFDA: 3 X IQR = 18.75
  - NAME: 3 X IQR = 127.5
  - CANA: 3 X IQR = 112.5
Appendix 3

UVR Legal Procedural Guidance Crosswalk
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Applicable laws</th>
<th>VA Regulations (CFRs)</th>
<th>VA Directives</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
<th>Oversight in place?</th>
<th>Compliance</th>
<th>Consistency</th>
<th>Gap Analysis</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VHA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38 USC 2303 (for those who served in the military)</td>
<td>38 CFR 17.170</td>
<td>VA Directive 5100.08 - section 4a</td>
<td>Burial allowance for deceased veterans who died while hospitalized by VHA (funeral services)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Complying times and methods of oversight in place to ensure timely and accurate claims for Reimbursement.</td>
<td>This is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1702 and 38 CFR 3.1708.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VHA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>38 USC 2303 only for VHA when Veteran is unclaimed</td>
<td>38 CFR 17.170</td>
<td>VA Directive 5100.08 - section 4a</td>
<td>Transportation expenses related to death while traveling under prior authorization or while hospitalized by VHA.</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Complying times and methods of oversight in place to ensure timely and accurate claims for Reimbursement.</td>
<td>This is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1702 and 38 CFR 3.1708.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VHA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>38 USC 2303 (section 5)</td>
<td>38 CFR 17.170</td>
<td>VA Directive 5100.08 - section 4a</td>
<td>Casket/urns</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Complying times and methods of oversight in place to ensure timely and accurate claims for Reimbursement.</td>
<td>This is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1702 and 38 CFR 3.1708.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VBA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38 USC 2303 (section 7)</td>
<td></td>
<td>VA Directive 5100.08 - section 6</td>
<td>Large flag</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Complying times and methods of oversight in place to ensure timely and accurate claims for Reimbursement.</td>
<td>This is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1702 and 38 CFR 3.1708.</td>
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<tr>
<td>VBA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>38 USC 2303 (section 7)</td>
<td></td>
<td>VA Directive 5100.08 - section 6</td>
<td>Funerals performed at the burial place of deceased veterans, external to VHA care</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Complying times and methods of oversight in place to ensure timely and accurate claims for Reimbursement.</td>
<td>This is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1702 and 38 CFR 3.1708.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VBA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>38 USC 17.170</td>
<td></td>
<td>VA Directive 5100.08 - section 6</td>
<td>Autopsies</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Complying times and methods of oversight in place to ensure timely and accurate claims for Reimbursement.</td>
<td>This is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1702 and 38 CFR 3.1708.</td>
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<td>VBA</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>38 USC 17.170</td>
<td></td>
<td>VA Directive 5100.08 - section 6</td>
<td>Radiology</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Complying times and methods of oversight in place to ensure timely and accurate claims for Reimbursement.</td>
<td>This is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1702 and 38 CFR 3.1708.</td>
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<td>VBA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38 USC 17.170</td>
<td></td>
<td>VA Directive 5100.08 - section 6</td>
<td>Pathology</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Complying times and methods of oversight in place to ensure timely and accurate claims for Reimbursement.</td>
<td>This is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1702 and 38 CFR 3.1708.</td>
</tr>
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<td>VBA</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38 USC 17.170</td>
<td></td>
<td>VA Directive 5100.08 - section 6</td>
<td>Forensic pathologist</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Complying times and methods of oversight in place to ensure timely and accurate claims for Reimbursement.</td>
<td>This is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1702 and 38 CFR 3.1708.</td>
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**Recommendation 42 Report Appendix**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Applicable laws (Statutes/USC)</th>
<th>VA Regulations (CFRs)</th>
<th>VA Directives Brief Description</th>
<th>Oversight in place?</th>
<th>Compliance</th>
<th>Consistency</th>
<th>Gap Analysis</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<td>17</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>NA</td>
<td>Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Section A - Establishing Veteran Status.</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.6</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>NA</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Section A - Establishing Veteran Status.</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.101</td>
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<td>High</td>
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<td>NA</td>
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<td>38 CFR 3.12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>High</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.13</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>NA</td>
<td>Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Section A - Establishing Veteran Status.</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.15</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>High</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Section A - Establishing Veteran Status.</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.1705</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>See comments under 38 USC 2303 and 2304.</td>
<td>Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Section A - Establishing Veteran Status.</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.1707</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>See comments under 38 USC 2303 and 2304.</td>
<td>Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Section A - Establishing Veteran Status.</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.1806</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>See comments under 38 USC 2303 and 2304.</td>
<td>Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Section A - Establishing Veteran Status.</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.1703</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>See comments under 38 USC 2303 and 2304.</td>
