

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials
Meeting Minutes
June 14, 2023
8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Attending Committee Members:

- Gina Farrisee, Chair
- Paul Adkins
- Eric Brown
- Amerophan Callahan
- Thomas Hernandez
- Michael Hoplight
- William Kennedy
- Jared Peatman
- Floyd Watson, Jr.
- Candace Wheeler

Ex-officio Members Present:

- Karen Durham-Aguilera, Office of Army Cemeteries
- Thomas Sole, American Battle Monuments Commission (virtual)
- Gia Wagner, National Park Service

Office of Cemetery Army Cemeteries Present:

- Cynthia Riddle
- Renea Yates

Office of the VA Secretary Attendees:

- Jeffrey Moragne, Director, VA Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO)

National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Attendees:

- Matthew Quinn, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs (USMA)
- Ronald Walters, Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
- Jennifer Jessup, Chief of Staff
- Gerardo Avila, Deputy Chief of Staff
- Jacqueline Hillian-Craig, Executive Director, Strategy and Analysis
- Deyo Johnson, Senior Advisor
- Lisa Pozzebon, Executive Director, Cemetery Operations
- George Cannizzaro, Deputy Director, Cemetery Operations
- Jerry Sowders, Executive Assistant, Cemetery Operations
- James Earp, Director, Veterans Cemetery Grants Program
- Tanya Turner, Special Assistant to the USMA
- Artis Parker, Executive Director, Office of Field Programs
- Jay Dalrymple, Director, National Cemetery Scheduling Office
- Daniel Devine, Executive Director, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations (OEMI)
- Faith Hopkins, Designated Federal Officer (DFO), OEMI
- Antonio Addressi, Alternate DFO, OEMI
- John Williams, Grants Specialist

Other VA Staff

- Kevin Friel, Director, VBA Pension and Fiduciary Service
- Burnetter Jennings, Business Implementation Manager, VHA Veterans Integrated Service Network 12
- Barbara Morton, Deputy Chief, Veterans Experience Office

Also Present:

- Shaylah Kiser, Trust Point

Wednesday, June 14, 2023

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

Opening Remarks

Gina Farrissee calls the meeting to order. The purpose of the meeting is to advise the Secretary of the VA on the administration of national cemeteries, soldiers' lots, new cemetery sites, the development of memorials, and the adequacy of federal burial benefits.

Committee Introductions

Each committee member and ex-officio in attendance introduced themselves. All eleven members attended the meeting. William Kennedy is an advisory board member and chairman of the Friends of the Yellowstone National Cemetery in Laurel, Montana. Eric Brown is a US Air Force Veteran, retired, and former state director of the Texas State Veterans Cemeteries. He is chair of the Tribal and State Subcommittee affairs. Thomas Hernandez is a Marine Veteran, ICCFA graduate, and branch developer from Merendino Cemetery Care in Linden, New Jersey. He is chair of the Subcommittee for Unclaimed Veterans Remains. Candace Wheeler is a military spouse and Director of Government and Legislative Affairs for the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. She is on the Subcommittee on Unclaimed Remains. Mike Hoplight is retired from the Army and represents the Red Cross for Service to the Armed Forces. Jared Peatman is a historian working with George Washington University. He is on the Subcommittee for Outreach. Gia Wagner is ex officio and represents the National Park Service and its 14 national cemeteries. Renea Yates is the Director of the Office of Army Cemeteries and is here for Karen Durham-Aguilera. She is an Army Veteran. Floyd Watson is retired from the Air Force and is the chair of the Committee for Outreach. Alvin Duncan is retired from the Army and is Director of Operations for Kentucky's five state Veterans' cemeteries. Paul Adkins is an Army Veteran and on the outreach team on the committee. Ame Callahan is retired from the Air Force and a former VA team member from Prescott, Arizona.

Video Message from Secretary of VA

Secretary Denis McDonough appears via a pre-recorded video for VA Advisory Committees acknowledging the difficulty of the pandemic and requesting ideas, critiques, and advice. The VA will be the leading advocate for Veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors. The VA will provide Veterans with timely access to VA resources, healthcare, benefits, and a final resting place. The VA will provide access to educational opportunities, training, and worthy jobs and will ensure that the most vulnerable Veterans have easy access to care. The VA needs to leverage the nation's top data science talent and will depend on good data and evidence-based decision-making. The VA seeks excellence and welcomes all Veterans, including women, Veterans of color, and LGBTQ+ Veterans so they feel safe and free of harassment and discrimination.

