

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials

Meeting Minutes

May 8-9, 2024

8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Attending Committee Members:

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

Ex-officio Members Present:

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

Office of Cemetery Army Cemeteries Present:

Cynthia Riddle (Virtual)
Renea Yates

National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Attendees:

Matthew Quinn, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs (USMA) (virtual)
Jennifer Jessup, Chief of Staff
Gerardo Avila, Deputy Chief of Staff (virtual)
Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations
James Earp, Director, Veterans Cemetery Grants Program
Tanya Turner, Special Assistant to the USMA
Faith Hopkins, Designated Federal Officer (DFO), OEMI
Antonio Addressi, Alternate DFO, OEMI
Ricardo DaSilva, Director of Communications, OEMI
Jacqueline Hillian-Craig,
John Williams
Lisa Hollenbeck

Office of the Secretary

Jelessa Burney

Other Guests

Asher Allman
Nancy Springer
Andrew Pond

Wednesday, May 8, 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 Columbus, Georgia. The Committee visited Andersonville National Cemetery, Fort Moore Post Cemetery, and Fort Mitchell National Cemetery. All sessions except the visit to Fort Moore Post Cemetery were open to the public for this day. The meeting information was published in the Federal Register announcement.

Thursday, May 9, 2024

The semi-annual meeting of the VA ACCM was held in Columbus, Georgia. The session was open to the public, and the meeting information and teleconference number were published in the Federal Register announcement.

Opening Remarks

Gina Farrisee, 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 made remarks covering the committee's site visit to Andersonville National Cemetery (National Park Service), Fort Moore Post Cemetery (Department of the Army), and Fort Mitchell National Cemetery (National Cemetery Administration).

Committee Introductions

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

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.

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.

Michael 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.

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

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.

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

William Kennedy was virtual for this meeting. He is an advisory board member and chairman of the Friends of the Yellowstone National Cemetery in Laurel, Montana.

Karen Durham-Aguilera is ex-officio and represents the Office of Army Cemeteries.

Thomas Sole is an ex-officio Chief Engineer with the American Battle Monuments Commission.

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

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.

Secretary Advisory Committee Message (Video)

The Committee viewed a video from the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs which stated fundamental Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence (ICARE) values that are critical for advisory committees as partners in the VA's work in support of Veterans.

Outreach Video Presentations

Ricardo DaSilva, Director of Communications, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations presented outreach videos prepared in collaboration with the Veterans Experience Office. He received feedback from members Candace Wheeler, Amerophan Callahan, and ex-officio, Gia Wagner regarding accessibility, adding auditory for those visually impaired, and how is viewership measured. An additional effort to increase awareness is the implementation of creating short videos titled, "The Memorial Minute." The video is narrated by a staff member visiting a cemetery and a fact about the cemetery of Veteran is shared and posted on the NCA Facebook page.

- On behalf of a Grateful Nation: Pre-Need Eligibility Assessment
- Veterans Legacy Memorial
- Sacred Hearts Clean-Up

Mr. DaSilva stated that NCA staff are also working to manage the connection between the utilization of the cemetery and the VLM site by notifying the family via email once the VLM page is created. In fiscal year 2024 to date, 30,000 pieces of content have been posted to the VLM site, and 5,000 new users are attributable to the additional five million records integrated into the VLM site as well as the videos created as part of the Choose VA campaign.

For Pre-Need Burial Eligibility, over 100 funeral industry publications were contacted to request the inclusion of the burial benefit in their magazine or newsletter. At least 25-30 industry magazines responded to the request, including Purple Heart and American Legion. NCA staff are also working across administrations to ensure burial benefit information is in VBA and VHA benefits correspondence where applicable.

Candace Wheeler suggested that NCA consider using the Department of Defense Exchange (Exchange)shopping online platform as a way to publicize the burial benefit. She mentioned that the Exchange continually runs ads and NCA could potentially partner with them to market burial benefits.