<td>Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Section A - Establishing Veteran Status.</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.1709</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>See comments under 38 USC 2303 and 2304.</td>
<td>Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Section A - Establishing Veteran Status.</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.1710</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>See comments under 38 USC 2303 and 2304.</td>
<td>Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Section A - Establishing Veteran Status.</td>
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<td>Agency</td>
<td>Item #</td>
<td>Applicable Laws (Statutes/USC)</td>
<td>VA Regulations (CFRs)</td>
<td>VA Directives</td>
<td>Brief Description</td>
<td>Oversight in place?</td>
<td>Compliance</td>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>Gap Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>38 USC 2402</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Persons eligible for internment in national cemeteries</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td></td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38 USC 101i</td>
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<td>Definitions</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38 USC 2306</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Headstones, markers, and burial receptacles</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>38 USC 2411</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Prohibition against interment is the National Cemetery Administration or Arlington National Cemetery of persons committing Federal or State capital crimes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>38 USC 5303</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Certain bars to benefits</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td></td>
<td>35</td>
<td>38 USC 5303A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum active-duty service requirement</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>36</td>
<td>38 CFR 38.602</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Persons eligible for burial is a corresponding regulation to 38 USC 2402</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>38 CFR 38.600(b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>This regulation provides definitions for understanding/interpretation of 38 USC 5303 regarding capital crimes. See cell 154.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>Applicable laws (Statutes/USC)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>38 CFR 3.61</td>
<td>Duty periods</td>
<td>vs</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>NCA</td>
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<td>38 CFR 3.71</td>
<td>Individuals and groups considered to have performed active military, naval, or air service</td>
<td>vs</td>
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<td>38 CFR 3.12</td>
<td>Character of discharge</td>
<td>vs</td>
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<td>High</td>
<td>NCA</td>
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<td>38 CFR 3.12a</td>
<td>Minimum active-duty service requirement</td>
<td>vs</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>NCA</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>38 CFR 3.628</td>
<td>Reimbursement for caskets and urns for unclaimed remains of Veterans</td>
<td>vs</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Med-Med</td>
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<td>38 CFR 3.627</td>
<td>Prohibition of interment or Memorialization of persons who have been convicted of Federal or State capital crimes or certain sex offenses</td>
<td>vs</td>
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<td>High</td>
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<td>38 CFR 3.12</td>
<td>Character of discharge</td>
<td>vs</td>
<td>High</td>
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NCA
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<th>Agency</th>
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<th>Applicable law (Statutes/USC)</th>
<th>VA Regulations (CFRs)</th>
<th>VA Directives</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
<th>Oversight in place?</th>
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<th>Consistency</th>
<th>Gap Analysis</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<td>47</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.12a</td>
<td>Minimum active-duty service requirement</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No foundational to NCA determination of eligibility for and provision of benefits. NCA personnel responsible for scheduling and determining eligibility for national cemetery interment receive initial and ongoing training regarding these requirements.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>48</td>
<td>38 CFR 3.12a</td>
<td>Minimum active-duty service requirement</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No foundational to NCA determination of eligibility for and provision of benefits. NCA personnel responsible for scheduling and determining eligibility for national cemetery interment receive initial and ongoing training regarding these requirements.</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCA</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>NCA Directive 3210</td>
<td>Eligibility Authorities and Administration of Burial Benefits in VA National Cemeteries</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Identifies burial eligibility requirements for national cemetery interment and responsibilities related to the provision of burial benefits. Statutory authorities: 38 USC 2402; 38 USC 2411. Implementing regulations: 38 CFR 38.617; 38.618; 38.319; and 38.620. NCA personnel responsible for scheduling and determining eligibility for national cemetery interment receive initial and ongoing training regarding these requirements. See cell U50.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>NCA Directive 3210</td>
<td>Eligibility Authorities and Administration of Burial Benefits in VA National Cemeteries</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Identifies burial eligibility requirements for national cemetery interment and responsibilities related to the provision of burial benefits. Statutory authorities: 38 USC 2402; 38 USC 2411. Implementing regulations: 38 CFR 38.617; 38.618; 38.319; and 38.620. NCA personnel responsible for scheduling and determining eligibility for national cemetery interment receive initial and ongoing training regarding these requirements. See cell U50.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>51</td>
<td>NCA Directive 3211</td>
<td>Eligibility Authorities and Administration of Memorialization Benefits</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Identifies memorialization eligibility requirements for benefits administered by NCA. Statutory authorities: 38 USC 101/2306/2402/2411 and 2404. Implementing regulations: 38 CFR 38.600; 38.619; 38.620; 38.628; 38.629; 38.630; 38.631; 38.632; and 38.633.</td>
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Appendix 4