Remarks from Mr. Matthew T. Quinn, Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs, NCA

Matthew T. Quinn, Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs, acknowledged the committee's work on tribal cemeteries and the importance of how NCA best partners with our tribal grant-funded cemeteries and ensures that our rules for national shrines and ensures uniformity of our national

shrines, that we aren't missing and ignoring some very important tribal culture that is making a difference to them. He mentioned that the national cemeteries and state grant-funded cemeteries are at a 22 percent interment rate and would like the committee's thoughts to increase that number. There is an information campaign to make sure Veterans know there is a benefit they earned, and Mr. Quinn is working on getting the word out through the Veteran Service Organization as mentioned in his talks with the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA). The usage rate in national cemeteries is 40 to 60 percent when the benefits of the marker and presidential memorial certificate and medallion are added. Mr. Quinn would like to see the usage at 100 percent, using the other benefits when it is not practical to have a national or grant-funded cemetery.

Mr. Quinn stated that the pre-need eligibility process is under review to obtain determinations at a faster rate. NCA staff is working with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) on an automated process. They should ensure that the Veteran knows that interment at a national or grant-funded cemetery is an option. VBA is an incredible partner on that and they will bring the VA along on the automated processes. They are also working with the Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) team providing sites of Veterans interred in the national and grant-funded cemeteries and working on pre-need records. Mr. Quinn is also coordinating end-of-life planning with the Veterans Health Administration. He wants to increase the use of the final benefit the Veteran has earned. He stated that VLM provides a lasting legacy memorial online for every Veteran interred in a national cemetery. The VLM site has 4.8 million pages of Veterans interred in national and grant-funded, and Department of Defense (DOD) cemeteries.

Mr. Adkins asked if the 22 percent of Veterans using the national cemeteries or benefits includes only the Veterans, not the families. Mr. Quinn stated, "Yes". Mr. Kennedy states that in his area, it is 24 to 26 percent, and that is low, but the numbers are coming up. Mr. Hoplight states that in Buffalo they are putting up bulletin boards for outreach and they will be able to reach their 50,000 outpatients once they get the information from the VA to put on the bulletin boards. Mr. Quinn stated that there is data on which Veterans are among the 22 percent that use the benefits and that he is concerned that some Veterans do not think they are eligible because they never went to war. The VA is looking at how to do better at that.

Ms. Wheeler asked if the 22 percent of Veterans has been broken down to determine the era served to determine who by majority is served. This would allow the VA to pinpoint different groups for outreach campaigns. Mr. Quinn agreed and stated that the data would be provided to the committee. He also mentioned opportunities to make improvements in reaching women Veterans.

Mr. Duncan stated that Kentucky has a community adopt-a-section program for flags that works well and has community support. Mr. Hernandez says that he sits with families at a cemetery he oversees for the Trustees of St. Patrick's New York, and trains his counselors to always ask whether the deceased is a Veteran so the family is aware of the benefits. The people who reject the benefits do so because of the distance and attendance at the funeral, the customization of the monument, and the length of the VA process. Ms. Wagner stated that in the National Park Service, they do a lot of social media and they have Girl and Boy Scouts come out and put

16,000 flags out every Memorial Day. It is more problematic to get them down, but there were 280 people out this year.

Mr. Quinn also highlighted the 50th anniversary of NCA events occurring over the July 4 weekend and events scheduled at Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery and Quantico National Cemetery. He concluded his comments by recognizing the members and staff who were U.S. Army Veterans as it was the 248th birthday of the U.S. Army.

Unclaimed Veterans Remains Panel:

The purpose of this panel was to provide an update on the status of the 11 recommendations the Office of Inspector General (OIG) made in its December 15, 2021, report. Panelists were Jennifer Jessup, NCA Chief of Staff; Burnetter Jennings, Business Implementation Manager for Veterans Integrated Service Network 12, VHA; and Kevin Friel, Deputy Director of Pension and Fiduciary Service for VBA.

- **Background:**

- The OIG published its final report on December 15, 2021; made 11 recommendations.
- The OIG found three key areas in which VA governance of benefits and services for deceased veterans whose remains are unclaimed was not effective:
 - VA's insufficient outreach to likely custodians of unclaimed Veteran remains and lack of external collaboration with other agencies or organizations to locate these veterans and facilitate their burials.
 - VA's financial oversight structure, which does not enable VA to perform either cross-administration or VA-wide accounting and reconciliation of payments made on behalf of deceased veterans whose remains are unclaimed; and
 - VA's inadequate department-level oversight of benefits and services for deceased veterans whose remains are unclaimed, as well as oversight issues within each of VA's three administrations.
- VA created an Integrated Project Team (IPT) led by the Office of Enterprise Integration (OEI) and the Veterans Experience Office (VEO) – with participation from staff in VHA, VBA, NCA, and the Office of Management (OM).
- VA has closed eight of the 11 recommendations.