Remarks from the Under Secretary of Memorial Affairs

Under Secretary Matthew Quinn joined the meeting virtually from his conference room in Washington, D.C. Accompanying him was Gerardo Avila, Deputy Chief of Staff. Ms. Farrisee thanked Mr. Quinn for all of his support of the Committee. Mr. Quinn wants the committee to continue to focus on three areas:

- The Living Veteran Project allows Veterans to have a VLM page developed once they apply for Pre-Need Eligibility. The page is immediately available for the Veteran and/or family members to populate. Once the Veteran is interred in a national cemetery the page is visible on the active side of VLM. Mr. Quinn stated that the program should be live by the end of December and should drive awareness of the burial benefit.
- Pre-Need Eligibility allows the Veteran to obtain status for burial in a national, state, or tribal Veteran cemetery. Mr. Quinn wanted to decrease the time it takes to determine eligibility. The backlog has been eliminated due to looking at Veterans who have zero to 100 percent disability ratings or receiving retirement pay. Veterans in this category can be completed within one day.
- Cemetery grant funding. He stated that the priority is the expansion of current cemeteries, new establishment of cemeteries, and operational maintenance funds such as raise and realignment at the cemetery. Nebraska and Texas built new cemeteries however we are not keeping up with current expansions so that is going to be a challenge going forward. The program has to be watched closely moving forward. NCA spent \$50 million a year which is fairly static.

The USMA mentioned the work that Daniel Devine, Executive Director, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations (OEMI). NCA is engaging with private cemeteries to ensure that headstones and markers are properly install and maintain to the same standard as in national cemeteries. The expectation is that those cemeteries would be located within our grant-funded cemetery. He stated that NCA should look beyond its walls to assist private cemeteries and told the story of Marie Edmee LeRoux a “Hello Girl”, United States Army who was laid to rest in an unmarked grave in a Maryland cemetery. Mr. Quinn stated that every Veteran’s grave should be a national shrine and properly marked.

Gina Farrisee asked about the, “Did You Know Campaign” and if it was still in progress as it was a great way to bring the three administrations together. Jennifer Jessup, NCA Chief of Staff answered stating that the plan is to get a contract in place this year to help provide the framework for great communication and outreach.

Thomas Hernandez asked how Veterans choosing interment in a private cemetery learn about The Living Veteran Project. Ricardo DaSilva stated that to activate a Veterans page there would have to be a record of death distributed to NCA.

Candace Wheeler thanked Mr. Quinn on behalf of the survivors and expressed her gratitude for his service.

Karen Durham-Aguilera also thanked Mr. Quinn for what he has done for NCA, Veterans, and the partnership with the Office of Army Cemeteries.

Mr. Quinn ended his remarks by commending Ms. Farrisee for her leadership and the Committee for its recommendations and wished everyone well stating, “God bless you all, and let’s keep serving Veterans the best way.”

Updates on ACCM Recommendations

The Committee received updates on recommendations made during the June and November 2022 meetings. The Committee made 16 recommendations during this period and requested status updates where the VA response was, “Concur” and will not pursue further action on recommendations where the VA response was, “Concur-in-Principle.”

Briefings were provided on Recommendations 1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 11, and 15. James LaPaglia, Digital Services Officer, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovation provided an update on Recommendation #5 at the October 2023 meeting.

Update on Recommendation #1 James Earp, Director, Veterans Cemetery Grants Program, NCA (Virtual)

Recommendation 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.

Update: NCA continues to conduct interviews with tribal leaders of VA grant-funded cemeteries. USMA Quinn completed three tribal interviews on:

- May, 2023 - Seminole Nation Veterans Cemetery, Oklahoma
- December 2023 -Big Sandy Rancheria Veterans Cemetery, Western Mono Indians, California
- January 2024 - Metlakatla Veterans Memorial Cemetery, Metlakatla Indian Community, Alaska

NCA has completed interviews with tribal leaders have been performed with the following Tribal Veterans Cemeteries: Apsaalooke Veterans Cemetery, MT, Monte Calvario Veterans Cemetery, AZ, and Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Veterans Cemetery, SD.

Additionally, with assistance from the VA’s Office of Tribal and Government Relations (OTGR) is coordinating future meetings with the eight remaining tribes: Sicangua Akicita Owicahé Veterans Cemetery, Yurok Veterans Cemetery, Lakota Freedom Veterans Cemetery, San Carlos Apache Veterans Cemetery, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians Veterans Cemetery, White Eagle Tribal Cemetery, All Nations Veterans Cemetery, and Leech Lake Veterans Cemetery.

Update on Recommendation #2 James Earp, Director, Veterans Cemetery Grants Program, NCA (Virtual)

Recommendation 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.

Update: NCA in collaboration with VA’s Office of Tribal and Government Relations (OTGR) hosted a Tribal Listening Session on March 25, 2024, that was attended by representatives of nine tribes. Tribal input was requested on issues NCA identified for discussion having administered cemetery grants to fourteen Tribal Nations:

- Maintaining the cemetery according to NCA Operational Standards and Measures.
- Correcting deficiencies identified during a Compliance Review assessment of the cemetery.