UVR Governance
Appendix 5

VHA Resource Assessment
Appendix 5: VHA Resource Assessment

Background

VHA lacks a national program office to provide oversight, guidance, and support to field personnel charged with performing activities associated with deaths of Veterans occurring at VA medical facilities or while under VA-authorized care. This lack of oversight leads to decedent affairs and Unclaimed Veteran Remains (UVR) functions being performed inconsistently between different VA medical centers (VAMCs) and Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs), inconsistent support to families of deceased Veterans regarding benefits for which the decedent is eligible, potential regulatory and compliance issues stemming from a lack of clear guidance and oversight, and the potential for fraud, waste, and abuse from items such as payments made in excess of statutory limits or to improper recipients.

Recommendation for VHA

Pursue resources and funding to institute national oversight via a “Decedent Affairs Program Office” (DAPO). The mission of the DAPO will be to provide decedent affairs program oversight; evaluate decedent affairs needs and effectiveness through program evaluation and interaction with Deputy Network Directors (DNDs) and Business Integration Managers (BIMs); oversight of decedent affairs ERM activities, to include risk assessment, internal control evaluation, and testing; direct field interaction in furtherance of the program mission; development and reporting of decedent affairs metrics to assess program health; outreach as necessary to industry organizations and Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) regarding VHA decedent benefits; and interaction with Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) and National Cemetery Administration (NCA) personnel to share best practices to further the mission of providing dignified burials to all families and custodians of Veterans eligible for and requesting burial and memorial benefits.

Review the feasibility of aligning a DAPO within VHA Patient Care Services (PCS), Care Management and Social Work Services (CM/SW) or other appropriate VHA office. To inform this review, VHA is convening a sequester of process stakeholders to strategize the desired-state of decedent affairs support that benefits the organization and the Veteran/family experience. Further exploration is also needed to allow for the eventual owning office to identify the necessary roles (clinical and administrative) and responsibilities (person in grade) and appropriate allocation of personnel resources.

Suggested allocation could include 11 FTEEs, and is subject to change based on changes in scope, workload, and VHA alignment. FTEE could be clinical and administrative and range in grade from GS-12 to GS-14.

Through implementation of the structure above, the experience for Veteran’s, their families and survivors will be positively enhanced by ensuring that they are provided compassionate, timely, and accurate counsel regarding end-of-life benefits, that unclaimed Veterans receive timely and dignified burial, and that decedent affairs services are provided consistently and effectively by trained staff across the VHA network.
**Stakeholder Considerations**

Approximately 24,000 Veterans die annually in VHA facilities or under VHA-authorized care. Of this number, roughly 400 have no next-of-kin or acquaintances that claim their remains for burial.

For Veterans whose remains are claimed, burial and memorial benefits are available and payable through VBA. VHA typically is not responsible for benefits or other expenses associated for deaths that occur in VHA or VHA-authorized facilities. However, VHA has a responsibility to the families of these Veterans to ensure that they are made aware of all benefits for which they are potentially eligible, the steps required to obtain these benefits, and information regarding how best to begin the necessary steps of obtaining benefits through VBA.

Respondents to two specific survey questions administered by the Palliative and Hospice Care Program Office between Q4 FY20 and Q3 FY21 indicated the interaction with VHA staff by families after the passing of a Veteran was inadequate. The first question, “Would it have been helpful if the VA had provided more information about benefits for surviving spouses and dependents” received an answer of “Yes” from 56% of respondents. The second question, “Would it have been helpful if the VA had provided more information about burial and memorial benefits?” received an answer of “Yes” from 48% of respondents. Specific narrative from respondents regarding guidance provided by VHA after a loved one’s death included the following:

- “We were also at a loss with dads’ burial and memorial benefits no one provided any assistant (sic) so we were on our own to figure it out.
- “We never received any help to find funeral and cremation services in the area since we were from out of state.”
- “Afterwards it was really hard to get in touch with someone regarding benefits. I literally had to fly down there and sit in an office.”

The comments above were not isolated and confirm potential gaps in information provided by VHA staff regarding burial and memorial benefits provided to Veterans and their families. The DAPO will have responsibility for ensuring consistent information is offered to families for decedents across all VHA facilities regarding available benefits, and the process for obtaining those benefits. Additionally, for Veterans whose remains are claimed, DAPO staff will have oversight of and perform work with facility staff to develop consistent processes for administrative work associated with these deaths, to include such items as coordinating release of Veteran remains to mortuaries, processing death certificates, and ensuring all required actions are fully documented, tracked and auditable.

