

The National Cemetery Administration



RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Administration and Congress need to provide advance appropriations to the remainder of the discretionary and mandatory programs, services, and benefits accounts of the Department of Veterans Affairs, including the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) to ensure that its critical mission is protected from any and all future budgetary disputes and allowing it to fulfill the nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country honorably and faithfully.

Expand the NCA's Veterans Apprenticeship Program to all administrations within the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Establish a Consistent Applicability Date for Provision of Memorial Headstones and Markers for Eligible Non-Veteran Individuals: Amend 38 U.S.C. § 2306(b) to establish a consistent applicability date of "after November 11, 1998," for provision of memorial headstones and markers for all eligible veterans' spouses, surviving spouses, and dependent children.

Align Eligibility for Burial and Presidential Memorial Certificates for Members of the Reserve Components of the Armed Forces: Amend 38 U.S.C. § 112(a) to allow the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide a Presidential Memorial Certificate to eligible recipients of the reserve components of the Armed Forces of the United States Army or Air National Guard and the Reserve Officers' Training Corps who are eligible for burial in a VA national cemetery.

Use of Character of Service Determinations for Active Duty Deaths: This proposal would amend 38 U.S.C. § 2402(a)(1) to require that a service member who dies in active service must have been serving under conditions other than dishonorable to be eligible for burial in a VA National Cemetery. The proposal would also amend title 38 U.S.C. § 2306(b)(4)(A) and (f)(2), to impose the same requirement for eligibility for a memorial headstone or marker and Section 2301(d) for a burial flag. This proposal seeks to rectify the current inequity in eligibility determinations that exists between active duty service members and veterans.

Expand Authority to Provide Headstones and Markers to Eligible Spouses and Dependents at Tribal Veteran's Cemeteries: This proposal would amend title 38 U.S.C. § 2306, to provide eligibility for headstones and markers for burial and memorialization of veterans' eligible spouses and dependent children interred at tribal veteran's cemeteries.

Expand the VA Authority to Provide an Allowance to transport Certain Deceased Veterans to a State or Tribal Veterans Cemeteries: This proposal would amend title 38 U.S.C. § 2308, to expand the VA current authority to pay the cost of transporting the remains of certain deceased veterans to the closest National Cemetery for burial in a state or tribal veterans cemetery. Under Section 104(b)(2) and (3) of P.L. 112-260, effective January 10, 2014, VA many only pay the cost of transporting the remains of certain deceased veterans to the closest National Cemetery.

Expand the VA Authority to Provide Outer Burial Receptacles to State and Tribal Cemeteries: This proposal would amend title 38 U.S.C. § 2306(e), to direct VA to provide an outer burial receptacle for each new casketed gravesite in a State or Tribal Veterans Cemetery that receives a grant from the VA Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP), as well as in new VCGP establishment projects.

Expansion of Eligibility for Medallion or Other Device to Signify Status as a Deceased Veteran: This proposal would remove the November 1, 1990 applicability date for provision of medallions to veterans. This proposal also would allow VA to provide the medallion benefit, regardless of date of death, in order to signify the status of the deceased as a veteran who served in the U. S. Armed Forces. A medallion is issued to be affixed to a privately purchased headstone or marker installed at the grave of an eligible veteran buried in a private cemetery.

Allow for the Provision of Government-Furnished Headstones and Markers for the Privately Marked Graves of Medal of Honor Recipients who Died Prior to November 1, 1990: This proposal would amend title 38 U.S.C. § 2306(d), to allow VA to furnish headstones or markers for the privately marked graves of all eligible Medal of Honor recipients who died prior to November 1, 1990.

In its efforts to meet the burial needs of veterans, especially those located in rural or western states, NCA should continue acquiring land and awarding Master Plan/Design Development contracts for new national cemeteries. We further recommend that NCA continue land searches at seven rural locations.

NCA should continue with the largest expansion of the national cemetery system since the Civil War, which, along with continued grant awards to states, territories and tribal organizations, will allow NCA to meet its strategic goal of providing 95 percent of American veterans with a burial option within 75 miles of their homes by 2017.

BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION:

The National Cemetery Administration, which today sustains 131 of the nation's 147 national cemeteries as well as one rural National Veterans Burial Ground and 33 soldiers' lots, has a long and honorable history. The seeds for what would become the National Cemetery Administration were planted in 1862 by President Abraham Lincoln during the second year of a war that many were afraid would be over before they could get involved. On 17 July of that year, Congress passed legislation authorizing the purchase of land to be used as "cemetery grounds...for soldiers who shall have died in the service of the country." At the end of only one year, a total of 14 national cemeteries had already been established, and only eight years later, that total had reached 73. Not surprisingly, the majority of these early cemeteries were located in close proximity to the Southeastern battlefields and campgrounds of the Civil War. At the conclusion of the war, the Army sent out teams to recover the remains of the fallen, and by 1870 over 300,000 Union soldiers had been honorably interred in one of the newly established national cemeteries. After 1873 all honorably discharged Union veterans became eligible for burial alongside their departed comrades.

Following the end of WWI, Congress established an independent agency, the American Battle Monuments Commission, to be responsible for maintaining burial grounds outside of the U.S. for service members who die overseas. The commission maintains 24 American military cemeteries as well as monuments and memorials.

During the 1930s, because of the high concentration of veterans living in metropolitan areas such as New York, Baltimore, Minneapolis, San Diego, San Francisco, and San Antonio, new national cemeteries were established. Additionally, some cemeteries closely associated with major Civil War battlefields of historical significance (i.e. Gettysburg and Antietam), which had been under the control of the U.S. Army, were transferred during this time to the National Park Service. In the early 1970s, Congress again authorized the transfer of 82 of our national cemeteries from U.S. Army control to what would become the Department of Veterans Affairs. The 131 cemeteries and one National Veterans Burial Ground currently under the purview of the NCA are composed of nearly 3.4 million gravesites and are located in 40 states and Puerto Rico.

The most important obligation of the National Cemetery Administration is honoring the memory of the brave American men and women who have, over the course of our country's history, selflessly served in our armed forces. Therefore, it is with this sacred duty in mind that we expect the stewardship, accessibility, and maintenance of our entire NCA cemetery system, as well as Arlington National Cemetery, be treated as the highest priority. *The Independent Budget* veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) believe that the dignified burial of America's veterans is equally as important as any other service provided by VA. With this in mind we support extending advance appropriations to the remainder of the discretionary and mandatory programs, services, and benefits accounts of VA, which would include the NCA. This issue of advance appropriations is at the top of our list of concerns regarding NCA operations.

Advance appropriations for veterans health care have proven to be nothing less than a resounding success for all stakeholders. Timely and predictable funding has produced numerous operational efficiencies in the planning and budgeting process and has enabled VA to more resourcefully utilize its Congressionally provided appropriations in operating its medical facilities and programs. Unfortunately, other veterans benefits and services that rely wholly or partially on discretionary funding face annual threats of funding delays and reductions because of annual budget disputes. Extending advance appropriations would shield all veterans programs from unrelated political and partisan budget disputes so that VA can continue to deliver all the benefits and services that wounded, and ill veterans have earned.

President’s Budget Requests (\$ in Millions) FY14 and FY15		
Line Item	2014	2015
Operations and Maintenance	\$249	\$257
Major Construction	121	10
Minor Construction	89	60
Compensation and Pension	100	121
Veterans Cemetery Grants Program	46	45

As last year’s government shutdown has without a doubt proven, advance appropriations not only work, they work well. Thanks to their advance funding, VA hospitals and clinics were able to provide uninterrupted care to millions of wounded, injured, and ill veterans. By contrast, other critical services for veterans were delayed, disrupted, and suspended. Work was stopped on more than 250,000 Department of Veterans Affairs disability claims awaiting appeals, burials at national cemeteries were scaled back, and vital medical and prosthetic research projects were suspended. Had this stalemate continued for another several weeks, even mandatory obligations of the federal government, such as disability compensation and pension payments to veterans and their survivors, would have been halted. More than four million wounded, injured, ill, and poor veterans rely on these payments; for some it is their primary or only source of income. IBVSOs find it completely unacceptable that even the threat of default on these hard-earned benefits was possible.

