

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)

Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials

Meeting Minutes

October 26, 2023

9:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Attending Committee Members:

- Gina Farrisee, Chair
- Paul Adkins
- Eric Brown
- Amerophan Callahan
- Alvin Duncan
- Thomas Hernandez
- Michael Hoplight
- William Kennedy
- 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 (Virtual)

National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Attendees:

- Matthew Quinn, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs (USMA)
- Jennifer Jessup, Chief of Staff
- Gerardo Avila, Deputy Chief of Staff
- Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and 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 (Virtual)
- James LaPaglia, Program Manager, Veterans Legacy Memorial (OEMI)
- Faith Hopkins, Designated Federal Officer (DFO), OEMI
- Antonio Addressi, Alternate DFO, OEMI
- Ricardo DaSilva, Director of Communications, OEMI
- Richelle Taylor, Public Affairs Specialist, OEMI

Other Guest Present:

- LoRae (HoMana) Pawiki, Office of Tribal Government Relations Specialist, Office of Tribal Relations (VACO)
- Duane Neset, Office of Congressman Rosendale

Thursday, October 26, 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 Billings, Montana. 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 at Yellowstone National Cemetery the previous day and the cancellation of other site visits to Apsaalooke Tribal Veteran Cemetery (Crow Nation), Little Bighorn Battlefield - Custer National Cemetery, and Billings Community Based Clinic due to inclement weather.

Committee Introductions

Each committee member and ex-officio in attendance introduced themselves. All twelve 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.

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 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.

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

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

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

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.

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

Matthew T. Quinn, Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs, welcomed the committee to Billings, Montana, and thanked the Friends of Yellowstone for their commitment to establishing the Yellowstone National Cemetery. The Undersecretary discussed the Fiftieth Anniversary of the establishment of the National Cemetery Administration. He thanked the NCA and OEMI team for conducting the anniversary ceremony at Quantico National Cemetery. He then talked about how NCA has been working with VBA to streamline eligibility applications and shorten the response time.

Mr. Quinn provided updates about the Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) and the nearly five million Veteran pages on the VLM website. The VLM team will be adding five million Veteran pages for Veterans interred in private cemeteries with a headstone or medallion since the year 1996. He added that in the future NCA plans to integrate additional records into VLM including records from the Veterans History Project (LoC). Additionally, NCA will add living Veteran records for Veterans who have pre-need eligibility into the VLM system. NCA purchased land in Chattanooga, Tennessee for expansion of the national cemetery there. NCA's number one priority is to expand to prevent closures and to increase availability in underserved areas of the country. These include Loving, Texas, and Grand Island, Nebraska with expansion grants. NCA is working with state cemeteries in establishing new grants and purchases for expansion. NCA is under contract for two new rural cemeteries in Cedar City, Utah Elko, Nevada. The Undersecretary then discussed the importance of utilization of the national cemetery interments. He discussed the awareness campaign that NCA is launching to increase utilization.

Mr. Quinn requested assistance from the committee on two items NCA is currently working to improve on: Awareness campaigns for Pre-Need Eligibility and the Veterans Legacy Memorial. Addressing the committee on Pre-Need, he explained how important informing Veterans of the eligible benefits they have through NCA. Secondly, the Under Secretary spoke on the importance of an awareness campaign for VLM; and the expansion of the website to include non-VA interred pages for Veterans across the country. This expansion will allow millions of Veterans to have a VLM page created for them to memorialize their service to the country. The Undersecretary requested that the subcommittees (Outreach and Grant Funded) take a look at these two areas to see what they would consider to be the best practices for the NCA to use to increase awareness and utilization.

Mr. Quinn then opened the discussion for questions from the committee. Mr. Hernandez asked how NCA manages the capital crimes matter for pre-need eligibility versus at time of need. Mr. Quinn stated that a capital crime check is conducted during a time of need.

Mr. Hoplight asked about the distribution of more brochures, banners, and advertisement campaigns for burial benefits at all VA facilities (VA Medical Centers for example). The Undersecretary discussed the survey that VA conducted with Veterans across the country asking if they were aware of the benefits they are entitled to and if they use them will allow NCA to target specific areas.

Carlisle Barracks Disinterment Project (CBDP)

Renea Yates and Karen Durham-Aguilera discussed the Office of Army Cemeteries' disinterment of the Native American children who passed away at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. This project returned the remains of Native American children to their tribes. Ms. Yates discussed the regulations the Army works under to conduct the disinterment. Thirty-two children's remains have been returned to date (since the projects started in 2017). Additionally, she provided the operational processes that the staff followed to implement the effort. Ms. Durham-Aguilera discussed the Tribal Liaison's role and how important their work was in getting the CBDP going. Ms. Yates discussed overall operations and how it was impacted by the location of the site. She also discussed headstone disposal. Ms. Durham-Aguilera closed the presentation with a discussion on the transfer of remains to the families, media coverage, and press conferences.

Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM)

James LaPaglia, the Project Manager for the Veterans Legacy Memorial, presented an update on the Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM). Mr. LaPaglia discussed the inner workings of VLM, its launch in 2019, and its recent expansions:

- Currently, doubled in size: nearly 10M pages.
- Expansion: almost 5M pages from marker ordering database
- Interments from 1996-Present:
 - 80,000+ pages from state, tribal, and territory Veteran cemeteries
 - 4,000+ pages from interments in 86 foreign countries
 - 1,000+ pages from interments in National Park Service cemeteries. there are 9.8 million Veteran pages.