For Veterans whose remains are unclaimed, VHA has the responsibility of arranging and ensuring all benefits are coordinated and / or paid to ensure dignified burial of the Veteran. This substantially increases the amount of work required by facility staff as well as increasing the chance of non-compliance with statutory requirements. Currently, there is no
single standard across VHA for the execution and review of duties in arranging benefits for unclaimed Veteran deaths occurring under VHA or VHA-authorized care. The DAPO will ensure that standards are created and monitored for compliance, and subsequent review by the DAPO performed, to provide reasonable assurance that VHA’s decedent affairs program, regardless of whether Veteran remains are claimed, is compliant with regulation and meets stated program objectives.

**External Considerations**

**Media Reports:** Issues regarding decedent affairs are often covered in local and national media. The genesis of the OIG report referenced was in response to a media report regarding the cremains of 28 Veterans stored in the attic of a funeral home, some for as long as 44 years, before discovery and burial. VHA is not insulated from potential media issues and needs to ensure consistent processes to ensure both Veterans and their families are treated equitably, receive timely information, and that dignified interment occurs.

**Congressional Scrutiny:** Through media coverage, internal or external audits, or direct interaction from surviving family members, VHA is at risk of Congressional scrutiny due to its perceived treatment in the handling and disposition of Veterans who pass under VHA or VHA-authorized care. These issues cannot be entirely eliminated. However, implementation of standardized processes, requisite controls, and ongoing evaluation and monitoring of program objective achievement will provide reasonable assurance that will largely mitigate this risk.

**Improper or erroneous payment:** The current decedent affairs process across VHA presents the potential for improper payments to be made. Examples of improper payments are amounts paid in excess of allowable statutory amounts, or amounts paid that are not documented in a way to support payment. Erroneous payments could occur when VHA pays for a service that is not allowed by statute, or a payment is made by VHA or another administration more than once for the same service. VHA currently has no pre- or post-payment review to reduce the possibility of incorrect or erroneous payments from occurring.

**Resource Assessment Criteria**

The specific criteria serving as the basis for this recommendation:

- Requirements cited in OIG Report 19-09592-262 “Improvements Needed to Ensure Final Disposition of Unclaimed Veterans’ Remains” dated December 15, 2021 requiring OEI and VHA analysis of the most appropriate location for the Program Office

- Social workers assist Veterans and Caregivers by assessing and providing support and assistance in various areas of care coordination. They connect them with resources, services and programs to meet their current needs and address issues related to access to care, psychological status, economics, functional status, housing and social support.
Enterprise Considerations

VHA’s implementation of its DAPO will affect all VA administrations (VHA, VBA, and NCA).

VHA impact will include all VISNs/medical facilities, contracting and procurement, finance offices, and ongoing collaborations with OGC and the Office of Regulations, Appeals and Policy. Most impact will be felt by the VISNs and medical facilities. The DAPO is encouraged to actively partner with DNDs, BIMs, and facility staff to research and understand facility concerns and best practices to support policy revisions and process level guidance.

The DAPO will follow the model already in place within VHA to actively collaborate with VBA, NCA, and OEI in the assessment, analysis, and correction of enterprise-wide issues identified by the IPT through the course of its program evaluation. For example, VHA actively aided NCA with analysis of unclaimed persons databases in an attempt to discover potential Veterans for which benefits are due and is currently in discussion with VBA regarding the impact of NCA provision of casket and urns to mortuaries rather than treating these items as a reimbursable expense. VHA actively collaborates with NCA regarding benefits available to the families of claimed Veterans who pass under VHA or VHA authorized care and are currently actively involved in discussions with both NCA and VBA regarding ways that payments made for burial and memorial services can be analyzed for potential duplicate payments.

In all instances, the strength and productivity of current relationships VHA has developed with VBA, NCA, and OEI will be built upon by VHA’s DAPO and will allow for the most expedient and efficient standardization of decedent affairs and UVR functions across VA.