Workload and Performance		
	Actual 2014	Actual 2015
Interments	125,188	126,500
Headstone and Marker Application Processed	360,761	361,800
Presidential Memorial Certificate Applications Processed	618,570	723,100
Perpetual care provided for 4.2 million veterans, service members, reservists, and family members in 3.4 million gravesites		

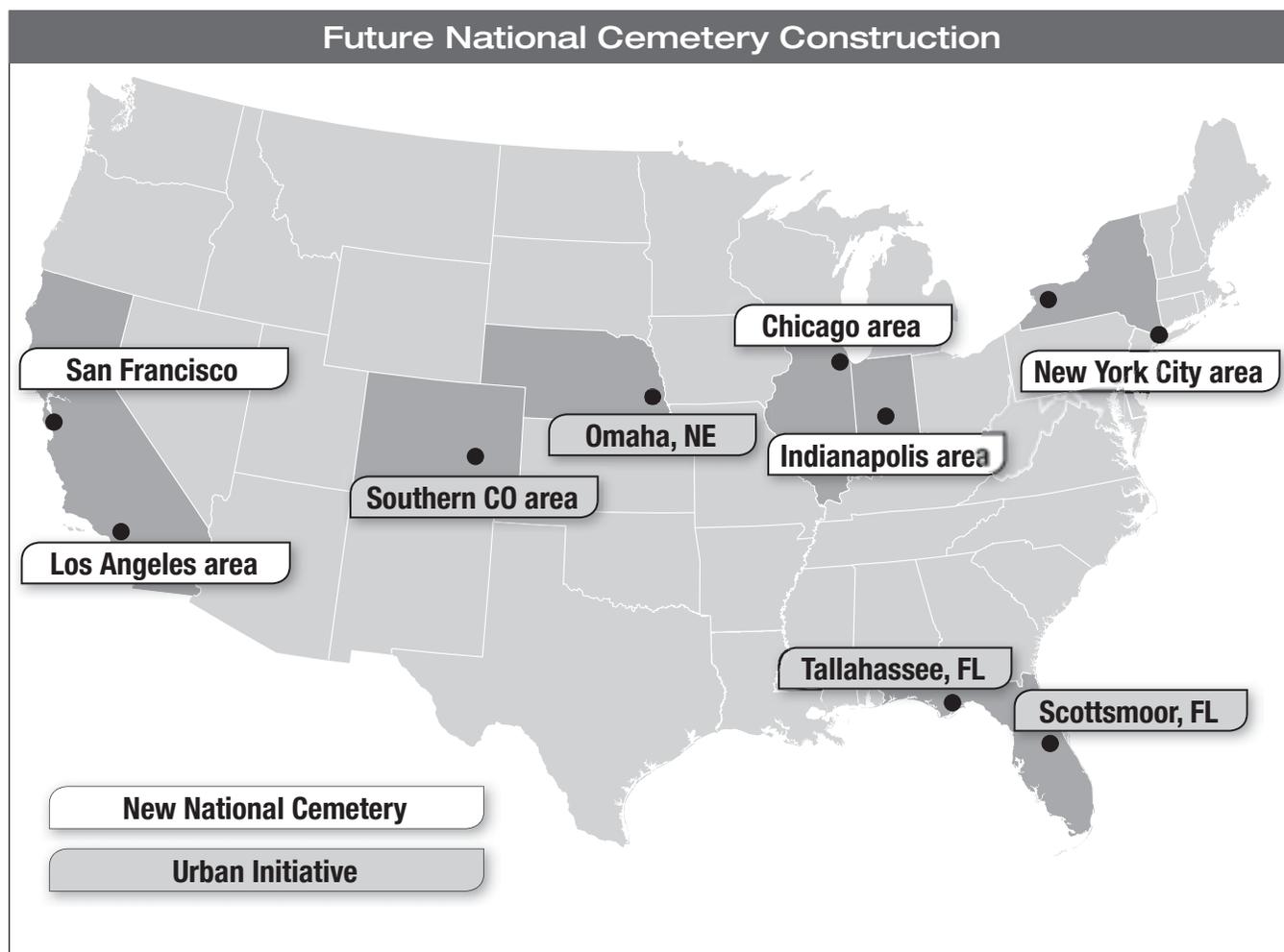
The direct impact of advance appropriations on NCA would be substantial and would prevent the interruption of a myriad of burial and memorial services including:

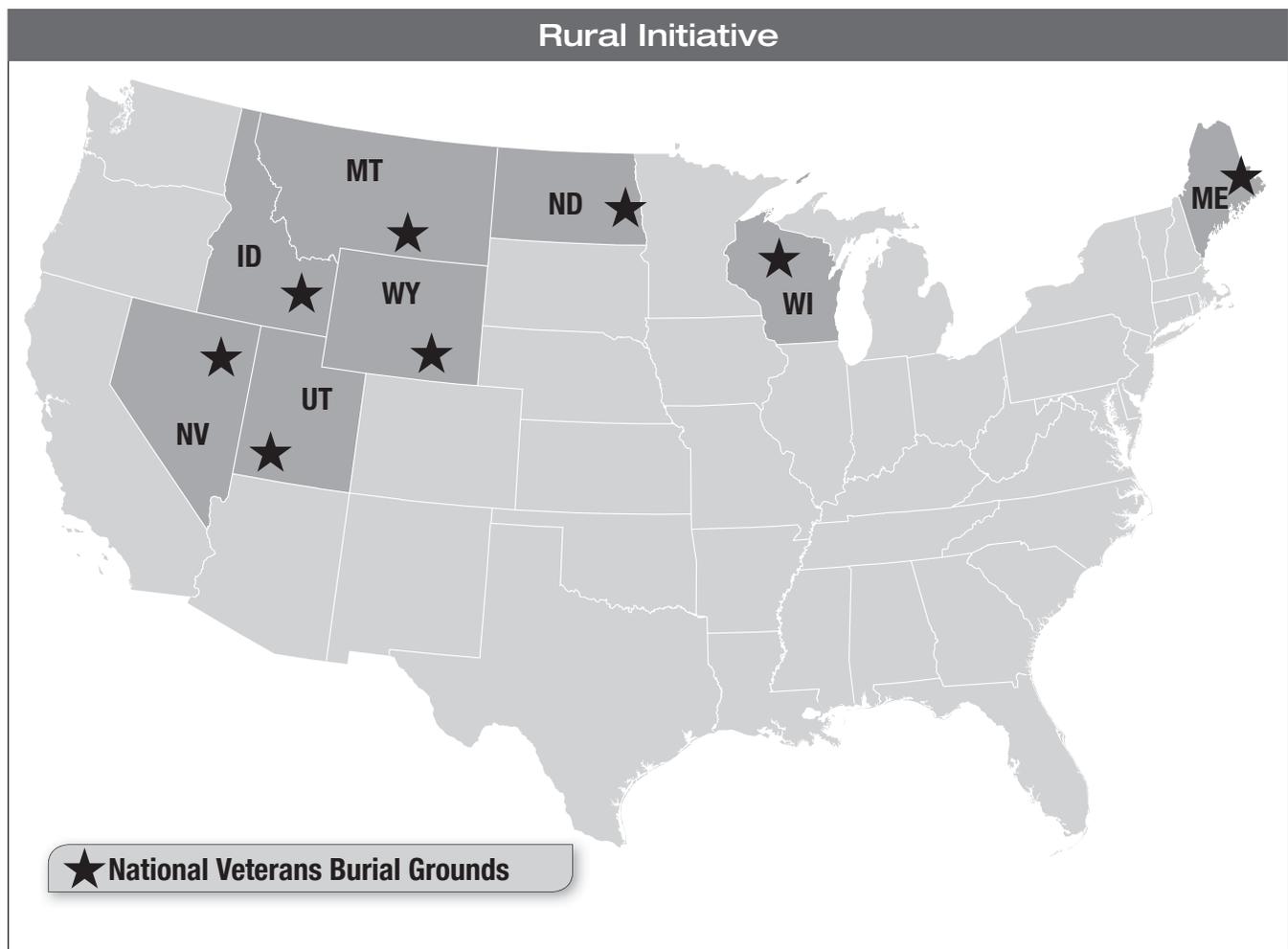
- limited and/or delayed interment schedules;
- cessation of administrative functions – no Presidential Memorial Certificates issued or interruption of headstone/marker/medallion application processing & status;
- termination of maintenance functions;