Additionally, he spoke of tributes, mementos, and historical documents that are uploaded onto individual Veterans pages. Mr. LaPaglia discussed content issues and overall user experience and how it connects with current social and medical issues identified by the VA. He then discussed the yearly Veterans Month expansion of VLM and new updates to the VLM website including making the website more user-friendly. Mr. LaPaglia stated that the content submitted for the VLM pages does not have to be Section 508 compliant.

He also provided an update to the Committee's November 2022 recommendation #5, *"NCA continues to expand on the success of the Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) to include all eligible deceased Veterans."*

Mr. LaPaglia stated that NCA will continue to make progress through Fiscal Year 2026 to include other Government-run cemetery systems including Arlington National Cemetery and 27 other Department of Defense cemeteries, the remaining 12 National Park Service cemeteries, and those managed by the American Battle Monuments Commission. Additionally, NCA will add Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) pages for post-1993 Veterans interred in private cemeteries who have had VA memorial products ordered from the VA.

These efforts will add millions more Veteran pages to VLM. In a parallel effort, NCA will also explore a hybrid online workflow approach for survivors and others to submit other Veterans to NCA for review and approval for VLM page creation who were laid to rest in private cemeteries pre-1993 and for various other circumstances (burial at sea, scattered cremains, interred remains at private residences, etc.). Mr. LaPaglia concluded his presentation with a VLM video Titled, [VLM Impacts Veteran Community](#).

Subcommittee Presentations and Recommendations

The committee designated three subcommittees for focus areas on state and tribal cemeteries, funeral directors and unclaimed Veteran remains and outreach. The chair for each subcommittee briefed on their respective area providing recommendations which the committee voted unanimously to bring forth to the Secretary of the VA and Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. Overall, the Committee made nine recommendations.

State and Tribal Cemeteries

Eric Brown, the chair of the State and Tribal Cemeteries Subcommittee, presented their findings and recommendations for 2023 which align with NCA goals and objectives. Goal 1 is to have Veterans and eligible family members have increased access to burial benefits. Objective 1.2 is to address the burial needs of unserved Veterans. Goal 2 is to have more Veterans and eligible family members use VA burial and memorial benefits.

Overall, the committee proposed four recommendations however, the two were accepted based on discussion by the committee and present subject matter experts.

The subcommittee made two recommendations:

1. NCA to notify each tribal grant funded cemetery of the following: As long as each tribal grant funded cemetery interrs 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.
2. 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 conference agenda. The purpose is to educate and assist the Tribal Leaders about NCA benefits for their 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.

Funeral Director and Unclaimed Veteran Remains

Thomas Hernandez presented as the chair of the Funeral Directors and Unclaimed Veteran Remains Subcommittee. The purpose of the subcommittee is to assist the VA in finding and helping to initiate improvements needed to ensure the final disposition of Unclaimed Veterans Remains. There are improvements needed to ensure the final disposition of unclaimed remains. There is a need for continued improved coordination across the three administrations of the VA to ensure dignified burials for Veterans whose remains are unclaimed. The process of identifying and qualifying deceased Veterans and accessing reimbursements set in place for unclaimed Veterans needs to be standardized and more user-friendly.

This subcommittee made the following five recommendations:

1. The VA 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.
2. The Deputy Director of Pension and Fiduciary Service within the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) should establish a collaborative framework with the National Funeral Directors Association and the International Cemetery Cremation Funeral Association to educate the membership on Unclaimed Veteran Remains (UVR) procedures, benefits, and reimbursement policies.
3. 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.
4. The Veterans Benefits Administration in conjunction with the Veterans Health Administration (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.
5. NCA should distribute nationwide to VA facilities (VHA/VBA) and Veteran Service Organizations the brochures and pop-up banners already created that list instructions on how to qualify both accompanied and unclaimed Veterans for burial benefits in National, State, or Tribal grant funded cemeteries. Distribution should begin on or before June 2024 prioritizing rural areas.

Outreach Subcommittee

Mr. Jared Peatman presented to the committee on behalf of the Outreach subcommittee. The recommendations focused on increasing awareness of the national cemeteries. Visits to several national cemeteries have shown there to be an opportunity to increase Veteran engagement with the cemeteries by telling the stories of the cemetery and the Veterans buried within those cemeteries through the development of self-guided tours.

Providing Veterans and the public with ways to engage more substantially with the cemeteries will serve the dual purpose of honoring deceased Veterans and encouraging current Veterans to reflect upon the possibility of being interred in a national cemetery.

Based on these findings they made two recommendations:

1. 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 2025, with the goal of adding two more tours per district each succeeding year.
2. VHA should work directly with 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.

Open Discussion

The Committee discussed the wording of their recommendations to ensure they were as clear as possible before sending them to the Secretary. Amerophan Callahan of the State and Tribal Cemeteries Subcommittee proposed that the following draft recommendation be removed because it is not necessary. Glenn Powers elaborated that it is not that the recommendation has been accomplished however the cemeteries must follow NCA standards and measures to receive grant funding.

The first recommendation read: "Recognize each cemetery's ability to operate and maintain the cemetery in conformance with tribal government standards and with all applicable community and local laws, codes, regulations, and ordinances." The committee voted and unanimously agreed to remove this recommendation.

The committee continued their discussion with proposals for the 2024 Fall Meeting site visit. The DFO Faith Hopkins made note of possible locations and will bring to the committee what research she will have on the sites. The proposed sites included Lexington, Kentucky, Fort Mitchell in Alabama, and San Antonio, Texas. The committee attempts to visit a different region each year. The region they are planning to visit in 2024 is the Southeast.

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 4:30 p.m.



Gina Farrisee

Committee Chair