

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)

Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials

Meeting Minutes

October 29-30, 2024

9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time (EST)

Attending Committee Members:

Gina Farrisee, Chair
Paul Adkins
Amerophan Callahan
Alvin Duncan
Thomas Hernandez
Michael Hoplight
Karen King (virtual)
Jared Peatman
Floyd Watson, Jr.
Candace Wheeler
Monica Mohindra

Ex-officio Members Present:

Gia Wagner, National Park Service

Office of Cemetery Army Cemeteries Present:

Cynthia Riddle (virtual)
Renea Yates

National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Attendees:

Ronald Walters, Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
Jennifer Jessup, Chief of Staff
Gerardo Avila, Deputy Chief of Staff
Daniel Devine, Executive Director, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovation
Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations
James Earp, Director, Veterans Cemetery Grants Program
Jonny Muckey (virtual)
Timothy Nosal
Richelle Taylor (virtual)
Faith Hopkins, Designated Federal Officer (DFO), OEMI
Juan Nieves, Alternate Designated Federal Officer, Puerto Rico National Cemetery
Jacqueline Hillian-Craig, (virtual)

Office of the Secretary:

Margaret Kabat, VA Chief of Staff
Jeffrey Moragne, Advisory Committee Management Office
Alison Barninger, Executive Assistant, VA Chief of Staff

VA Attendees:

Kevin Friel, Director, Pension and Fiduciary Service
Laura Taylor, Associate Director, Quality and Training, Survivor Assistance and Memorial Support (SAMS) Program, Veterans Health Administration (VHA)

Other Guests:

Asher Allman

Dr. Michael Cahn

Julie Gunderson, Dynamic Integrated Services

Julianna Holt, Dynamic Integrated Services

Dr. John Kelley, Texas State Veterans Cemeteries

Chris McNamara, Dynamic Integrated Services

Claire McKinney

Steven Sann

Aaron Kilmer

Tuesday, October 29, 2024

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 Committee met at the Library of Congress. All sessions were open to the public. The meeting information and teleconference number were published in the Federal Register announcement.

Opening Remarks

Gina Farrissee, Chair called 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. The Chair gave remarks covering the agenda for the two-day meetings and thanked member, Monica Mohindra for hosting the Committee at the Library of Congress. She welcomed newest committee member, Dr. Karen King.

Committee Introductions

Each committee member and ex-officio in attendance introduced themselves. Ten of the eleven members attended the meeting.

Paul Adkins is an Army Veteran and on the outreach team on the committee.
Amerophan Callahan is retired from the Air Force and a former VA team member from Prescott, Arizona.

Thomas Hernandez is a Marine Veteran, International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association graduate, and branch developer from Merendino Cemetery Care in Linden, New Jersey. He is chair of the Subcommittee for Unclaimed Veterans Remains.

Michael Hoplight is retired from the Army and represents the Red Cross for Service to the Armed Forces.

Dr. Karen King is the Commander, Disabled American Veterans, Department of Georgia, Gwinnett County.

Monica Mohindra is the Director of the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project. She is a resident of Maryland.

Jared Peatman is a historian working with George Washington University. He is on the Subcommittee for Outreach.

Floyd Watson is retired from the Air Force and chair of the Committee for Outreach.

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 Veteran Remains.

Gia Wagner is an ex officio and represents the National Park Service and its 14 national cemeteries.

Renea Yates represented Office of Army Cemeteries on behalf of ex-officio Karen Durham-Aguilera.

Administrative Announcements

The DFO Faith Hopkins welcomed the Committee. She explained the policies and procedures of the meeting as well as how to address the committee both in person and virtually.

Tuesday, October 29, 2024

Update on Unclaimed Veterans Remains Kevin Friel, Deputy Director, Pension and Fiduciary Service, Veterans Benefits Administration

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) works with Veteran service groups, funeral industry partners, public administrators, and other concerned citizens to ensure the dignified burial of unclaimed Veterans.

