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STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION

ON

HONORING AMERICA'S FALLEN HEROES: AN UPDATE ON OUR NATIONAL CEMETERIES

BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

UNITED STATE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MARCH 8, 2012

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this afternoon. I am Ashley Cozine, a third-generation funeral director in our family-owned mortuary that began operation in 1913. I began my career as a licensed funeral director in 1995. Currently we operate one mortuary, as well as a cemetery and crematory that we established in 1997. We serve approximately 350 families a year at our mortuary and employ 10-12 people. I currently serve on the Executive Board of the National Funeral Directors Association, and I am a past president of the Kansas Funeral Directors Association.

I am testifying today on behalf of the more than 19,000 funeral directors and funeral service personnel who are members of the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA). The average NFDA member is an independently owned and operated business with fewer than 10 employees and has been in the same family for over 60 years. NFDA is the leading funeral service organization in the United States, providing a national voice for the profession.

NFDA has a great interest in the national cemetery system as our members provide both funeral and burial services for our veterans and their families on a daily basis. Every day funeral directors offer comfort and support to families who are dealing with the loss of a loved one. When a family is dealing with the loss of a veteran, funeral directors help the family organize a personalized funeral and burial that both celebrates the life of their loved one and honors their service to our country. The VA estimates that roughly 648,400 veterans died in the U.S. in 2011. Each one of these service men and women has a family or friends who grieved their loss, and in each case a funeral director helped ensure that every veteran received the care, honor, and dignity they earned because of their sacrifice for our country.

According to the National Cemetery Administration, the VA maintained more than 3.1 million gravesites at 164 properties, including 131 national cemeteries and 33 other cemetery installations, in 2011. The National Cemetery Administration is to be commended for their service to our nation's veterans. In preparation for my testimony here today, NFDA conducted a simple e-mail survey of NFDA members to obtain firsthand experiences from our members in relation to veterans cemeteries. We asked that our members recount their experiences, including service, upkeep and areas for improvement. Overall, our members were highly complementary of the state of our veterans cemeteries. We received an almost unanimous response that our nation's national cemeteries operate efficiently, effectively, and with much compassion for those being buried there as well as their families. Our members have found the management and operation of these cemeteries to be courteous, flexible and accommodating to the needs of the funeral director and the family members of the deceased veterans.

One funeral director from Clawson, Michigan, stated; "I would estimate that we average 30 services annually at Great Lakes National Cemetery. I must say that the cemetery is an example of how all cemeteries should function. The members of the staff are courteous and competent. The grounds are beautifully maintained and the services are appropriate to honor those who have sacrificed so much for our freedom. Additionally, their family members who are interred there are treated with the same respect and reverence as the veterans. Surviving family members are also shown every courtesy and kindness. We recommend Great Lakes National Cemetery to all our veterans' families who are in need of cemetery space both preneed and at-need. It is a pleasure working with Great Lakes Cemetery. On a scale of 1 to 10, I rate them a 10 plus."

An NFDA member from Illinois stated: "We use Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery in Elwood, Illinois, and they do a great job. The cemetery is clean and the staff very professional. I have nothing but good things to say about our experience with them."

A funeral director from Georgia stated: "The veterans cemetery that we have in Milledgeville is a state and national cemetery together. We have a great relationship with the employees here and they have gone above the call of duty. The director here is retired from the Army so he brings some great skills to the table. If we have a question regarding a veteran he is always more than willing to jump in and help with whatever is asked. If the grounds keeper needs extra help the director and asst. director will change clothes and grab a shovel or lawn mower and start work."

According to the National Cemetery Administration, 89 percent of veterans are served by a burial option within a reasonable distance (75 miles) of their residence. NFDA believes the family of every deceased veteran should have easy and convenient access to a national cemetery. While NFDA members believe that the National Cemetery Association has improved access to veterans cemeteries, some of our members are still experiencing accessibility issues because of distance.

One NFDA member from Tennessee stated: "We do not have a VA cemetery here in Jackson. One in Memphis (70 miles) and two in Nashville (120 miles). Therefore we do not go to VA cemeteries a lot. But I will say the one in West Nashville and the one in Memphis are first class. They do an excellent job on all fronts. Very respectful, very professional, very well kept, etc....Due to the distance we just don't go a lot."

