



Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) on the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) and the national cemetery system. I am John H. Fitch, Jr., Senior Vice-President for Advocacy.

The National Funeral Directors Association represents more than 13,000 funeral homes and over 21,000 licensed funeral directors and embalmers in all 50 states. 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. .

The 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. As a result, they use the national cemeteries as well as the state veterans cemeteries often.

In a recent survey of our members on this question, we have 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.

As one of our members from Florida stated: *“Being in Southwest Florida and with the amount of retired veterans that have come to our beautiful side of the state, we deal regularly with the Florida National Cemetery as well as many times with Arlington National. I couldn't be more pleased with how we are taken care of when we call the Florida National Cemetery. Everyone is pleasant, efficient and Knowledgeable and the cemetery is kept up beautifully.*

An Illinois members stated: *“We use the Rock Island National Cemetery quite often, in fact I have expressed my desire to be buried there since I am an eligible veteran of the Vietnam War. I really do not know of any way to make improvements. It is impossible to say enough good about the management, the way families are treated and the way funeral directors are treated. Please encourage the Veteran's Administration to leave it just as it is.”*

A Massachusetts member writes: *“ I am a funeral director at the Conley Funeral and Cremation Service in Brockton, Mass. We have interments at the Massachusetts National Cemetery in Bourne probably 40-50 times a year. The entire staff at Bourne is fantastic. They are very helpful and accommodating to our families and us. I especially appreciate the improvement of being able to call the Jefferson Barracks in Missouri on weekends to schedule funerals in Bourne.*

Finally an Arizona member wrote: *“I am very pleased to be able to respond to your request regarding our National Cemeteries - in a positive light. We have a wonderful National Cemetery and Staff here in Phoenix. We have no problems with scheduling; if we need a "favor" every now and then, they are willing to go the extra mile for us. They are compassionate with families and are attentive to their needs as well as ours. I'm sure if you spoke with any of our other Directors they would agree.”*

I use these examples from around the country to illustrate that our national cemetery system and its operation and management from our member's standpoint is of the highest caliber. Believe me, if it was not, they would say so. They tend to be very protective of the families they serve and want to insure they are treated with respect and dignity during all phases of the funeral and internment.

In my dealings with the NCA on issues, problems or questions that from time to time arise with our members; I found them to be very responsive and eager to assist in any way possible to find a solution. For example, several months ago one of our members in South Yarmouth, Massachusetts called to express concern over the number of broken or damaged markers they were receiving and the problems that caused for the families. I contacted NCA and they were very helpful in solving this matter directly with the funeral home. They advised them to be sure they inspected the markers before they accepted them and to report any damages to NCA. They also indicated that they would look into revising their transportation requirements for the vendors who manufacture and ship the markers to insure they are being adequately packed and protected. I could not ask more from them.

While most of our members are well satisfied with the services provided them by the national cemeteries, there are some improvements that could be made. For example one of our members in Texas who uses the DFW National Cemetery stated: *“ It has been a problem serving our families during week-end hours. Upon the death of a veteran on a Friday evening or on the weekends, we cannot make any notification to the national cemetery. This prevents the family from making any gravesite service arrangements until the following Monday, which means the service, won't be held until Tuesday or Wednesday. Some form of contact during the weekend hours would solve this problem. Not knowing the gravesite service time also prevents us from commencing the funeral services as well.”*

As for Arlington National Cemetery, one member wrote: *“Arlington is a little different. Although the people working there are very knowledgeable and in most instances get back to us in a timely fashion, there have been times when we have been concerned that even after setting up services we find that the times and day were not correctly entered*

*and it has caused a problem on more than one occasion. Had it not been that we follow up closer to time the families would have had a real problem.*

*My biggest concern of all however, is the fact that Arlington National Cemetery does not accept cremated remains from the Post Office. It has presented a bit of a problem in having to send them to another funeral home there rather than directly to Arlington and thereby causing an additional charge that the families have to pay.*

*I certainly understand that after 9-11 we can't be too careful but by the same token I think there would be ways of making sure this could still be done.*

*A comment from our New Jersey State Funeral Directors Association stated: "New Jersey has one of the highest per capita population rates in the county. In addition, New Jersey and the surrounding states have some of the most congested roadways in the nation. Unfortunately, New Jersey veteran families are underserved by the location of the Mid-Atlantic National Cemeteries. Funeral procession s from the Garden State (originating in the North, Central or Southern part of the state) travel a minimum of 3 hours to the closest cemetery (Calverton, Arlington, or Indian Gap). Such excessive travel adds to the cost of the funeral and creates a travel burden on families who would like to visit the grave. Considering the population that would be served, the National Cemetery System should build a new cemetery that would be more convenient for New Jersey Veteran families."*

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my testimony. I hope it has been helpful.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear and present the views of the National Funeral Directors Association. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have.