Unclaimed Veteran Remains (UVR) are the remains of a Veteran who has not been claimed by relatives, friends, and/or a representative, and whose burial is not the responsibility of any other Federal, State, or local agency. The Office of Inspector General (OIG) published a report entitled *Improvements Needed to Ensure Final Disposition of Unclaimed Veterans' Remains*. A work group, which consisted of representatives from across VA, was created and tasked with addressing the recommendations that were generated by this OIG report. On October 15, 2024, OIG agreed to close the report entitled *Improvements Needed to Ensure Final Disposition of Unclaimed Veterans' Remains*. VA continues to provide stability and accountability to ensure Veterans and their families receive the best treatment, to include the Veteran's final resting place. VA's outreach has led to more inquiries and claims from custodians of UVR than ever before. We attribute this effort to identifying more about what VA can offer these industries. A GovDelivery digital communication bulletin was sent in March 2024 to 3,052 e-mail addresses that were identified as custodians of unclaimed Veteran remains. As of September 9, 2024, there have been 581 burial benefit claims for unclaimed Veteran remains completed in 2024, as well as 241 requests for burial arrangements for unclaimed Veteran remains. VA strives to expand outreach to more funeral homes, medical examiners, and coroner offices in 2025.

VA will pay a burial and/or plot allowance for UVR to a funeral home or other third party that provided burial services, if VA receives a VA Form 21P-530EZ, Application for Burial Benefits, indicating they incurred expenses.

- Burial Allowance VA will pay up to \$978 toward burial and funeral expenses for deaths on or after October 1, 2024.
- Plot Allowance VA will pay up to \$978 for a plot-interment allowance for deaths on or after October 1, 2024.
- Casket or Urn VA will pay \$1,273.00 for a casket or \$147.00 for an urn that meets the required minimum specifications for deaths on or after October 1, 2024. For more details visit: [Unclaimed Veteran Remains - National Cemetery Administration \(va.gov\)](https://www.va.gov/unclaimed-veteran-remains/).

A transportation benefit may be payable in most cases and covers reasonable costs incurred to transport a Veteran's remains from the place of death to the place of burial (This is not a flat-rate benefit).

VBA has at least one designated Indigent Veterans and Unclaimed Remains Coordinator (IVURC) at every Regional Office. An IVURC can assist a funeral home or other third party who handles arrangements for a potential Veteran whose remains are unclaimed by:

- Verifying Veteran status
- Assisting in finding a next of kin who will assume burial responsibilities, and
- Acting as a liaison between local partners in the funerary industry and the NCA to inter UVR in national or covered Veterans' cemeteries.

The Department of Veterans Affairs, via the UVR program, will be enacting new policy and procedures that requires a thorough search of all VA records by an IVURC prior to NCA interring a Veteran as unclaimed.

Briefing on Survivor Assistance Memorial Support, Laura Taylor, Associate Director, Quality and Training, Survivor Assistance and Memorial Support (SAMS) Program, Veterans Health Administration (VHA)

VHA is establishing a Survivors Assistance and Memorial Support (SAMS) Program to provide personalized, supportive services to families, caregivers, and survivors at the end of a Veteran's life and ensure Veterans without identified family receive dignified burials to honor their service.

The operational impact is that 500,000 – 600,000 Veteran deaths occur annually generating an estimated 20,00 – 30,000 calls to VA medical centers for assistance. There were 21,810 decedents under authorized VHA care in FY 23 and of that number 21,422 were claimed and 388 unclaimed. According to the Bereaved Family Survey, Q3 FY23, 67% of survivors state that they need more help with funeral arrangements.

The vision for the SAMS program is that VHA will have infrastructure at every level for standardized clinical and operational processes, training, and oversight to enhance the Veteran and survivor end of life experience. At the center of the experience are Veterans and survivors, VHA program, staff, and partners.

Forward progress and focus are the development of materials that are:

- Personalized
 - Piloting standard Bereavement Support package
 - Training to provide high quality, compassionate interactions.
- Supportive
 - Developing web-based resources
 - Designating a contact person at every facility
- Consistent
 - Publishing job aids for standard training across VA facility
 - Preparing standardized electronic health record notes

- Engaged
 - Strengthening partnerships with VBA, NCA, external partners
 - Launching committees and support networks

A brochure prototype has been piloted in six sites and conducted three trainings across the VA. New staff may take the training on demand in addition to working on web-based resources. Twenty sites are represented to activate the SAMS program as early adopter sites and the plan is to progressively deploy the program to all facilities over the next two years.

Remarks from Ronald Walters, Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs

Mr. Walters presented a certificate to departing members, Floyd Watson, Jr., and Michael Hoplight for their contribution to the committee. He welcomed new member, Dr. Karen King, Disabled American Veterans and Ex-officio, Thomas Spoeher, Executive Director for Operations, American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC).

