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NATIONAL
HEADQUARTERS
4647 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland
20706-4380
TELEPHONE: 301-459-9600
FAX: 301-459-7924
E-MAIL: amvets@amvets.org

STATEMENT OF

DIANE M. ZUMATTO

AMVETS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE
AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS**

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

***ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION***

CONCERNING

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS BUDGET REQUEST FOR
FISCAL YEAR 2013**

THURSDAY, 16 FEBRUARY 2012

334 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

10:00 A.M

Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member McNerney, Congressman Walz and distinguished members of the subcommittee, as an author of *The Independent Budget (IB)*, I thank you for this opportunity to share with you the IB's recommendations in what we believe to be the most fiscally responsible way of ensuring the quality and integrity of the care and benefits earned by American veterans.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) National Cemetery Administration (NCA) maintains 131 of the nation's 147 national cemeteries, as well as 33 soldiers' lots. The 131 NCA operated cemeteries are composed of approximately 3.1 million gravesites and are located in 39 states and Puerto Rico. As of late 2010, there were more than 20,021 acres within established installations in the NCA.

VA estimates that approximately 22.4 million veterans are alive today and with the transition of an additional 1 million service members into veteran status over the next 12 months, this number is expected to continue to rise until approximately 2017. On average, 14.4 percent of veterans choose a national or state veterans' cemetery as their final resting place. As new national and state cemeteries continue to open and as our aging veterans' population continues to grow, we continue to be a nation at war on multiple fronts. The demand for burial at a veterans' cemetery will continue to increase.

The single most important obligation of the NCA is to honor the memory of America's brave men and women who have selflessly served in this nation's armed forces. Many of the individual cemeteries, monuments, grave stones, grounds and related memorial tributes within the NCA system are richly steeped in history and represent the very foundation of these United States.

The Independent Budget veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) would like to acknowledge the dedication and commitment demonstrated by the NCA leadership and staff in their continued dedication to providing the highest quality of service to veterans and their families. It is in the opinion of the IBVSOs that the NCA continues to meet its goals and the goals set forth by others because of its true dedication and care for honoring the memories of the men and women who have so selflessly served our nation. We applaud the NCA for recognizing that it must continue to be responsive to the preferences and expectations of the veterans' community by adapting or adopting new interment options and ensuring access to burial options in the national, state and tribal government-operated cemeteries. We also believe it is important to recognize the NCA's efforts in employing both disabled and homeless veterans.

NCA Accounts

In FY 2011 the National Cemetery Administration operated on an estimated budget of \$298.3 million associated with the operations and maintenance of its grounds. The NCA had no carryover for FY 2011. The NCA was also able to award 44 of its 48

minor construction projects and had four unobligated projects that will be moved to FY 2012. Unfortunately, due to continuing resolutions and the current budget situation, the NCA was not able to award the remaining four projects.

The IBVSOs support the operational standards and measures outlined in the National Shrine Commitment (PL 106-117, Sec. 613) which was enacted in 1999 to ensure that our national cemeteries are the finest in the world. While the NCA has worked diligently improving the appearance of our national cemeteries, they are still a long way from where they should be.

The NCA has worked tirelessly to improve the appearance of our national cemeteries, investing an estimated \$39 million into the National Shrine Initiative in FY 2011. According to NCA surveys, as of October 2011 the NCA has continued to make progress in reaching its performance measures. Since 2006, the NCA has improved headstone and marker height and alignment in national cemeteries from 67 percent to 70 percent and has improved cleanliness of tombstones, markers and niches from 77 percent to 91 percent. Although the NCA is nearing its strategic goal of 90 percent and 95 percent, respectively, for height and alignment and cleanliness, more funding is needed to continue this delicate and labor-intensive work. Therefore, the IBVSOs recommend the NCA's Operations and Maintenance budget to be increased by \$20 million per year until the operational standards and measures goals are reached.

The IBVSOs recommend an Operational and Maintenance budget of \$280 million for the National Cemetery Administration for FY 2013 so it can meet the demands for interment, gravesite maintenance and related essential elements of cemetery operations. This request includes \$20 million for the National Shrine Initiative.

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

State Cemetery Grant Programs

The State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP) complements the National Cemetery Administration'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 establishing a new cemetery and expanding or improving an established state or tribal organization veterans' cemetery. New equipment, such as mowers and backhoes, can be provided for new cemeteries. In addition, the Department of Veterans' Affairs may also provide operating grants to help cemeteries achieve national shrine standards.