- Submitting Annual VA Form 40-0241 (VA Grant-Funded Veterans Cemetery Data) documenting current burial activity at the cemetery, use of gravesites, and additional operational information intended to answer questions about the status of the grant program.
- Clarifying any potential impacts of regulatory changes currently under consideration by VA.
- NCA also presented VA burial benefits and cemetery grant information to attendees of the United South and Eastern Tribes (USET) on March 28, 2024.

Update on Recommendation #4 James Price, Historian, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovation, NCA

Recommendation 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.

Update: In fiscal years 2022 and 2023 the Veteran Legacy Program awarded six grants each year. Highlights from VLGP inaugural year Include:

- 463 Teachers and staff participated in Teacher Professional Development Programs
- 295 K-12 Students participated in the program.
- 388 Veterans and Service Members were studied or profiles developed.
- 185 Curriculum modules, lesson plans, or other educational products developed

In fiscal year 2024, the plan is to award six to eight grants that begin in July or August timeframe.

Amerophan Callahan asked if the program considered placing a barcode at the gravesite so that the story of the Veteran is readily available. James Price stated that this is available for some but not all of the grantee programs. When this technology is available it is publicized by the university, VLGP program on its website and Facebook. Jennifer Jessup stated that QR codes are used for special events and it connects to the VLM page however, this is not available for large-scale implementation as it will affect the grounds of the cemetery. She asked the Committee members to let her know if they had any ideas to consider for such an effort.

Update on Recommendations #8 and #9 Jennifer Jessup, Chief of Staff, NCA

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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!”*

Ms. Jessup provided the statistics regarding preference regarding the burial benefit.

- 16% of Veterans choose a VA national cemetery for burial.
- 22% of Veterans choose a VA national cemetery or a state/tribal/territorial grant-funded cemetery for burial.

- 43% of Veterans choose a VA national cemetery or a state/tribal/territorial grant-funded cemetery for burial OR request a headstone/marker/medallion for a private cemetery.

Update: Ms. Jessup stated that NCA has accomplished a great deal to meet the recommendation to date:

- Refreshed some of our outreach materials and produced new materials (outreach materials were passed around).
- Developed the “End of Life” planning materials, landing page, and public service announcement.
- Created ongoing workgroups with VBA and VHA on shared messaging.
- Increased joint outreach opportunities.
- Shared our data for better-informed, joint outreach.
- Created connections with national non-profit organizations.

To further meet these recommendations, NCA will execute strategic communications via a contract with the anticipated award by the end of July. In addition, leverage internal partners to determine the right moments to reach out to Veterans and Survivors about their burial and memorial benefits to determine what communications products work best for various audiences; what communications modalities work best for various audiences; who should NCA be communicating with and how can resources be shared to continue to develop external partnerships and tools to leverage data.

Update on Recommendation #11 Kevin Friel, Deputy Director, Pension and Fiduciary Service, Veterans Benefits Administration (Virtual)

Recommendation 11: VBA’s OTED should provide a briefing to the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials (ACCM) on the progress of the Indigent Veteran and Unclaimed Remains Coordinators (IVURCs) program during a Fall 2023 ACCM Business Meeting.

Update: Mr. Friel addressed the Committee with an update stating that a lot has been accomplished to improve the Indigent and Unclaimed Veterans Remains (UVR) Program by fostering a collaborative environment with internal and external stakeholders.

To sustain the program going forward the focus is on creating and maintaining a proactive, collaborative, and efficient program for the organization. Modernization of the UVR program using leading practices and a focus on four key areas:

Delivery of benefits - Streamline the administrative process and coordinate between administrations to verify eligibility for VA burial and memorial benefits and services.

Employee engagement - Provide comprehensive training on burial allowance, outreach, and burial arrangements for Indigent Veterans and Unclaimed Remains Coordinators and Regional Office Directors on an annual basis.

Customer experience - Enable our customers to see us as the sole provider of a solution to their problem or need customer experience. Engage in public awareness campaigns designed to inform the community about the UVR program and encourage reporting of UVR. Develop relationships with local authorities, including coroners, funeral homes, and other agencies, so that VA and stakeholders are working together to ensure the timely reporting and burial of UVR and technology.

Technology - Enhance systems to accept unclaimed remains data from a variety of internal and external sources and automatically identify cases involving Veterans Leverage automation capabilities to integrate enterprise-wide data into a central repository.

Gina Farrisee asked if VBA attempts to contact an unclaimed Veteran's family. Mr. Friel stated that where the information is valid, the family is contacted and offered to take possession of the Veteran's remains.