Mr. Walters started by thanking everyone for their time and dedication to the committee. He provided an overview of fiscal year 2024 closeout highlights and upcoming items for fiscal year 2025. He provided an overview of the following statistics:

- Interments: 135,624 slightly down from FY23
- Headstones and markers: 300,000, lower than FY23
- Pre-need applications: 82,000 up 47% from previous year
- Presidential memorial certificates: 625,000, significantly above last year

Mr. Walters stated that under the Veterans Cemetery Grant Program, 14 grants were provided to 11 states for expansion and improvement.

NCA continues to provide world class service to Veterans and their families on key metrics in customer satisfaction:

- 99% agree the cemetery appearance was excellent.
- 97% agree the service was excellent.
- 99% would recommend the national cemetery to Veteran families in their time of need.

While state cemetery customer survey results are slightly lower however, comparable to the national cemeteries results.

NCA is working to open 18 new national cemeteries resulting from new burial policies established in 2011 and 2013. St. Albans National Cemetery, Queens, New York (columbarium only) – November 9th dedication, will be cemetery #156. Elko, Nevada and Cedar City, Utah rural cemeteries are scheduled in fiscal year 2025 or 2026. Once these are completed, only 2 of the 18 cemeteries remain to be opened as columbarium only in San Francisco, California and Chicago, Illinois where NCA is working to acquire land.

The Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) added 5 million webpages to the platform from private cemeteries. If someone ordered a headstone or marker from the NCA system, a

VLM page was created. The Living Veterans feature which had not been publicized provides a page that is activated in the VLM system but not publicly posted. The Veteran may populate the page with mementos, letters and photos should they choose before their time of need. Mr. Walters stated this a very powerful outreach tool and instrument and will exponentially increase the number of pages we have to allow Veterans to be a part of how they are memorialized.

Pre-need automation and modernization have been effective for NCA as we've partnered with VBA to automate some of the eligibility processes. From its manual process, the automation takes 20% to 30% of the workload.

During the question-and-answer discussion, Michael Hoplight asked if native American Veterans are returned to their homeland. He stated that he encounters many families who cannot find their family member who they believe is deceased and served in the military. Mr. Walters responded that NCA would return Veterans and asked if there were specific cases in which this did not occur.

He also mentioned that NCA is working across administrations to improve the unclaimed Veteran process. Mr. Hoplight did not have a case however he suggested that Mr. Walters publicly communicate the possibility that native American Veterans who are deceased may be returned to their tribal land for burial.

Mr. Walters discussed the communications campaign. He mentioned that utilization rates are different throughout the country and overall, the national average of Veterans choose burial in a national cemetery is 16%. Once the state and grant funded cemeteries are included the number is 22%. The survey results show two primary reasons is they have a family plot, and they are not aware of the benefit or have misconceptions about the benefit such as it is only for service-connected Veterans, or the spouse cannot be buried in cemeteries with their Veteran spouse. He mentioned that the campaign is to increase the knowledge of Veteran use of the burial benefit.

Candace Wheeler suggested that organizations such as the Tragedy Assistance and Survivors Program, Veteran Service Organizations are great places to advertise burial benefits. Ms. Wheeler also suggested that memorial products such as medallions are important for those families opting for burial in a private cemetery. She also believes that including survivors and Veterans in focus groups is helpful for the communications campaign.

Mr. Hoplight discussed the hospitals and the need for representatives to inform families as he does when volunteering in his local area. It was pointed out that the administrations are working together to improve processes and share information.

Mr. Walters thanked the committee and looks forward to working together in the future.

Remarks, VA Chief of Staff, Margaret Kabat

Chief Kabat thanked the committee for actionable and well documented recommendations. asked the committee to speak with her about their focus areas as

they engaged in conversation. Thomas Hernandez, Chair for the Funeral Director and Unclaimed Veteran Remains subcommittee commended VA leadership for ensuring collaboration across the administrations to resolve matters identified on unclaimed Veteran remains. Stating that the subcommittee looks forward to providing additional recommendations to further improvements.

Jared Peatman discussed the outreach subcommittee's recommendation for NCA to develop self-guided tours of the cemetery so that visitors have some stories to engage with. The subcommittee is encouraging six to eight stories not in the form of waysides, which is expensive. An alternative is to add a "Notable Person" page to the Veterans Legacy Memorial web site.

Chief Kabat reflected on her time at Baltimore National Cemetery cleaning headstones and QR codes were used to read about the Veteran which made the experience more engaging.