A funeral director from New Jersey also commented on distance issues: "The closest VA cemetery to us in Northern NJ is a state veterans cemetery about an

hour and a half away. The National VA cemeteries we seldom go to as they are located in the greater New York/Long Island area and are a challenge to get to and even a longer ride. The dignity and care received at the New Jersey veterans cemetery in Wrightstown mentioned above is fine. The only concern is one of scheduling as it is very popular among New Jersey residents and sometimes it can take an extra day or two to secure one of the available time slots to have the interment."

Additionally, a funeral director from Maryland stated: "Garrison Forest Veterans Cemetery is the one that our firm uses the most, by far. Their operation is very efficient. However, demand is simply so great that we are often forced to wait a week or more for burial from the time contact is first made. And since their policy is to not allow families out to the actual burial sites for the interment service, all services run through one chapel. So as long as their policies and procedures remain in place, there really is no feasible way to increase the number of interments on a daily or weekly basis. Unfortunately, this disrupts what the family often has in mind as the natural progression of the service for their loved one. They either wait until the date of burial to have a service, in which case it may not be possible to have a viewing the day before. Or they go ahead with viewing and funeral service as they choose, but then have to wait and have another service, usually with just family, a week later. And since it is a military service at the cemetery, it is an event that they would have liked many to witness."

I use these examples from around the country to illustrate that our national cemetery system and its operation and management from our members' standpoint is of the highest caliber. Most of my experience has been with the Kansas Veterans Cemetery in Winfield, Kansas. This cemetery is under the direction of the Kansas Commission of Veterans' Affairs. In my experience, it is a well-run and efficient cemetery operation. The staff is very friendly and helpful in assisting our mortuary and the families we are serving. The grounds and facilities are well maintained. It is a good option for veteran families that do not already have cemetery property. I have also had the opportunity to work with Ft. Leavenworth and Ft. Scott National Cemeteries, albeit on a much more limited basis. These two cemeteries are several hours away from Wichita, so there are fewer families that choose these options. However, my experience has been positive with them as well. They appear to be efficiently operated and are beautifully maintained. The families served seem to be very appreciative of their services. I have not had any negative feedback in my dealings with them.

While most of our members are satisfied with the services provided to them by the national cemeteries, there are some improvements that could be made to improve the service funeral directors can provide the families of our nation's

veterans. In February of 2012, NFDA conducted a non-scientific study of our members to assess whether they are experiencing difficulties when dealing with the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) funeral reimbursement policies. Approximately half of the respondents receive reimbursements from the DVA in nine months or less while it takes 10 months or longer for the remaining half of respondents to receive reimbursement. In fact, 60 percent of respondents stated the VA owes them for outstanding veterans' funerals that are over six months past due. Of the 60.9% of members who stated the VA still owes them for outstanding veterans' funerals that are over six months past due, the average amount owed is \$5,951. However, one funeral director reported that the DVA owes him \$128,355.

Also, I would be remiss if I did not mention that there are hundreds of funeral directors in Washington, DC today. My colleagues and I have come to Capitol Hill to support our nation's veterans by working for passage of H.R. 2051, a bill to Repatriate Unclaimed Veterans' Cremated Remains.

Currently, many funeral homes across the country are holding the cremated remains of veterans that have been unclaimed by family members or relatives. NFDA strongly believes that these remains should be properly identified and given the proper burial or interment along with the appropriate military honors. The issue here is how best to identify these remains and see that they receive a proper burial or interment in a recognized veterans cemetery with appropriate military honors. In that regard, legislation has been introduced to repatriate unclaimed cremated remains of veterans held by funeral directors.

H.R. 2051 would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to work with veteran's service organizations and other groups in assisting funeral homes in possession of unidentified or abandoned remains in determining if the remains are that of a veteran eligible for burial at a National Cemetery. If remains are determined to be that of an eligible veteran, there is no next of kin, and there are no available resources to cover burial and funeral expenses, then the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall cover the cost of burial. In addition, the bill would call on the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a public database of the veterans identified in this project. NFDA strongly supports this legislation, and encourages Congress to pass this important legislation.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of the members of the National Funeral Directors Association, I want to conclude my testimony today by thanking you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of NFDA. I hope my testimony has been helpful and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.