- **The IPT has made the following accomplishments:**

- Implemented monitoring mechanisms, procedures, and recurring training for VA Regional Office (RO) directors on their responsibilities for facilitating burials.
- Published internal and external webpages with information and a list of Indigent and Unclaimed Remains Coordinators; updated procedures and outreach requirements; and conducted training for staff.
- Determined eligibility and facilitated dignified burials for persons with unclaimed remains whose records OIG referred to VA.
- Enhanced functionality of the Memorial Benefits Management System to allow users to allow for better tracking of unclaimed remains and burial requests. Published proposed amendments to 38 CFR § 38.628 to convert the current reimbursement

program to flat-rate allowances for caskets and urns purchased for the interment of unclaimed Veteran remains.

- Developed a comprehensive estimate of the number of deceased veterans whose remains are unclaimed and awaiting burial (18,972 – 21,624)
- Conducted an enterprise-wide program evaluation.
- Designated VBA as the UVR enterprise program owner

There are three open recommendations remaining that the IPT will continue working on in the future:

- Recommendation 3 – Develop a data-sharing agreement with the Department of Justice to help identify deceased Veterans whose remains are unclaimed. The VA Master Person Index (MPI) team will receive data from the DOJ regularly to perform data matching.
- Recommendation 6 – Finalizing internal controls and procedures that will coordinate requests for benefits for unclaimed Veterans' remains across all three Administrations.
- Recommendation 9 – Establishing a VHA Decedent Affairs Program within Patient Care Services (PCS), Office of Care Management, and Social Work Services (CM/SW). This new national program is currently working through the required funding and manpower processes.

Moving forward, the responsibility for the unclaimed remains program is within the Pension and Fiduciary Service. Part of that is collaborating across administrations and deciding things that affect administrations. They will look at each administration to determine what they think is happening and what is happening and pivot off of that to what needs to happen. There will be a more proactive function with outreach and information on what benefits are available and who should be contacted. Before they do that, they need to understand how it happens now. They are also working on data sharing with the DOJ. There are processes in NCA, VHA, and VBA and they have to figure out how to use them. They will see if they can quickly identify the end product, they have established for unclaimed remains based on the DOJ data, get it pushed to the right office, and make sure it happens. On others, they will work to decide. Once they get the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in place, they will figure out how to work the data to make sure they are doing the best they can. They have to identify stakeholders and do outreach. He can send a letter every year, but he wants to focus on reaching out when they get the DOJ data to help someone make sure a Veteran is properly interred.

Mr. Friel also mentioned the recent changes to what the VBA can pay for burial. It is \$2,000, a flat rate. They used to pay a non-service-connected burial \$300, but Congress has taken up the issue and now it is \$893 for the burial payment. They also reimburse \$893 for a plot. They also changed transportation allowance. They can now pay transportation allowance for all burials.

Overall, Mr. Friel plans to implement changes in the first quarter of 2024 to ensure adequate staffing. He needs to make sure he has the structures and guidance for proper rollout. His office does a lot with letters and they do outreach, and they are looking at the end-of-life experience,

how they prepare a Veteran for the end of life, preparing the survivors, and the forms they need. Both burial and unclaimed remains are a part of the process.

Briefing On Veterans Experience Office (VEO):

Ms. Barbara Morton stated that the change in VA customer service capability in VEO was due to the Phoenix VA Medical Center access crisis in April 2014. It caused the organization to rethink how they deliver benefits and services. Secretary Bob McDonald saw that VA did not have a mechanism to understand the voice of the customer, and if they had, they would have seen Phoenix coming. The VEO was established in January 2015. They wanted to figure out the baseline trust level, and they learned that it could only go up. 2017 was pivotal because they built the first patient experience program in concert with the VHA. They used human-centered design, an industry best practice of talking to customers before starting to solve problems. They rolled out the entire program with VHA, and from 2018 to 2020, they thought about how to hardwire the capability in VA. They tie their core values to customer experience principles so everyone has a common understanding. In December 2021, there was a Presidential executive order on customer experience, meaning every executive branch agency has to create a customer experience capability and measure it as a part of agency performance. Today, trust is at 79 percent of agree/strongly agree on the Likert scale.

Core Drivers of VEO

In 2018, there was an Information Technology bill that about human-centered design and customer experience as key performance indicators. Other management tools were focused on customer experience. There is a VA strategic plan and in 2016 it started to contain customer experience and Veteran experience journey maps. The core values are codified in the regulations and performance standards. Trust is the North Star. It has to be easy; it has to be effective, and you want to feel like a valued customer. They borrowed that from industry best practices. The mission of VEO is to support the entire Department as the insight engine. They want a 90 percent agreement on trust.