Paul Adkins mentioned the stories told by college students through the Veterans Legacy Grant Program at Riverside National Cemetery. He also mentioned of the application developed by the students that was not implemented due to the high cost of obtaining Wi-Fi at the cemetery.

Michael Hoplight thanked Chief Kabat on the work done regarding the PACT Act as it has enabled him to receive additional benefits.

Monica Mohindra suggested that unique audiences are other ways to engage the community with stories. Candace Wheeler also suggested that a different approach is to see the Veteran's story as service to the country, especially as it relates to recruitment challenges.

In closing, Chief Kabat stated that NCA's work on pre-need helps make the process easier for Veterans to plan early for their burial choice. Additionally, the survivor assistance and memorial support program is critical to ensure the families are getting the care they need at various points of need. Continued focus on healthcare, benefits, lasting memorial, and legacy for Veterans is a focus at levels of the VA. Chief Kabat thanked the committee for their dedication and commitment.

Overview on Recommendations

Jeffrey Moragne, Director, Advisory Committee Management Office gave a brief overview of the recommendations process.

Review ACCM 2022 Recommendations

The ACCM reviewed its 2022 recommendations to determine if they should remain open or closed per VA implementation. The DFO read the recommendation, VA response and most recent update afterwards, the committee deliberated on the disposition of the recommendation.

After review, 2 recommendations remained open and 14 were closed and deemed implemented or for revision. See the table below for a summary.

2022 Recommendations Status Update
<p>1. The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) should continue to conduct interviews with tribal leaders and the Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs to better determine the needs of VA grant-funded tribal cemeteries.</p> <p>Glenn Powers stated that NCA engages with tribes on multiple matters and regularly attempts to engage with tribal cemetery leaders.</p> <p>Status: The Committee considers this an ongoing process and will keep it open through the next site visit and then consider it for closure.</p>
<p>2. NCA should continue to provide support to tribal cemeteries with a focus on the acknowledgment of traditional practices and cultural sensitivity to increase utilization by the tribal membership.</p> <p>Mr. Powers stated, effective October 1, 2024, tribal cemeteries may develop, post, and enforce their own floral policy. The cemetery policy should ensure a safe environment for visitors and employees and a statement regarding the removal, holding and disposal of items left at the gravesite. It should also prohibit objects placed on or attached to the VA provided headstone, marker, or niche. It should also prohibit against explosives, firearms, or ammunition.</p> <p>Status: The Committee closed this recommendation based on NCA's accomplishment in this area.</p>
<p>3. NCA should develop customizable Funeral Director Continuing Education Training Program tools to be provided to National, State, and Tribal Veterans Cemeteries, to use as they are able.</p> <p>Jennifer Jessup suggested that through newly awarded NCA communications contract many of the outreach focused recommendations may be met once executed. She recommended closure and bundle into one recommendation.</p> <p>Status: The Committee closed this recommendation with the intent of submitting a new consolidated recommendation.</p>
<p>4. NCA continue to expand on the success of the Veterans Legacy Grant Program (VLGP) to increase the number of grantees and enhance the awareness of the legacy of our Veterans.</p> <p>The committee discussed the October 2024 update regarding funding and limited resources. Mr. Peatman asked about the allocation of dollars and amounts. Daniel Devine explained that the 388 Veterans and service members studied or profiled, curriculum modules and teacher involvement cost \$2.2 million dollars is from a single grant. He also said that each grant is different.</p> <p>Status: Closed. The Committee closed this recommendation.</p>
<p>5. NCA continue to expand on the success of the Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) to include all eligible deceased Veterans.</p> <p>In December 2024, VLM is launching your story, your legacy living Veteran feature allows Veterans approved and NCA's pre-need program to privately submit autobiographies, images,</p>

life, and career milestones. The page remains hidden until the Veteran dies, then the page is made public. Continuation of OIT and NCA funding for 2006 2000 through 2031 will allow VLM to create a process for pre 1996 veterans who received the memorial product to have VLM pages and to pursue options for other veterans buried at sea.

Status: The Committee closed this recommendation.

6. NCA should provide funeral homes, and other stakeholders who participate in the Unclaimed Veterans Remains Program a Certificate for Exceptional Service to Unclaimed/Unassisted Veterans.

The VA concurred in principle with the recommendation. The VA response stated that the most appropriate office to respond to this recommendation is VBA as it has the full scope of benefits and services on behalf of unclaimed Veterans.

