

House Committee on Veteran's Affairs

Disability Assistance & Memorial Affairs Subcommittee

Hearing on "Honoring America's Fallen Heroes: An Update on our National Cemeteries"

March 8, 2012; 1:30 p.m.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to thank you for holding today's hearing entitled, "Honoring America's Fallen Heroes: An Update on our National Cemeteries."

150 years ago in 1862, President Abraham Lincoln created a national veterans' cemetery system and dedicated it, "...for the soldiers who shall die in the service of the country."

President Lincoln's words and our steadfast appreciation are as important today as they were during the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Ensuring a proper burial for our fallen heroes is a solemn obligation.

This hearing follows up on a September 24, 2009 hearing, in which the Subcommittee examined the VA's cemetery policies and operations, as well as those of the other cemeteries under our jurisdiction, primarily Arlington National Cemetery and the American Battle Monuments Commission.

This Subcommittee conducts these oversight reviews to ensure that all eligible Veterans are

served by an optimal burial option with the highest quality possible as their final place of repose.

I want to recognize former Chairman Bob Filner's efforts to direct the NCA to change its requirements for establishing a national cemetery from 170,000 veterans in a 75-mile radius to 80,000 veterans in a 75-mile radius.

With this change, the NCA met the burial needs of 89% of the total veteran population in fiscal year 2011.

I appreciate the VA's decision outlined in President Obama's fiscal year 2013 budget to change service area guidelines to better accommodate the needs of rural and urban veterans.

These changes will increase the number of veterans served by a federally implicated burial option.

Despite the progress we made in the previous Congress, we must do better, particularly as it pertains to wait times for burials and quality control at NCA facilities.

I think we are all aware of the numerous errors related to the VA's contractor-executed Raise-and-Realign project revealed after the VA's audit of 93 of its 131 cemeteries.

I've said this in the Subcommittee before. Mistakes like these are unacceptable. They are as avoidable as they are awful. They rob us of time that could otherwise be spent ensuring that our Nation's heroes are properly laid to rest. More importantly, these mistakes rob the family and friends of the peace of mind they deserve.

I hope to hear a positive update from NCA on the resolution of these errors and prevention efforts moving forward.

Further, the value of the current \$300 burial allowance and \$300 plot allowance for qualifying veterans has diminished as funeral and burial costs have increased - negatively affecting the survivors left behind

Additionally, the National Shrine Mandate holds that “all national and other veterans’ cemeteries under control of the NCA shall be considered national shrines.”

The NCA’s ability to meet and maintain the National Shrine Mandate will require adoption of the highest quality assurance measures.

I applaud the Independent Budget’s thorough assessment of the NCA, highlighting current shortcomings and the need for targeted funding.

In that vein, I believe that the VA should conduct a preemptive review of the NCA’s obstacles in meeting the National Shrine Mandate and its other commitments.

This will help thwart new issues that may arise and ensure that existing ones do not grow in complexity, as we recently witnessed.

Finally, I look forward to hearing an update from Ms. Kathryn Condon and the progress being made with record keeping, contracting, and other issues at Arlington National Cemetery.

I appreciate your vigilant oversight of Arlington, an unparalleled national treasure that serves a very unique mission.

More needs to be done but you have made tremendous progress.

I also look forward to hearing from all of our esteemed witnesses.

I welcome the opportunity to continue working with you to maintain our final commitment to those who gave so much for our country.

I yield back.