



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

April 15, 2009

Mr. John A. Kelly
Chairman
Advisory Committee
on Cemeteries and Memorials
3645 Kanawha Street, NW
Washington, DC 20015

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for the recommendations from the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials' November 2008 meeting held at the National Harbor in Fort Washington, Maryland. I appreciate the work that the Committee has done to assist the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regarding its Memorial Affairs program.

Enclosed are VA's responses to the Committee's recommendations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric K. Shinseki". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "E" and "S".

Eric K. Shinseki

Enclosure

**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA) RESPONSE TO THE
NOVEMBER 18-19, 2008
RECOMMENDATIONS OF
THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CEMETERIES AND MEMORIALS**

Recommendation 1: That the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) adopt the use of memorials at selected NCA cemeteries for the purpose of enhancing the education of our citizens, especially our younger children, about the sacrifice and contribution of our Veterans.

Response: VA supports opportunities to educate the public and particularly our youth about the history of America's Veterans and their contributions to our country and society. VA gladly works with schools and other community groups to assist in organizing educational opportunities at VA facilities to include our national cemeteries when opportunities are presented. On Memorial Day and Veterans Day, many youth-based groups, such as Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts of America assist to decorate Veterans' graves with miniature flags as well as attend ceremonies at VA national cemeteries. Recently, a new tradition has started at VA national cemeteries that honors the memories of Veterans by placing holiday wreaths at gravesites. Community and youth groups are quickly making Wreaths Across America a new holiday tradition honoring and learning about Veterans and their service. These events provide opportunities for participants to learn about VA and Veterans in the process. For Veterans Day each year, VA sends out an educational school kit to over 100,000 schools throughout America to assist teachers in developing Veteran-specific educational programs for our youth about the contribution of America's Veterans. VA regularly supports and welcomes community organizations that wish to use VA facilities for educational purposes as long as they do not interfere with or add burdensome responsibilities to VA's core missions.

Recommendation 2: The committee endorses the recommendations in the recent ICF International "Evaluation of the VA Burial Benefits Program" (Final Report August 2008) with the exception of the analysis of the drive-time standard.

Response: The Government Performance and Results Act requires periodic reviews of VA programs. The Evaluation of the VA Burial Benefits Program was completed in August 2008. Its purpose was to conduct an objective third party evaluation of the entire array of burial benefits offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Results of the study were used to determine whether the burial benefits program is achieving its expected outcomes and to identify the program's impact on veterans and their families. VA has reviewed the 19 recommendations contained in the Burial Benefits Program Evaluation. NCA senior leadership used the study recommendations and findings as a springboard to develop new burial policy proposals that will enhance service to Veterans and their eligible family members and position the organization for future success. While the program evaluation did not recommend a drive-time standard for

**RECOMMENDATIONS OF
THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CEMETERIES AND MEMORIALS
(Continued)**

establishing new national cemeteries, VA acknowledges the challenges of travel time and distance especially in densely populated urban areas. VA has addressed this issue as well as other access criteria in developing the new policies. These proposals are under review and will be considered in future planning and budget cycles.

Recommendation 3: That VA pays a \$300 plot allowance to the State for the cost of a plot or interment in a State Veterans cemetery for a Veteran's survivors (spouse or dependent child) when buried in a State Veterans cemetery.

Response: A plot allowance for non-veteran dependents buried in State Veterans cemeteries would require legislative action by Congress (i.e., a change to Section 2303 of Title 38). VA is assisting State Veterans cemeteries with budget challenges in other ways. VA increased funding for the construction and startup costs of State Veterans cemeteries to 100 percent in 1998. Recent action by Congress has authorized VA to make grants available to State Veterans cemeteries to assist them with funding their operating budgets. Public Law 110-157 authorizes VA to provide grants totaling up to \$5 million to State Veterans cemeteries for operations during the fiscal year. VA anticipates beginning to provide these grants starting in FY 2010 after rulemaking on the governing regulations is complete. VA believes that these combined actions will help hard-pressed State Veterans cemeteries to meet their operations and maintenance funding goals.