Status: The Committee closed this recommendation, and the subcommittee will consider a new recommendation.

7. NCA should explore ways to partner with Veterans Service Officers in the Veterans Benefits Administration in outreach efforts to increase awareness about burial benefits and NCA offerings on a local level.

Jennifer Jessup stated that NCA has done a lot of work with Veteran Service Organizations to increase awareness.

Status: The Committee closed this recommendation. The subcommittee will bundle this recommendation with other outreach-related recommendations.

8. NCA should invite Funeral Directors to learn about Veteran burial benefits by establishing a Funeral Director Continuing Education (CE) program by which Cemetery Directors, Veterans Service Officers, and other presenters can deliver training and materials to local Funeral Directors.

Ame Callahan stated that this recommendation is like #3 in that it speaks of continuing education. Additionally, the VA concurred and the response cites the communications contract as the source to carry out the recommendation. The communications contract was awarded in September 2024. Ms. Callahan suggested that the recommendation is closed but the committee monitors progress.

Status: The Committee closed the recommendation and will monitor progress by requesting updates after execution of the communications contract.

9. VA should create promotional materials to help raise awareness about Veteran burial benefits provided by VBA and NCA for use at Funeral Homes. For example, NCA could develop a poster that states, "Did you know you and your spouse may be eligible to be buried in a Veterans Cemetery? Ask us how!"

The VA concurred on this recommendation and NCA communications contract award would support implementation with specific messaging and material to funeral home staff. NCA leaders and staff also collaborates with other administrations to provide awareness of burial benefits. For example, NCA staff have briefed at the Survivor Assistance and Memorial Support open house office hour, VSO communicator calls, VA Women Veterans Summit, Advisory Committee on former Prisoners of War, Federally Employed Women National Training Conference, Virtual Faith Summit, and the Veterans Family Caregiver group.

Status: The Committee closed this recommendation as it believes that NCA is conducting a lot of work in this space.

10. The Veterans Benefits Administration's Indigent Veterans Unclaimed Remains Coordinators (IVURCs) should proactively increase outreach, education, and contact on an annual basis to the County Coroners and Medical Examiner Office and their Indigent Remains Program Coordinators, as well as the County Veterans Service Officers (VSOs) to help raise awareness about unclaimed and indigent Veteran burial benefits. (VBA).

VA concurred in principle on this recommendation. The committee proposed to close it and rely on recommendation #10 wherein the VA concurred that they receive updates on the IVURCs and outreach during annual meetings.

Status: The Committee closed this recommendation.

11. VBA's OTED should provide a briefing to the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials (ACCM) on the progress of the IVURCs program during a Fall 2023 ACCM Business Meeting.

Status: The recommendation remains open, and the committee will monitor for progress. There have been two briefings.

12. The Veterans Benefits Administration and National Cemetery Administration should work with County Medical Examiner Office Indigent Burial Program Coordinators, County Coroners, and Funeral Directors to develop a "How To" workflow to help coordinate the final disposition of unclaimed Veteran remains (e.g., poster, flyer, videos).

Status: The Committee closed this recommendation and will monitor for progress.

13. NCA should reach out and partner with the National Associations of Financial Advisors, Certified Public Accountants, estate planners, probate and trust attorneys, and hospice and palliative healthcare professionals, whose agents routinely have face-to-face meetings with Veterans and spouses, to increase awareness of, improve education about, and promote utilization of VA burial benefits using the NCA website link video:

https://www.cem.va.gov/burial_benefits/index.asp.

Jennifer Jessup stated that NCA has spoken to the National Association for Palliative Care, Veterans Health groups and local healthcare and hospice community groups. NCA also hopes to include stakeholder groups in the communications plan.

Status: The Committee closed the recommendation.

14. NCA should consider developing detailed surveys for state and tribal cemetery leadership covering all aspects of burial and memorial operations to identify support gaps and establish baseline data. The results of these surveys will assist NCA in identifying areas in greatest need of support.

Glenn Powers stated that NCA will support the committee conducting the surveys and focus groups. He mentioned that NCA is aware of the needs of the state and tribal cemeteries. NCA meets quarterly by conference call and bi-annually in person with the supervisors of the state-run cemeteries. A lot of feedback is also provided in the annual customer satisfaction surveys.