Human-Centered Design

Human-centered design is a methodology focused on putting insights from the people served into a design and having a co-designed solution. It is rapid and iterative. Products were created that enabled people to navigate VA. There is the VA Welcome Kit, which maps VA resources based on a Veteran's life journey, like if they are looking for a job if they are retiring, or if they are a survivor. There are quick start guides so people understand where to get started with benefits. They also get feedback about customer communications, so they issue a Veteran Resources Newsletter once a week to 12 or 13 million people. They also issue targeted communications. There are back-end data systems for homes in particular populations. If there are multiple questions about VA services cutting across health, benefits, memorials, and appeals, VEO partnered with people across the Department to create Veterans Experience Action Centers, events where Veterans or families can have all their VA questions answered in one place with one appointment. They have served 7,000 Veterans that way. They measure the experience of those events, with an overall trust score of 76 percent. Ease is 87 percent, Effectiveness is 85 percent, and Emotion is 94 percent. We continue to engage with community partners, setting out a VA community playbook to help people understand how to engage with communities. Results have improved from 55 percent to 79 percent in trust, and the ease, effectiveness, and emotion

scores rose by 13 percent, seven percent, and 13 percent. VEO is a driver but it is not just one office.

Questions

Ms. Callahan asked if the VEO office does anything internally for the employee experience. Ms. Morton stated that there is an onboarding orientation program developed from employee insights. Mr. Kennedy asked about the emotional aspect of supporting families for Veteran burials, making the connection with a Veteran or survivor, and making them feel understood and listened to with empathy. Ms. Morton stated that emotion is subjective, but it is a signal that requires attention. The dialogue has changed, and it is asking whether the person felt valued when interacting with the member of the VA team. The same applies to trust. As to the internal customer, we did a VA-wide employee experience human-centered design sprint, understanding the employee's journey and important moments. They took those insights to create tools to address some of the challenge areas like onboarding. Employees are trained on the rules but they also have to lead with the heart. Employees have to know that leadership has their back. The cultural transformation takes time, but trust and emotion matter. That has to be an organizational agreement, and they have gotten there over time.

Ms. Wheeler asked if the VEO office assesses the point of entry into the VA system (e.g., healthcare, benefits). Ms. Morton does not know that her office has visibility on the entry points for all of the Veteran population, but there are key entry points, one of which is before people transition. The VEO office crafted a cross-agency priority goal as part of the President's Management Agenda, and every administration has cross-agency priority goals, including the Department of Defense (DOD), Labor, the Small Business Administration, Office of Management and Budget, General Services Administration, and others, applying human-centered design research. The experience when you are still in and transitioning, and in the very beginning moments, will either alienate you or make you want to come in. There was a recent survey of people who have not used the VA, and 80 percent said that they had a bad experience with the VA. There are other arenas like compensation where they did a human-centered design sprint. They are working with VBA to co-design tangible solutions.

The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxins (PACT) Act is another opportunity. The Secretary is in alignment and has seen it as an opportunity to support Veterans who are connected and who are not connected. Any effect of the PACT Act has not shown up yet in the trust scores. The transition experience project they are working on allows the transitioning service member to create a checklist of their interests. It will be almost like Google. They do not want the ocean of information, and the VEO needs to help navigate those resources, which is the power of human-centered design. They use the electronic version for the transition experience tool, but it is also printable. They heard that people wanted printable materials and they do events in person because that is a touchpoint people want.

Overview of the, "Did You Know" Campaign

Mr. Ronald Walters, Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs presented on the pending, Did You Know campaign. In his remarks, he stated that the Did You Know campaign is in the process of being launched. It is an attempt to develop a comprehensive outreach and communication plan for Veterans, families, survivors, and others to increase awareness about

burial and memorial benefits and to increase utilization of the benefits. The utilization rates compared to other VA benefits are relatively low for several reasons. NCA is aware there are some issues beyond its control such as families prefer to be buried in a family plot. The memorial benefits products increased the utilization rate to the forties but is still low. NCA needs to conduct more aggressive outreach because people are not aware of the benefits. It is difficult to get the word out, and that is where the Did You Know campaign comes into play. People did not know about alternatives at VA national cemeteries and state and tribal partners. The plan would include things like targeted areas where our utilization rates are lower than our national utilization rate average. In some places in the country, 30, to 40 percent of the veterans who die within our service area of a cemetery choose burial in the cemetery. In other places, it's five percent and we would like to understand those disparities a little bit better. Our campaign is also going to look at different types of mediums to explore for outreach -- digital campaigns, advertisements, and media.

