

National Cemetery Administration

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) National Cemetery Administration (NCA) currently maintains more than 3 million graves at 131 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico. Of these cemeteries, 71 are open to all interment; 19 will accept only cremated remains and family members of those already interred; and 41 will only perform interments of family members in the same gravesite as a previously deceased family member. The NCA also maintains 33 soldiers' lots and monument sites. All told, the NCA manages 19,300 acres, half of which are developed.¹

Today there are nearly 23 million living veterans who have served our nation as far back as World War I and in every conflict and peacetime era since. However, it is estimated that approximately 653,000 veterans died in 2010. VA interred more than 106,000 veterans in 2009, and the Department expects that number to slowly climb and peak at 116,000 in 2013 and to maintain that level through 2015. VA expects to maintain 400,000 more graves during that same period of time.²

The most important obligation of the NCA is to honor the memory of America's brave men and women who served in the armed forces. Therefore, the purpose of these cemeteries as national shrines is one of the NCA's top priorities. Many of the individual cemeteries within the system are steeped in history, and the monuments, markers, grounds, and related memorial tributes represent the very foundation of the United States. With this understanding, the grounds, including monuments and individual sites of interment, represent a national treasure that deserves to be protected and cherished.

The Independent Budget veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) would like to acknowledge the dedication and commitment of NCA staff who continue to provide the highest quality of service to veterans and their families. We call on the Administration and Congress to provide the resources needed to meet the changing and critical nature of NCA's mission and fulfill the nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country honorably and faithfully.

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration Fact Sheet (July, 2010) <http://www.cem.va.gov/pdf/facts.pdf>.

² *FY 2011 Budget Submission Summary Vol. III, 1A-6.*

NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION

NCA Accounts

In FY 2010, \$250 million was appropriated for the Operations and maintenance of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), with approximately \$2 million in carryover. This constitutes less than 1 percent of the total Operations and Maintenance budget. The NCA awarded 47 of its 50 planned minor construction projects, and the three unobligated projects will be obligated in FY 2011. The State Cemetery Grants Program awarded \$48.5 million to fund 12 state cemeteries.

The NCA has done an exceptional job of providing burial options for 90.5 percent of veterans who are part of the 170,000 veterans within a 75-mile radius threshold model. The NCA realized that, without adjusting this model, only one area, St. Louis, would qualify for a cemetery within the next five years and that the five highest veteran population centers would never qualify. *The Independent Budget* veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) are pleased to see that the NCA has adjusted its model and will begin using the model of 80,000 veterans within a 75-mile radius for future cemetery placement. This modification will allow the NCA to continue to provide burial options for veterans who would otherwise be limited geographically for this benefit.

The IBVSOs recommend an Operations and Maintenance budget of \$275 million for the National Cemetery Administration for FY 2012 so that it can meet the increasing demands for interments, gravesite maintenance, and related essential elements of cemetery operations.

The NCA has worked tirelessly to improve the appearance of our national cemeteries, investing \$45 million in the National Shrine Initiative in FY 2010 and approximately \$25 million per year for the three previous years. The NCA has done an outstanding job thus far in improving the appearance of our national cemeteries. In 2006 only 67 percent of headstones and markers in national cemeteries were at the proper height and alignment. By 2009 it had reached 76 percent. The NCA is on target to reach 82 percent proper height and alignment in FY 2011. To ensure that the NCA has the resources to reach its strategic goal of 90 percent, the IBVSOs recommend the NCA's Operations and Maintenance budget be increased by \$20 million per year until the operational standards and measures goals are reached.

In addition to the management of national cemeteries, the NCA is responsible for the Memorial Programs Service. This program provides for lasting memorials through headstones for the graves of eligible veterans and honors their service through Presidential Memorial Certificates. Public Laws 107-103 and 107-330 allow for a headstone or marker for the graves of veterans buried in private cemeteries who died on or after September 11, 2001. Prior to this change, the NCA could provide this service only to those buried in national cemeteries. P. L. 110-157 gives VA authority to provide a medallion to be attached to the headstone or marker of veterans who are buried in a private cemetery. This benefit is available to veterans in lieu of a government-furnished headstone or marker.