One member asked if the committee has authority to conduct a needs assessment and would obtaining baseline survey results inform how a state or tribal cemetery is functioning. The main issue with the quarterly calls is there was not enough time to deal with individual cemetery matters. Mr. Powers suggested that NCA provide a briefing to provide the baseline survey data

to the committee. In addition, a briefing on the Compliance Review Program may be helpful as well.

Status: The Committee closed this recommendation and will review for revision.

15. NCA should create remote (web-based) operational training for Veteran cemetery staff; producing and providing these resources, using virtual technologies, would ensure Veteran Cemeteries are well-postured for optimal success.

The committee requests an update on this recommendation regarding its last progress report which stated that the developed courses were being migrated in the VA Talent Management System.

Status: The Committee closed this recommendation and will request a briefing at the next meeting.

16. NCA should consider convening state and tribal focus groups with participants volunteering time to formulate strategies to ensure parity and consistent distribution of benefits. Focus groups would also serve to collectively communicate issues or requests for additional support.

Status: The Committee discussed the disposition of #14 and #16 simultaneously. The committee closed this recommendation and will review for revision.

Adjournment

The Chair adjourned the meeting at 4:30 p.m.

Wednesday, October 30, 2024

The semi-annual meeting of the VA ACCM was held at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. The session was open to the public, and the meeting information and teleconference number were published in the Federal Register announcement.

National Archives and Records Administration, Scott Levins, Director, National Personnel Records Center, National Archives and Records Administration

Scott Levins, Director, National Personnel Records Center, National Archives and Records Administration provided a briefing on its mission, recovery efforts from the pandemic, current state, and plans.

Mr. Levins discussed challenges brought on by the pandemic and recovery efforts implemented to support NCA which involved prioritizing requests made by the National Cemetery Scheduling Office (NCSO). Recovery efforts from the pandemic, NPRC engaged partnerships w of pandemic, worked with NCSO to service some transactions through loan of original records instead of extraction of information and reproduction of documents. In addition, they worked within the VA/NCA to manage requests for Pre-Need Eligibility and requests Headstone/Marker Requests, expand digitization of records and sharing of electronic records.

Library of Congress, Naomi Coquillon, Chief of Interpretation

Naomi Coquillon, Chief of Interpretation, presented, the Building the David M. Rubenstein Treasures Gallery at the Library of Congress. The overall briefing focused on the construction and fabrication, content considerations, and design of the gallery. This briefing was informative for the Committee as it considers opportunities for the VA to increase awareness and utilization of burial benefits.

Library of Congress Tour

The Committee participated in a tour of the Library of Congress from 11:15 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. EST

Review Updates to ACCM 2023 Recommendations

The ACCM reviewed its 2023 recommendations to determine if they should remain open or closed per VA implementation. The DFO read the recommendation, VA response and most recent update afterwards, the committee deliberated on the disposition of the recommendation.

After review, 3 recommendations remained open and 6 were closed and deemed implemented or for revision. See the table below for a summary.

2023 Recommendations
1.The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) should develop self-guided tours that allow visitors to engage with the incredible stories of the Veterans buried in the various National Cemeteries. The Committee recommends that NCA commits to developing a self-guided program for at least two cemeteries in every district by September 30, 2025, with the goal of adding two more tours per district each succeeding year.

Purpose

The self-guided tours will serve the dual purpose of honoring the Veterans who rest in the cemeteries while simultaneously giving visitors a way to engage more meaningfully with the cemeteries and, if they are Veterans, consider a National Cemetery for their final resting place.

Structure

The product would be a self-guided tour with interpretive information about the cemetery itself, any monuments, or memorials of significance, and – most importantly – biographies of perhaps six to ten Veterans. The exact composition would vary from cemetery to cemetery, but each tour should include an array of diverse Veterans – different eras of service, branches, ranks, races, genders. The material presented should aim to engage visitors for about thirty minutes and should be suitable for all age groups.

This product should be located on the NCA's webpage for the specific cemetery it covers. A new tab would need to be created on the webpage – “Self-Guided Tour” – perhaps adjacent to the existing tab for “Notable Persons.” The document should be available as a PDF that visitors can access and print or download before visiting, as well as be accessible via QR code displayed on site. After this initial step, future iterations could see the project accessible in a more digital format either through the individual cemetery webpages or through VLM.

Creation

We suggest using the Veterans Legacy Program as a funding vehicle to obtain third party support in completing the research and interpretive work to create the self-guided tours at individual cemeteries.