NCA has the highest ranking on the American Customer Satisfaction Index, which is a cross-industry measurement of customer satisfaction for both public and private sector organizations and companies. We scored for the seventh consecutive time -- when we participated in 2022 the survey, for the seventh consecutive time, we scored the highest score ever achieved by any organization, public or private. Government agencies do not often get high customer satisfaction marks, but NCA is besting Mercedes, Google, and McDonald's. That is a tribute to the team members interfacing with Veterans every day.

Mr. Walters stated that it is important to find out how many Veterans who choose burial are taking advantage of other VA benefits. He stated that it is also important with the PACT Act, to try to reach out to Veterans and survivors who would benefit from that information.

Overview of End of End-of-Life Planning Briefing

Ms. Jennifer Jessup reiterated how the Office of Enterprise Integration is integrating across different parts of the organization, especially internally. She referenced an End-of-Life Planning slide deck that illustrated how the Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Health Administration, and the National Cemetery Administration provide benefits and services related to end-of-life planning. These Administrations collaborate to inform and educate Veterans and their family members about benefits that support end-of-life planning and legacy services that honor memorialization. Many family members have a difficult time when a loved one passes away. Being aware of the benefits and services available to their Veteran before they pass away can make it easier to navigate the process during a stressful time.

Questions

Ms. Wheeler asked if the program works with individuals who are not a part of the caregiver program. Ms. Jessup stated that there is a caregiver program that is relied on as the expert in communicating the right things at the right time. There is also a newsletter about the pre-need program. They can solve some of the problems by giving the right information at the right time, and the caregiver network is on the radar. Ms. Wagner suggested that the human resource departments of Veterans and their spouses may be a resource to share information. Ms. Jessup stated that often the focus is on everyone else and the VA employees who are Veterans are a stakeholder group that has not been on their radar.

Open Discussion Incarcerated Veterans

Mr. Brown asks whether incarcerated Veterans are a gap that needs to be filled. Lots of homeless Veterans are arrested for minor things and there are certain legal bars to benefits, but sometimes the Veterans are incarcerated because they cannot make bail, and sometimes they die in jail. Ms. Jessup stated that they are working with the DOJ to get access to the database. Ms. Jessup does not think the benefits would differ unless the Veteran was convicted of a felony. She does not know whether they do outreach to incarcerated Veterans, but they can add that to the list. Mr. Sowders stated that NCA has not conducted outreach to incarcerated Veterans, however, if someone dies incarcerated, the decedent is placed with a county coroner, who is a point of outreach thereby bridging the gap.

Due Diligence on Burial Applications

Mr. Hernandez asked what the due diligence is that was not done for the Missing in America Project. Mr. Sowders stated that NCA has many requests they cannot process for those believed to be Veterans which slows identifying the actual Veterans for burial. He does not know what tools the county coroner has, but they ask the coroners to look into them somehow to see whether there is a reason to believe any of them are Veterans.

Homeless Veterans

Mr. Kennedy stated that the majority of Veterans who came into the mental health center for transient people did not know they were Veterans and did not know they could get benefits. Once they started that partnership with the VA, they made sure one case manager was a Veteran. When the indigent people passed away, the question was who had to take them, and then the due diligence never happened to find out whether the person was a Veteran. They started researching the county pauper's cemetery, and they started working on the Veteran's cemetery, and they found 14 Veterans buried in the pauper's cemetery. That is what propelled them to move forward and do more due diligence. The county buries indigents in the pauper's cemetery, and he wants them taken to Yellowstone. It took three years to get the funeral directors on board, but now they are doing due diligence. Once there are remains of Veterans, they need to make sure they are laid to rest. The Friends of the National Cemetery make sure every Veteran is given a ceremony and they do a quarterly volley and Taps and the prayer. That is important to them. They brought it to the community, and now people in the community are coming to pay their last respects.

Mr. Sowders is interested in knowing what the counties are doing in due diligence so they can try to push that model out. Mr. Kennedy stated that some places do not check the Veteran status, and he fought to make sure they did not cremate someone against that person's culture. They started plotting the people in the county cemeteries and tied them into the national cemetery. They make sure the records are checked before the county commissioners perform a ceremony, and if someone is questionable, they are not buried until it is checked out. He has worked with the funeral directors in the community. The Veteran's manager always asks for it to be checked out to make sure the person is not on the rolls. The other incentive a county has is if the decedent is a Veteran, the county is not responsible for paying the bill.

Public Comment

The Chair opened the meeting for public comment and received none.

Adjournment

The Chair thanked everyone for their time and the meeting adjourned at 2:30 p.m.

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- Damion Jacobs, Assistant Director, Quantico National Cemetery
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Also Present:

- Heather Mitchell
- Shaylah Kiser, Trust Point

Call to Order, Pledge of Allegiance, Moment of Silence

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

Administrative Announcements, Remarks, and Recap

Faith Hopkins provided administrative announcements. Chair Farrissee stated there were great presentations on the day before. She mentioned the meeting is an opportunity to listen and learn and present actionable recommendations for the Secretary of VA to be able to make meaningful changes for our nation's Veterans and their surviving family members. She introduced Damion Jacobs, Assistant Director of Quantico National Cemetery to welcome the committee.