- inability to provide headstones/markers/medallions and other burial receptacles to veterans and eligible family members

In FY 2014 the NCA performed a total of 125,180 interments, maintained 8,812 acres of land, issued 570,983 Presidential Memorial Certificates, awarded \$28.8 million in National Shrine contracts to repair gravesites, and processed 360,761 headstone and marker applications. NCA has done an excellent job executing the responsibilities of its office to date and with continued funding at appropriate levels, will reach new levels of distinction including:

- continuing to address increasing workload requirements;
 - handling a rising number of interments through 2017
 - maintaining increasing numbers of occupied gravesites and acreage
 - issuing continued requests for Presidential Memorial Certificates
 - processing continued requests for headstones/markers
- expanding burial access for veterans and their eligible family members;
 - develop five new national cemeteries (Cape Canaveral National Cemetery, Tallahassee National Cemetery, and Omaha National Cemetery, and cemeteries in western New York and southern Colorado)
 - develop seven National Veterans Burial Grounds in rural locations (ME, WI, NV, UT, WY, ID, and ND)
 - develop five urban initiative facilities (San Francisco Area, Los Angeles Area, Chicago Area, Indianapolis Area & New York City Area)





- achieving high levels of customer satisfaction;
 - continue customer service best practices
- implementing cost saving and operational improvement measures;
 - headstone support systems;
 - preplaced crypts;
 - water-wise landscaping; and
 - memorial walls

Looking ahead, the IBVSOs support the NCA as the program continues to make progress on several major initiatives critical to the achievement of the mission through implementation of strategic goals including:

- much-needed land acquisition and critical master-planning efforts without which, NCA would be unable to meet the growing needs of our nation’s veterans, especially those in rural areas, and their eligible family members;
- continuously improving preservation and restoration of irreplaceable historic resources which not only commemorate the valor and service of our veterans but record the very historic fabric of our nation’s history;
- continued development and utilization of customer service best practices;
- continued leadership in and expansion of the hiring and training of veterans;
 - the Veterans Apprenticeship Program will be graduated 13 formerly homeless veterans as new caretakers and 20 members of the current class are expected to graduate in December 2014.

- the composition of NCA's current workforce is highly veteran oriented, with over 74 percent of its employees having served in the military.
- in FY 2014, approximately 85 percent of NCA's contracts were awarded to Veteran-Owned and Service Disabled Veteran-Owned small businesses.
- Leading-edge improvements in the area of environmental stewardship and facilities maintenance which not only leverage resources but uphold the high standards required of national shrines.

The IBVSOs believe the NCA continues to meet its goals and the goals set by others because of its true dedication and care for honoring the memories of the men and women who have selflessly served our nation. We applaud the NCA for recognizing that it must continue to be responsive to the preferences and expectations of the veteran community by adapting or adopting new burial options and ensuring access to burial options in the national, state, and tribal government-operated cemeteries. We also believe it is extremely important to recognize the NCA's efforts in employing both disabled and homeless veterans.