Mr. Peatman stated that the VA response did not address the content of the recommendation nor prior discussions about how implementation ensures that visitors are oriented to cemeteries. He stated the recommendation should remain open.

Status: The Committee will keep the recommendation open and seek an updated from NCA.

2. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) should work directly with the NCA to display information on Veterans' burial and memorial benefits in a highly visible place at every VHA facility. Materials to include posters and brochures such as the current “On Behalf of a Grateful Nation” trifold. Further, the new Survival Assistance and Memorial Support Officer in each VHA facility will be trained to share with Veterans and their families the information on burial and memorial benefits.

Status: The Committee considers this an ongoing process and will close the recommendation and request an update at the Spring 2025 meeting.

3. NCA to notify each tribal grant funded cemetery of the following: As long as each tribal grant funded cemetery inters Veterans as defined in 38 CFR 39.2; NCA shall recognize and respect the Tribal cultural norms by allowing each cemetery the authority to set and enforce their own cemetery gravesite/floral policies.

Mr. Powers stated, effective October 1, 2024, tribal cemeteries may develop, post, and enforce their own floral policy. The cemetery policy should ensure a safe environment for visitors and employees and a statement regarding the removal, holding and disposal of items left at the gravesite. It should also prohibit objects placed on or attached to the VA provided headstone, marker, or niche. It should also prohibit against explosives, firearms, or ammunition.

<p>Status: The Committee closed the recommendation as complete. They will monitor the progress of this effort for implementation and if there is no change in use of the cemeteries, it will be reopened.</p>
<p>4. NCA should engage with the VA's Office of Tribal and Government Relations to coordinate a request to add the National Cemetery Administration to a future National Congress of American Indian (NCAI) conference agenda. The purpose is to educate and assist the Tribal Leaders about NCA benefits for their Veteran members. This conversation should help Tribal Veterans to receive all the benefits offered by the U.S. government. In addition, NCA should request a breakout session with the leaders of the 14 tribal cemeteries to assist with this collaboration for the benefit of their Veterans.</p> <p>Mr. Powers stated, on October 10, 2024, the VA Office of Tribal and Government Relations (OTGR) informed NA that the convention canceled the NCA session. NCA was permitted to add two slides to their presentation to the NCAI. Mr. Powers also added that he and James Earp, Veterans Cemetery Grants Director presented at the Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs Committee meeting in September.</p> <p>Status: The recommendation was closed, and the Committee will pursue other opportunities to engage with the VA-grant funded cemetery tribal leaders.</p>
<p>5. The Department of Veterans Affairs should pursue gaining access to the digital organization of Veteran fingerprint records utilizing existing resources such as the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) administered by the National Archives and Records Administration, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) administered by the Department of Justice, and the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) administered by the Defense Forensics and Biometrics Agency to allow restricted access to funeral directors and coroners for expedited processing of deceased Veteran identification with a feasibility analysis report submitted to the committee on or before September 30, 2024.</p> <p>Status: Mr. Hernandez asked to keep the recommendation open to allow time to receive a feasibility report. The recommendation remains open and request an update at the Spring 2025 meeting.</p>
<p>6. The Deputy Director of Pension and Fiduciary Service within the VBA should provide an annual update to the Committee on their progress as it pertains to training, outreach, technology, and enterprise-wide communications of Unclaimed Veteran Remains (UVR).</p> <p>Status: The Committee closed this recommendation and will request an update at the Spring 2025 meeting.</p>
<p>7. The Deputy Director of Pension and Fiduciary Service within the VBA should establish a collaborative framework with the National Funeral Directors Association and the International Cemetery Cremation Funeral Association to educate membership on UVR procedures, benefits, and reimbursement policies.</p> <p>Status: The Committee is interested in the implementation of this recommendation; therefore, it remains open and will request an update at the Spring meeting.</p>
<p>8. The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) in conjunction with VHA and NCA should utilize best practices to standardize procedures in order to expand outreach to Funeral Directors, coroners, and medical examiners for processing unclaimed Veteran remains.</p> <p>Status: The Committee closed and will review for a new recommendation.</p>
<p>9. NCA should distribute nationwide to VA facilities (VBA/VHA) and VSOs the brochures and pop-up banners already created that list instructions on how to qualify both accompanied and</p>

unclaimed Veterans for burial benefits in National, State, or Tribal grant funded cemeteries. Distribution should begin on or before June 2024 prioritizing rural areas.