Briefing On Pre-Need Eligibility Modernization:

Deyo Johnson, Senior Advisor, Office of the Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs, provided a briefing about ongoing efforts to improve the processing time for the Pre-Need Eligibility determination process. The Pre-Need Eligibility allows individuals to know, in advance, whether they are eligible for burial in a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) national cemetery. To assist them, the VA launched the "Pre-Need Program" to determine eligibility and to help Veterans prepare for burial in their time of need. Having this information will help Veterans use the benefits they have earned for themselves their and families. Once eligibility is determined, Veterans and eligible family members will be entitled to benefits that they qualify for such as burial in any open national cemetery, opening and closing of the grave; grave liner; perpetual care of the gravesite; Government-furnished upright headstone, flat marker or niche cover Burial flag; Presidential Memorial Certificate.

NCA is partnering with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to leverage mail automation technology. The automation allows them to extract data from the forms, and they can move more quickly. Mr. Johnson mentioned that change management is a challenge for this however employee engagement is important for identifying barriers.

Mr. Hoplight inquired about who is polled for changes such as this to occur and how are rural Veterans without the technology contacted to share these changes. Mr. Johnson stated that he spoke with the staff and observed their work process for this task who works in the Eligibility Office in St. Louis as well as subject matter experts in the cemeteries. Mr. Hoplight stated that three counties in New York do not have Wi-Fi. There are people on reservations that do not have mainstream communications. Mr. Johnson stated that the current initiatives are fax and paper, we figured out how to leverage technology so that it doesn't change the way if a Veteran only has access to a fax, at this point, as we learn more, we're looking to move away from that or the mobile app option however this process should consider keep in mind as we continue to modernize that we're not leaving people behind. Ms. Callahan stated that VBA uses veterans

service officers and they could tie the NCA pre-need process to them to reach veterans without technology.

Mr. Hernandez asked whether Veterans have to choose a cemetery at pre-need or can choose a cemetery at pre-need. Ms. Callahan stated that applicants cannot, because by the time of death, the location may be full. Mr. Sowders states that there is a place on the form to enter where you would like to be buried but it also says in the eligibility letter that it does not reserve a space in a particular national cemetery.

Ms. Wheeler made the point that the Veteran is given the information but the families are unaware, so families are still expecting a place and are surprised. She asked whether Mr. Johnson is working with VEO to poll the customers and said that working with survivors, they think they have filled everything out properly only to find out months later that they did something incorrectly. Johnson has made a note of that. They are working to poll the customer. As a result of the discussion of end-of-life planning, they are working with survivors and thinking about how they can do that better and having conversations with VEO about how to ask patients that. One person he works with has change management and business process people and he can encourage them to do the triage. He is sure he has team members considering the things Wheeler mentioned.

Mr. Kennedy suggested that the spouse's information be included on the form if the individual (non-Veteran spouse) dies first. Additionally, Ms. Farrissee asked whether the spouse also has to sign when the Veteran requests eligibility. Mr. Sowders stated the applicant has to sign, so if the Veteran signs, the spouse may not know.

Ms. Hillian-Craig noted that she is working with the NCA Chief of Staff under the PACT Act to have a discussion in a summit about survivors and spouses and make sure there is a process in place to get the survivors involved and engaged. The survivors are at the cemeteries and there is an opportunity there.

Mr. Adkins asks about remarriage. Wheeler states that the new spouse, not the former spouse, has the right to be buried. Duncan states that in Kentucky for the state veterans' cemeteries, they have a pre-need eligibility form that contains the spouse's information and lists the five cemeteries, first come first served. Their cemeteries do not go through the NCA scheduling office, but they send a card to the family. They relook at the case when it is time and determine within 72 hours. They make sure they do it right at the beginning because they never want to disinter.

Mr. Parker commented that NCA relies on national cemetery employees to help get the word out about anything to do with burial and memorial benefits in rural areas. The staff can develop papers and talking points to help get the word to Veterans. The Veterans service officers can help.

Funeral Director And Unclaimed Veterans Remains Subcommittee Report:

Mr. Thomas Hernandez, Chair of the subcommittee provided a briefing on research and findings of the group which consists of Candace Wheeler and Michael Hoplight.

Mr. Hernandez stated that improvements are needed to ensure the final disposition of unclaimed Veteran remains. They need improved coordination across the three administrations to ensure dignified burials, and the process of qualifying for and using benefits needs to be standardized and more user-friendly for funeral directors. As of yesterday, the purpose of the subcommittee changed to assist the VBA's Pension and Fiduciary Service in helping to initiate improvements to ensure the final disposition of unclaimed remains.