Table 13. FY 2012 National Cemetery Administration (dollars in thousands)

FY 2011 Administration Request	\$250,504
FY 2011 <i>IB</i> Request	\$274,500
FY 2011 Enacted*	\$250,000
FY 2012 <i>IB</i> Recommendation	
Operations and Maintenance	\$275,000
*Amount based on H.R. 1, the "Continuing Resolution for FY 2011."	

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

THE STATE CEMETERY GRANTS PROGRAM:

The State Cemetery Grant Program is a cost-effective way for the National Cemetery Administration to achieve its mission.

The State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP) complements the National Cemetery Administration's (NCA's) mission to establish gravesites for veterans in areas where it cannot fully respond to the burial needs of veterans. Several incentives are in place to assist states in this effort. For example, the NCA can provide up to 100 percent of the development cost for an approved cemetery project, including design, construction, and administration. In addition, new equipment, such as mowers and backhoes, can be provided for new cemeteries.

Since 1978 the Department of Veterans Affairs has more than doubled the available acreage and accommodated more than a 100 percent increase in burial through this program. The SCGP faces the challenge of meeting a growing interest from states to provide burial services in areas not currently served. The intent of the SCGP is to develop a true complement to, not a replacement for, our federal system of national cemeteries. With the enactment of the "Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 1998," the NCA has been able to

strengthen its partnership with states and increase burial services to veterans, especially those living in less densely populated areas without access to a nearby national cemetery. Currently there are 48 state and tribal government matching grants for cemetery projects.

The Independent Budget recommends an appropriation of \$51 million for the SCGP for FY 2012. This funding level will allow the SCGP to establish new cemeteries, at their current rate, that will provide burial options for veterans who live in regions that currently have no reasonable accessible state or national cemetery.

Recommendation:

Congress should fund the State Cemetery Grants Program at a level of \$51 million for FY 2012.



VETERANS' BURIAL BENEFITS:

Burial benefits have lost their value.

In 1973 the National Cemetery Administration established a burial allowance that provided partial reimbursement for eligible funeral and burial costs. The current payment is \$2,000 for burial expenses for service-connected deaths, \$300 for nonservice-connected, and \$300 for plot allowance. At its inception, the payout covered 72 percent of the funeral cost for a service-connected death, 22 percent for a nonservice-connected death, and 54 percent of the cost of a burial plot. By 2007 these benefits eroded to 23 percent, 4 percent, and 14 percent, respectively.

Burial allowance was first introduced in 1917 to prevent veterans from being buried in potter's fields. In 1923 the allowance was modified. The benefit was determined by a means test, and then in 1936 the means test was removed. In its early history the burial al-

lowance was paid to all veterans, regardless of their service connectivity of death. In 1973 the allowance was modified to reflect the status of service connection.

The plot allowance was introduced in 1973 as an attempt to provide a plot benefit for veterans who did not have reasonable access to a national cemetery. Although neither the plot allowance nor the burial allowance was intended to cover the full cost of a civilian burial in a private cemetery, the recent increase in the benefit's value indicates the intent to provide a meaningful benefit. *The Independent Budget* veterans service organizations are pleased that the 111th Congress acted to improve these benefits. Now, recipients of the plot allowance will receive \$700, up from \$300. Also, included in the increase is \$700 for certain veterans. These increases will take effect on October 1, 2011.

However, there is still a serious deficit between the original value of the benefit and its current value. In order to bring the benefit back up to its original intended value the payment for service-connected burial allowance should be increased to \$6,160, the nonservice-connected burial allowance should be increased to \$1,918, and the plot allowance should be increased to \$1,150.

Based on accessibility and the need to provide quality burial benefits, *The Independent Budget* recommends that the Department of Veterans Affairs separate burial benefits into two categories: veterans who live inside the VA accessibility threshold model and those who live outside it.

For veterans who live within reasonable accessibility of a state or national cemetery that would be able to accommodate their burial needs but who would rather be buried in a private cemetery, the burial benefit should be adjusted as well. These veterans' burial benefits should be based on the average cost for VA to conduct a funeral. The benefit for a service-connected burial should adjust to \$2,793; the amount for a non-service-connected burial would increase to \$854; and the plot allowance would increase to \$1,150. This will provide a burial benefit at equal percentages, but based on the average cost for a VA funeral and not on the private funeral cost that will be provided for veterans who do not have access to a state or national cemetery.

Recommendations:

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

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

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

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

Congress should enact legislation to adjust these burial benefits for inflation annually.