Ms. Jessup stated that NCA strategic communication contract may respond to this recommendation. In addition, NCA published an internal only web page with information on NCA brochures and how to order them. NCA staff continue to collaborate and brief the Veterans VBA and VHA. NCA has conducted outreach at events such as:

- Memorial Support Program Open office hour on September 16, 2024.
- The VA Veteran Service Office communicators call, September 10, 2024
- VA women veterans Summit, September 6, 2024.
- Advisory committee on former Prisoners of war, August 28, 2024
- Federally employed Women national training conference, August 6, 2024

Ms. Wheeler asked if NCA will continue this type of outreach with the strategic communications contract. Ms. Jessup stated that the outreach is ongoing and instilled in NCA. The communications contract will enhance the outreach regarding materials provided to the audiences.

Ms. Mohindra asked about NCA evaluating the cost of providing pop up banners to all VHA facilities and if the recommendation is closed as it does not fully reach the audience the subcommittee is trying to reach. Also, she questioned if a revised recommendation is to request an evaluation of funding for the banners. Ms. Jessup suggested that the committee consider other ways to reach the same population such as a tool or communication method that works for both the population and for the hospital to get the materials distributed. Mr. Peatman expressed that many recommendations fall under the communications contract however, he would like to know what issues or gaps identified that the communications plan will fix.

Status: The Committee closed this recommendation and will follow up at the Spring 2025 meeting.

Subcommittee Reporting:

The State and Tribal subcommittee Alvin Duncan, Chair, Amerophan Callahan, and William Kennedy (not present). This subcommittee is working on a recommendation for consideration at the next meeting. The focus is to create a single point of access for state and tribal cemeteries.

The Funeral Director and Unclaimed Veteran Remains subcommittee, Thomas Hernandez, Chair, Monica Mohindra, Michael Hoplight and Candace Wheeler. The subcommittee is considering rewriting the 2023 recommendation #6 to create a certificate to reward coroners and funeral homes helping to identify unclaimed Veteran remains.

This could establish a benchmark of excellence and post a designation of unclaimed Veteran certified. The subcommittee is also exploring the demographics and process to identify unclaimed Veterans. In response to recommendation #5, they found no federal law to prevent funeral directors from collecting fingerprints to help identify and unclaimed deceased as Veteran.

The Outreach subcommittee Floyd Watson, Jr., Chair, Jared Peatman and Paul Adkins. Jared Peatman presented a new recommendation for the committee to accept and approve. The committee voted and accepted the recommendation for consideration by NCA and VA leaders.

Recommendation: The National Cemetery Administration should set aside 10% of their Veterans Legacy Program (VLP) grants budget to aid in the development of self-guided tours at the National Cemeteries. This set aside should be announced as a part of the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) in February 2025, with the expectation that the end product consists of educational tours at various national cemeteries. We suggest a goal of adding at least ten tours per year.

The product would be a self-guided tour with information about the cemetery itself, any monuments, or memorials of significance, and – most importantly – biographies of eight to twelve Veterans. The exact composition would vary from cemetery to cemetery, but each tour should include an array of diverse Veterans – different eras of service, branches, ranks, races, genders. The educational material presented should aim to engage visitors for about thirty minutes and should be suitable for all age groups.

This product should be located on the NCA’s webpage for the specific cemetery it covers.

A new tab would need to be created on the webpage – “Self-Guided Tour” – perhaps adjacent to the existing tab for “Notable Persons.” The document should be available as a PDF that visitors can access and print or download before visiting, as well as be accessible via the QR code displayed on the site. After this initial step, future iterations could see the project accessible in a more digital format either through the individual cemetery webpages or through the Veterans Legacy Memorial. The committee voted to accept the recommendation.

Public Comment

The Designated Federal Officer received over 100 emails titled, “Public Comment, NCA Advisory Committee, Oct 2024: Constitution Ave Pedestrian Gate.” The emails requested that the advisory committee adopt an action plan for reopening the pedestrian gate on the property of Los Angeles National Cemetery. The Committee listened to comments from Dr. Michael Cahn and Steven Sann.

Taking into consideration comments of the ACCM, emails, and the public, the Committee unanimously voted not to adopt the action plan for recommendation to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

Adjournment

The Chair thanked everyone for their time and the meeting adjourned at 4:09 p.m.

/s/Gina Farrisee
Committee Chair

/s/Faith Hopkins
Designated Federal Officer