Recommendation Pros and Cons

Pros: Establishing a VHA DAPO may bring about the following benefits:

• Development and implementation of standardized decedent affairs processes and program oversight across VHA
• Development and implementation of standardized initial and ongoing training for decedent affairs facility personnel
• Implementation of quantifiable standards for disposition of claimed and unclaimed Veteran remains for Veterans passing under VHA and VHA-authorized care
• Development of program level internal controls, testing, monitoring, and reporting of metrics providing reasonable assurance that program goals are met
• Confirmation regarding provision of dignified end-of-life benefits for unclaimed Veterans who pass under VHA-authorized care
• Consistent guidance to the families of Veteran decedents to facilitate claims for all burial and memorial benefits earned and available
• Program Office subject matter expertise and guidance regarding field level decedent affairs issues
• Standardized processes for decedent affairs payments reducing potential instances of fraud, waste, and abuse
• Coordination with NCA and VBA to ensure the VA implements an enterprise approach in the proper, timely, and dignified provision of decedent affairs benefits for eligible Veterans
• Addressing recommendations found by OIG regarding issues with execution of decedent affairs activities by VHA with respect to unclaimed Veteran remains, and the lack of a centralized VHA program office to provide oversight to facilities regarding these matters
• Minimizing potential ongoing Congressional, media, and public scrutiny regarding VHA’s treatment of Veterans under its care, and VA’s provision of end-of-life benefits to eligible Veterans

Cons: Potential detriments to establishing a VHA DAPO include:
• Requirement for increased funding for FY23 and outyears
• Increased performance, monitoring, and oversight requirements for VHA facilities
• Potential VHA facility level increase in staffing or decedent affairs manhours to meet legal and VHA Directive requirements
• Change management efforts in communicating and implementing program requirements and enhancements not currently in place at the VISN and VAMC level

Alternate Recommendation
An alternate option was assessed but not selected. The alternate choice was:
• Do not pursue funding and FTEE to establish a DAPO within VHA

Alternate Recommendation Pros and Cons
Pros: Not establishing a DAPO within VHA will bring about the following benefits:
• VHA remains at status quo; no additional funding required for FY23 and outyears
• VHA facilities will see no impact to current processes for decedent affairs
Cons: Potential detriments to not establishing a DAPO within VHA include:

- Continued Congressional, media, and/or public scrutiny regarding VHA decedent affairs and UVR activities
- Continued ad hoc support from VHA support offices without appropriate staffing, expertise, or authority to oversee facility implementation and performance of decedent affairs and UVR requirements
- Impact to other Veteran-focused missions from unfunded, out-of-hide support vice dedicated, funded decedent affairs personnel
- Lack of standardized decedent affairs processes across VHA, increasing the likelihood that Veterans who die under VHA authorized care will receive delayed and/or less than dignified receipt of end-of-life benefits
- Lack of reasonable assurance that VHA complies with its statutory responsibility to provide end-of-life benefits to eligible Veterans who pass under VHA-authorized care
- Increased potential instances of fraud, waste, and abuse regarding procurement of decedent affairs services and overall lack of stewardship of taxpayer funds for Veterans who pass under VHA-authorized care
- Inability to successfully implement Recommendation 9 set forth by OIG’s report calling on VHA to “…take appropriate action…”.

Recommendation Rationale
This IPT makes its recommendation for the following reasons:

- Provides reasonable assurance of attainment and monitoring of program objectives.
- Conforms with requirements for enterprise risk management and implementation / performance of internal control activities.
- Provides appropriate response to OIG’s direction for establishment of a program office appropriately placed within VHA.
- Support’s the SECVA’s fundamental principle of “Access” included in his FY22-28 Strategic Plan, which states “…the VA will provide timely access to VA resources: world-class health care, earned benefits, and a final resting place as a lasting tribute to their service.” Establishment of the program office not only aligns with VA strategic goals, but aids in ensuring that end-of-life benefits earned by Veterans under VHA care are received, that they are received in a dignified manner befitting the Veteran’s service to our Country, and that they are provided in a manner consistent with the proper oversight and use of taxpayer funding for which VHA has stewardship.

Program Office Considerations
During the course of this IPT’s program evaluation efforts, the following field measurements were identified for VHA’s consideration:

- Percentage of claimed Veteran remains provided to next-of-kin’s chosen funeral home within 5 days
- Average number of days from death to interment for Unclaimed Veterans
- Percentage of claimed Veteran remains with proper documentation of next-of-kin’s funeral home selection
- Percentage of unclaimed Veterans with proper documentation showing the VAMC’s determination of status
- Percentage of unclaimed Veteran funeral services procured at or under the statutory dollar threshold
- Average number of days to schedule Unclaimed Veteran interments after death
- Average number of days for a VAMC to determine Veteran remains as unclaimed

VHA DAPO measurements for consideration:

- Percentage field analysis/reporting engagements completed within target timeline
- Average number of days to close decedent affairs corrective actions
- Current count of open corrective actions
- Count of field inquires
- Average number of days to address field inquiries
- Percentage of analysis / reporting engagements with VBA and NCA completed within target timeline
- Detail or measures for VBA/NCA support
- Detail to report VISN / VAMC detail