Michael Hoplight asked if the unclaimed remains of Veterans are returned to their native land for burial. Glenn Powers stated the law only authorizes VA to pay for the transportation of unclaimed remains up to the amount of the cost of transporting the remains to the national cemetery closest to the Veteran's last place of residence in which burial space is available. Mr. Powers also noted that while unclaimed Veterans may be interred in tribal Veterans cemeteries, the VA may not currently pay for the transportation of the remains to those cemeteries.

Thomas Hernandez requested a copy of an updated responsibility flow chart. He also asked Mr. Friel to elaborate on the public announcement details and whether the outreach takes place in homeless shelters and rural areas. He stated that this process involved establishing a relationship with the funeral director, and coroners for awareness of VBA's role of the Coordinators, and reimbursement of some expenses. The office staff is working with the Office of Transition and Economic Development to reach the population. He stated that there are a lot of veteran service organizations present at events and he asks for their assistance in publicizing the processes.

Update on Recommendation #15 Andrea Massey, Director, Training and Safety, NCA (Virtual)

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

Update: The NCA Training team updated the onboarding material. Review of existing material. The training team is in the process of updating onboarding materials. Updated onboarding programs will be housed in the Talent Management System (TMS) for better accessibility and tracking of completion. The review of materials is complete. Updating content and modality of the programs has a target completion of 9/30/2024. An update of the is expected for completion by 4/30/2025.

The training team is reviewing options of VA versus contract support to update Caretaker and Cemetery Administrative Specialist (Cemetery Representative) videos. Target completion is 4/30/2025.

The NCA Training team is working with the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) staff on other training resources that could be made available through the Talent Management System. They have identified additional training that will be made available through the TMS with the VCGP team. Critical topics are:

- Compliance Review Program – Overview, Standards & Measures, Corrective Action Plans and Eligibility – Requirements, Resources,
- How to translate information on Military Discharge Documents. Program offices have provided resources and James Earp has provided feedback on the content. The Training team will review his feedback and begin creating training programs that can be housed in TMS.

Honoring and Sacrifice Briefing, Thomas Sole, Chief of Engineering, American Battle Monuments Commission

Mr. Sole provided the Committee a briefing about the establishment, and mission of the American Battle Monuments Commission. The preeminent guardian of America's commemorative military cemeteries and memorials worldwide honors the achievements of U.S. armed forces by preserving their legacy of service and sacrifice., and the vision of the ABMC. There are 31 memorials and 26 cemeteries broken down as follows.

World War I

9 cemeteries
14 monuments

Interred or Memorialized

World War I 35,300
World War II 172,100
Korean War 8,200
Vietnam War 2,500

World War II

14 cemeteries
15 monuments

Others 15,700

TOTAL 233,800

Others

3 cemeteries
2 monuments

Additionally, Mr. Sole highlighted several of the ABMC cemeteries, the Educational efforts around telling the story of the Veteran as well as commemoration. There are 11 Visitor Centers within the ABMC which are using a new approach to capture the attention of and engage the youth and visitors. They have found success using methods by:

- Leveraging capabilities of virtual and multimedia
- New publications on WWI, WWII, and ABMC
- Teacher resource packets and curriculum guides
- Webinars and teacher workshops
- Programs for educators, students, and lifelong learners
- Partner with other government and non-profit organizations

Three other major events highlighted were the burial of a World War I Unknown Soldier at Oise-Aisne American Cemetery, France on June 7, 2023; the 100th Anniversary of the ABMC and upcoming events as well as the anniversary of D-Day on June 8, 2024. The briefing ended with a short video about D-Day. He also recommended the Committee view a Centennial Film on YouTube and the Art Deco Poster Series at www.abmc.gov.

Public Comment

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

Open Discussion

The Chair asked the Committee to sign up for Gov.Delivery using the instructions sent to them by email. This online subscription allows them to stay abreast of NCA government-wide notices.

Member, Jared Peatman expressed concern over the VA's response to the ACCM's October 2023 Recommendation #1. The recommendation's purpose, structure, and creation sections were omitted from the correspondence package and not submitted to NCA and VA leadership. Per Jelessa Burney, the Advisory Committee Management Office representative during the meeting, all recommendation content should be presented as prepared during the business meeting. The DFO, Faith Hopkins, notified the Committee of this process, and to correct the error, the Committee will discuss it at a later date to decide if the recommendation will be resubmitted.

Karen Durham Aguilera commented about the October 2023 recommendations and suggested that NCA attend the National Funeral Director's Association and Congress of American Indian Conference.

Adjournment

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



Gina Farrissee

Committee Chair