Operations, Maintenance and National Shrine Initiative— The Veterans Cemetery Grants Program

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Congress should fund the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) at a level of at least \$25 million for FY 2016. This increase in funding will help the National Cemetery Administration better meet the needs of the VCGP, as its expected demand will continue to rise going forward. Furthermore, this funding level will allow the NCA to continue to expand its efforts of reaching its goal of serving 94 percent of the nation's veteran population by 2015.

Additionally, this funding level will allow the VCGP to begin recovering from previous funding cuts to this important program and establish new cemeteries, at its current rate, that will provide burial options for veterans who live in regions that currently have no reasonably accessible state or national veterans cemetery.

BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION:

The Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP), which complements the mission of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) to establish gravesites in areas where it is not currently meeting the burial needs of veterans, awards funding to states, territories and tribal organizations for the establishment, expansion, or improvement of state veterans cemeteries. Several incentives are in place to assist states and tribal organizations in this effort. For example, the NCA can provide up to 100 percent of the development cost for an approved cemetery project, including establishing a new cemetery and expanding or improving an established state or tribal organization veterans cemetery. New equipment, such as mowers and backhoes, can be provided for new cemeteries.

Grantees under this program are required to adhere to the standards and guidelines pertaining to site selection, planning and construction prescribed by VA. Cemeteries may only be operated solely for the burial of service members who die on active duty, veterans, and their eligible spouses and dependent children. All cemeteries assisted by a VCGP program grant must be maintained and operated according to the strict operational stan-

National Shrine Funding (\$ in Millions) FY14 and FY15	
2014	2015
\$27	\$8.1

Raise and Realign Projects

- **Maintain proper height and alignment**
- **Strict technical specifications**

dards and measures of the NCA. To date, the VA program has helped establish, expand, improve, operate and maintain 93 veterans cemeteries in 45 states and territories including tribal trust lands, Northern Mariana Islands, and Guam, which provided more than 33,000 burials in FY 2014. Since its inception, the NCA has awarded VCGP program grants totaling more than \$618 million.

While each VCGP grant recipient is solely responsible for the administration, operation, and maintenance of its cemetery, NCA is authorized to pay a plot or interment allowance (not to exceed \$700) to a state, territory or tribal government for expenses incurred by that entity in the burial of eligible veterans in a cemetery owned and operated by the state, territory or tribal government if the burial is performed at no cost to the Veteran’s next-of-kin. This benefit is administered by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and the state, territory or tribal government must apply to VBA to receive it.

The importance of the VCGP program, which continues to increase NCA’s presence and veteran access in rural areas, cannot be overestimated. NCA predicts that within the next few years, the number of state and tribal cemeteries that provide a full complement of burial options and services will exceed the number of equivalent national cemeteries. The current roster of state and tribal cemetery projects on the FY 2014 priority list with pre-application grant requests totals \$156.1 million, while projects requesting matching funds total \$97.5 million.

In FY 2015, NCA’s budget request included \$45 million for the VCGP program and since 1978, has more than doubled the available acreage and accommodated more than a 100 percent increase in burials. The VCGP faces the challenge of meeting a growing interest from states to provide burial services in areas not currently served. The intent of the VCGP is to develop a true complement to, not a replacement for, our federal system of national cemeteries. With the enactment of the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 1998, the NCA has been able to strengthen its partnership with states and increase burial services to veterans, especially those liv-

ing in less densely populated areas without access to a nearby national cemetery. In addition, the Department of Veterans Affairs may also provide operating grants to help cemeteries achieve national shrine standards.

Veterans Shrine Commitment

Because national cemeteries help foster patriotism and help preserve our nation's history, their appearance demonstrates the nation's appreciation for the selfless service and the sacrifices made by all American veterans. The high standards necessary to not only attain, but retain, national shrine status signal our national commitment to honoring our military service members and preserving our nation's history in a very public way. Establishing a national cemetery as a national shrine suggests that the grounds, the gravesites and the surroundings are both beautiful and an awe-inspiring tribute to those who gave so much to preserve the American way of life. Each cemetery provides an enduring memorial to their sacrifice as well as a dignified and respectful setting for their final rest. To satisfy this requirement, pre-applications should include a written assurance that the state, territory or tribal government will maintain the cemetery according to VA National Cemetery Administration standards as established in 38 C.F.R. § 39.6(4).