By law, the VA is required to ensure that deceased veterans without next of kin receive dignified burials and provide information about burial benefits to entities left with the custody of deceased veterans with unclaimed remains. The OIG report found insufficient outreach and financial oversight structure and Department-level oversight of benefits and services for deceased veterans with unclaimed remains. In response, the VA implemented the Integrated Project Team. They need to coordinate to ensure dignified burials for those veterans. The subcommittee assessed the pain points creating obstacles to doing that; one of the OIG's recommendations was a data-sharing agreement with the DOJ to help identify the deceased veterans but the obstacle is receiving data from the DOJ. It is in the works. Another recommendation is to finalize internal controls, which will happen by the end of July. The other recommendation that is open is to establish a VHA decedent affairs program. The subcommittee also found a need for training for external parties. The VBA needs more information and is looking for resources and strategic partnerships like with the Internal Revenue Service or Social Security Administration. Integrating responsibilities helps to streamline processes for unclaimed remains. They will go over the response report and have some strategic recommendations for NCA by the fall meeting.

State And Tribal Veterans Cemeteries Subcommittee Report:

Mr. Eric Brown, Chair of the subcommittee provided a briefing on the research and findings of the group which consists of Amerophan Callahan, Alvin Duncan, and William Kennedy.

Mr. Brown stated that the objective of the subcommittee aligns with NCA FY '22 to FY '26 long-range plan. Goal 1, Veterans and eligible family members will have increased access to burial benefits. Objective 1.2, address the burial needs of unserved Veterans. Goal 2, war Veterans and eligible family members will use VA burial and memorial benefits. The subcommittee has met with and consulted with the Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations, received a briefing regarding the cemetery at Monte Calvario Pasqui Yaqui Tribe, met the staff in the Office of Tribal Government Relations as well as the Designated Federal Officer for the VA Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs.

He noted that the data the team reviewed regarding low burial rates in tribal cemeteries is the restriction of tribal traditions at hosted cemeteries. Because Native American populations have sovereign nation status, their cultural norms are integrated, and that should apply to burial traditions. It is an opportunity to recognize their sovereignty while ensuring standards to honor people who served. As a result of their findings, Mr. Brown presented five draft recommendations

however, the subcommittee wants to do their due diligence and collect more information to provide recommendations by Fall 2023.

Outreach Subcommittee Report:

Mr. Floyd Watson, Chair of the subcommittee introduced Mr. Jared Peatman to conduct the briefing. The subcommittee members also include Mr. Paul Adkins and Ms. Gina Farrisee.

Mr. Peatman stated that 22 percent of veterans are buried in a national or grant-funded cemetery, meaning that 78 percent are not taking advantage of the benefit. The issue is the lack of awareness that may be leading to that number. Veterans and families did not realize they had the choice. The issue is how to increase outreach to ensure that people who do not use the benefit are doing so consciously. They want to use outreach to increase the number. They also want to identify veteran-facing partners, which may be the Veterans Benefits Administration Veterans Health Administration, or other government or non-government entities like nonprofits. They may reach people through rack cards or posters. They also want to make sure that it is easy to access benefits. There are emotions involved, and there are different demographics. The subcommittee is continuing to get information on how they think about those questions. They are still in an exploratory phase, so they have not come to conclusions as to what the recommendations should be and may have more definitive recommendations at the Fall meeting.

Briefing on Community Engagement Efforts

Mr. Daniel Devine is the Executive Director of the Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations. Mr. Devine provided an overview of community engagement efforts that his office has undertaken. The briefing began with showing two videos: The Ellsworth Cemetery United States Colored Troops Headstone Dedication and Preserving Veterans Legacies.

The projects began as he and Richelle Taylor, NCA Public Affairs Officer and Navy Veteran wanted to do something inside the VA to resolve the issues around crumbling Veteran headstones in private cemeteries. Civic organizations were taking up the issue and he wanted the VA to be involved. Some stones were from the Civil War Era. When some people fix gravestones in an otherwise crumbling cemetery, the hope is that other people will get involved and do something. There are a lot of volunteers that will participate yet the question is how we get people out to the cemetery. Creating events has changed the way people view cemetery benefits; people create personal connections and that is as important as getting a gravesite because the people on the outside should be honored as well.

For Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Mr. Devine conducted a training session in York, Pennsylvania which the Secretary of the VA attended along with the Chief of Staff as well as many others from the community. The Historic African American cemetery installed 12 new marble headstones. Mr. Devine believes that if you get the Veteran out to a site, and he gets them to see what the cemeteries look like; they sell themselves. Mr. Devine also mentioned other benefits Veterans are eligible for as well as memorialization using the Veterans Legacy Memorial tool.

Mr. Brown stated that in Texas they found a unique way to get young people to cemeteries to let them know they earned the benefit. He asked whether the 2022 approved funding included private cemeteries that needed upgrades. Mr. Devine stated that they do not have that yet, but there is suggested legislation to give him grant authority to help on the outside. Mr. Peatman asked if there would be a database that includes all Veterans. Mr. Devine stated that is his desire however, the process of verifying Veterans gets harder to try and prove their status.

Mr. Duncan asked why the VA does not include language that a state cemetery is an option for VLM and that six of the 22 percent burial rate includes state cemeteries. Mr. Devine stated that he would take the idea back for consideration to a change in the language.

Open Discussion

Chair Farrisee opened the floor to the committee members for discussion or insights from the day. Mr. Brown stated that one benefit of putting flags on graves is that the volunteers are young people who are military and they did not know it was like that. Farrisee says that not every cemetery has the staff, but a lot of cemeteries have support communities and events. It is an outreach.

Ms. Wagner states that they tend to work within the VA structure and want to look at who they are not partnering with. More survivors are seeking TAPS support when they have lost a loved one to suicide or illness. They need to work with DOD. She wants to make sure they are getting information to military families sooner when they transition. This is an opportunity to check the box of taking care of your family.

Ms. Farrisee states that the committee is considering Billings, Montana for the fall meeting. They would see a VA national rural cemetery and a tribal Crow cemetery along with a CBOC. She would like the subcommittees to strengthen their recommendations. She can help set up meetings.

Briefing On Quantico National Cemetery

Mr. Damion Jacobs provided an overview of Quantico National Cemetery in the absence of James Sanders, Director.

Mr. Jacobs shared that he began working at NCA as a volunteer, and he applied for a position in 2018 as a Program Support Assistant. A couple of years later, he became an Administrative Officer. Later that year he put in for the Assistant Cemetery Director because of the staff and the relationships they have with the families.

The NCA's mission is to honor Veterans with a final resting place and lasting memorials. Quantico was created with a Marine Corps land transfer in 1977 and the first interment was in 1983. The cemetery has 155 developed acres. They have 13 structures to maintain and an operating budget of \$3.7 million. Interments at Abel Cemetery are done through a private contractor. Quantico also oversees Alexandria National Cemetery, which was established in

1862, before Arlington. It is a closed cemetery and has infrequent burials. They also maintain the lodge and the office on the inside.

Quantico also provides support for Quantico information technology, which is IT for all of NCA. They have a lot of contractors for IT and audio/video. They have their FTE, a total of 30 employees. There is the cemetery director and assistant director. There are seven administrative staff and an administrative officer. There is a management analyst and five cemetery admin specialists. The staff meets with families and lead the procession to the committal service. In the field, there is one maintenance operations supervisor and two work leaders. There are two maintenance workers. There is an equipment operator and a gardener. The cemetery caretakers spend two weeks in the field and two weeks in the administrative office, which is an asset because families have a lot of questions that program support assistants may not be able to answer. There were 1,628 burials or interments at Quantico in FY 2022. Quantico National Cemetery is a medium-sized cemetery located in the North Atlantic District. Fifty-eight percent of interments are caskets, and the rest are cremations. Sixty-five percent of burials are first interment and 35 percent are subsequent burials.

Mr. Jacobs provided an overview of the burial benefits of being interred in a national cemetery such as the:

- Grave Site and Grave Liner
- Opening and closing of the grave
- Perpetual care of the gravesite
- Headstone or marker
- U.S. Flag
- Presidential Memorial Certificate

After the presentation, the committee adjourned the meeting to take a tour of the cemetery.

Ms. Wheeler inquired as to how mistakes on headstones were handled. Mr. Jacobs stated that the cemetery staff contacts the family member last identified to confirm the information and request additional documents, but the cemetery will not act without confirmation to correct.

Ms. Farrissee asks about the opening of the ossuary. Mr. Jacobs stated that the ossuary will open soon with its pending final inspection. Ms. Yates asked how the names of the people whose remains are going into the ossuary will be commemorated. Mr. Jacobs stated that the names would be right behind the ossuary. Some niches are about 10 by 10, and the person's information is inscribed into it. It will be marble. The ossuary provides a burial alternative. Mr. Jacobs closed his presentation by providing information on points of interest throughout the cemetery.

Adjournment

Ms. Farrissee acknowledged the participants called for a motion to adjourn.

Meeting Adjourned

The committee toured Quantico National Cemetery.

/s/

Gina Farrissee
Committee Chair

November 7, 2023

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