The FY 2015 NCA budget request included \$8.075 million for the National Shrine Initiative which provides funding for Operations and Maintenance activities, including raise and realign projects.

Veterans' Burial Benefits Have Lost Their Value

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Congress should divide the burial benefits into two categories: veterans within the accessibility model and veterans outside the accessibility model.

Congress should increase the plot allowance from \$700 to \$1,150 for all eligible veterans and expand the eligibility for the plot allowance for all veterans who would be eligible for burial in a national cemetery, not just those who served during wartime.

Congress should increase the service-connected burial benefits from \$2,000 to \$6,160 for veterans outside the radius threshold and to \$2,793 for veterans inside the radius threshold.

Congress should increase the nonservice-connected burial benefits from \$300 to \$1,918 for all veterans outside the radius threshold and to \$854 for all veterans inside the radius threshold.

The Administration and Congress should provide the resources required to meet the critical nature of the NCA mission and fulfill the nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country so honorably and faithfully.

BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION:

Since its inception, more than 4 million veterans, from every era and every conflict, have been buried within the 19,000 acres of hallowed grounds of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). Currently, the NCA has stewardship of more than 131 existing cemeteries, one National Veterans Burial Ground and 33 soldier's lots with additional sites planned to open within the next five years. These new cemeteries will be located in the following areas: Mims and Tallahassee, Florida; Omaha, Nebraska; western New York; and southern Colorado.

In 1973 the Department of Veterans Affairs established a burial allowance that provided partial reimbursement for eligible funeral and burial costs. The current payment is \$2,000 for burial expenses for service-connected deaths and \$300 for nonservice-connected, along with a \$700 plot allowance. At its inception, the payout covered 72 percent of the funeral costs for a service-connected death, 22 percent for a nonservice-connected death, and 54 percent of the cost of a burial plot.

The burial allowance, first introduced in 1917 to prevent veterans from being buried in potter's fields, was modified in 1923. The benefit was determined by a means test until it was removed in 1936. In its early history the burial allowance was paid to all veterans, regardless of their service connectivity of death. Then, in 1973, the allowance was further modified to reflect the status of service connection.

Initially introduced in 1973, the plot allowance was an attempt to provide burial plot benefits for veterans who did not have reasonable access to a national cemetery. Although neither the plot allowance nor the burial allowance was intended to cover the full cost of a civilian burial in a private cemetery, the recent increase in the benefit's value indicates the intent to provide a meaningful benefit. The IBVSOs are pleased that the 111th Congress acted quickly and passed an increase in the plot allowance for certain veterans from \$300 to \$700, effective October 1, 2011.

However, there is still a serious deficit between the benefit's original value and its current value. In order to bring the benefit back up to its original intended value, the payment for service-connected burial allowance would need to be increased to a minimum of \$6,160; the nonservice-connected burial allowance would need to be increased to at least \$1,918, and the plot allowance would need to be increased to a minimum of \$1,150. Based on accessibility and the desire to provide quality burial benefits, *The Independent Budget* recommends that the NCA separate burial benefits into two categories:

- veterans who live inside the VA accessibility threshold model; and
- those who live outside the VA accessibility threshold model.

Even for veterans who elect to be buried in a private cemetery, regardless of their proximity to a state or national veterans cemetery that could accommodate their burial needs, the benefit should be adjusted. The IBVSOs believe that veterans' burial benefits should be minimally based on the average cost for VA to conduct a funeral. Using this formula, the benefit for a service-connected burial would approximately adjust to \$2,793; the amount for a nonservice-connected burial would roughly increase to \$854; and the plot allowance would increase to \$1,150. This will provide a burial benefit at equal percentages, based on the average cost for a VA funeral and not on the private funeral cost that would be provided for veterans who do not have access to a state or national cemetery.



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