

**HONORING OUR NATION'S VETERANS:  
EXAMINING THE VETERANS CEMETERY  
GRANTS PROGRAM**

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**FIELD HEARING**  
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

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MAY 14, 2012  
FIELD HEARING HELD IN PRESTON, MINNESOTA  
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**Serial No. 112-60**

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**HONORING OUR NATION'S VETERANS:  
EXAMINING THE VETERANS CEMETERY  
GRANTS PROGRAM**

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**MONDAY, MAY 14, 2012**

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY  
ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:00 p.m., in the Fillmore County Courthouse Board Room, 101 Fillmore Street West, Preston, Minnesota, Hon. Jon Runyan (Chairman of the Subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Runyan and Walz.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN JON RUNYAN**

Mr. RUNYAN. Good afternoon, everybody. Usually when we hold these Subcommittee hearings, we're still in Washington, but it's great to be here today. I'm happy to be here with all of you in the Fillmore County courthouse in the district of my colleague and good friend, Tim Walz. I'd like to personally thank you for having me and also attending the field here back in my district a few weeks back and everyone else for joining us here today.

Although we are far away from the normal hearing room in Washington, D.C. and the Hill and the great cameras of C-SPAN, this is still an official Congressional oversight hearing of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and therefore the hearing rules and hearing conduct will apply. Therefore, I will respectfully request that everyone be courteous to our witnesses and remain silent until the hearing is formally adjourned.

In chairing the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, I've had the opportunity to work on many issues that affect our Nation's veterans, whether they are in my home district or here in Minnesota or wherever else across the Nation.

From working on these issues, I've learned firsthand that a veteran's final resting place is a subject of the utmost importance, not just for those who have served our country, but also their families and loved ones. As our veterans' population continues to age and we wind down from two overseas conflicts, the placement of our national and state veterans' cemeteries becomes increasingly important.

Accordingly, we are here today to talk about the Veterans' Cemetery Grants Program and the possibility of placing a new veterans'

cemetery right here in Fillmore County. It is my understanding that the need for a cemetery exists and a suitable location has already been determined. I look forward to hearing more from the citizens of Fillmore County as well as the VA in today's testimony.

It is my hope that by bringing all the parties together here today, we can make progress in evaluating the Veterans' Cemetery Grants Program and ultimately to serve the needs of our veterans as best we can.

As I am sure many of you are aware, cemeteries established under the grant program must conform to the standards and guidelines pertaining to site selection, planning, and construction as prescribed by the VA. These cemeteries must be operated solely for the burial service of members who died on active duty, veterans and their eligible spouses and dependent children. Further, any cemetery assisted by a VA grant must be maintained and operated according to the operational standards and measures of the National Cemetery Administration.

So we are here today to examine this process, not from afar in Washington, but right here in Fillmore County, where this program has a chance to make a direct impact.

Currently there are approximately 45,000 veterans in southern Minnesota who could be eligible for burial in a veterans' cemetery. It is my understanding that the VA is aware of this need for a veterans' cemetery in this area, and I hope through our efforts here today we are able to accomplish this goal of ensuring that this need is fulfilled.

Before jumping ahead to the specific steps of how to ensure the establishment of a new veterans' cemetery, I would like to welcome our witnesses here today who will be speaking in detail on the need for a cemetery here in Fillmore County and the steps that have been taken thus far.

Again, I am delighted to be with all of you here today, and I now yield to my colleague and distinguished gentleman from Minnesota, my good friend Tim Walz, for his opening statement.

[The prepared statement of Jon Runyan appears on p. 33.]

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. TIM WALZ, DEMOCRATIC  
MEMBER**

Mr. WALZ. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to all of you for being here today. I'd especially like to thank the Chairman for his service to veterans. As I often say when the frustration levels with government get high, I wish people could actually watch how we do things in the Veterans' Affairs Committee. The sole purpose of honoring that commitment that our servicemembers have made in making sure that we, as a nation, a grateful nation, follow through with everything from the benefits and the health care to that dignified burial, that says there's a grateful nation that will always remember.

So, Chairman, I welcome you out here. It was a great chance for me to get up into New Jersey, and we oftentimes talk about rural issues of access, but the Chairman's district goes from Philadelphia out to the Jersey Shore. And while geographically it was fewer miles from Philadelphia where I was at to where we held the hearing, it actually took longer than it did for him to drive from Min-

neapolis down here. And I think those are issues that we have veterans stretched across this country, and I'm grateful to have him come out here and what I believe is the way it should be done—serving veterans. We have a collaborative effort from our local elected officials who have done heroic work and done what I think is visionary type of collaboration building to our veterans' service officers, to our state representatives, and now we're going to talk about the role of the Federal Government in terms of the cemetery grant program to make that happen. So it's these types of hearings, I think the Chairman was exactly right coming out of Washington and doing it out here, a way to make the connection to how this is supposed to work.

We have an issue of how do we care and how do we bury our veterans. How do we make sure we do it in a cost-effective manner and make that happen, and you're proving ways to do that. So this hearing is going to be a way to make sure we get this project finished, get it over the line. I think there's a lot of my colleagues who will come in and talk to me about this. They want to learn from you, the lessons learned of how to make this happen, and I think that's what we can learn to take back and make a difference on things.

This is a follow-up hearing on a hearing that the Chairman had on March 8th in the DAMA Subcommittee that was titled, "Honoring America's Fallen Heroes", an update on our national cemeteries, which focused on the larger issues of the National Cemetery Administration. This is meant for you to talk to us about the local issues of making it happen, but we've seen that there are some issues with making things work. And there have been some issues of misidentification of grave markers and some of those cross into DoD responsibility at Arlington National Cemetery and others, but as a nation they are simply unacceptable. And while we do many, many, many things right, and I've said it time and time again, with our veterans it's a zero sum game. If one veteran or spouse is not served to the utmost diligence and the standards that we set, then we have failed them, and we need to continue to strive for that. I want to make sure, and I'm going to make a little bit of it here, some of the audits and the things that were happening.

We're going to hear from our witnesses on the public private partnership, but we're also going to hear from the VA. We want to hear what they're doing or intending here on the work that I did from my constituents regarding whether there were mistakes related to grave site markers in the National Cemetery Administration. The National Cemetery Administration reports it made 249 mistakes out of 1.5 million grave sites, which when you look at it, that's just about Six Sigma of accuracy, but that's not good enough. We have to figure out how we do that better. We deserve the best for them.

The VA in St. Paul has a workload of 91,000 cases, and it takes them upwards of a year to process benefits for burial claims. We had a lunch today with some of our county veterans service officers, and one of them brought Carol, who lost her husband last week and buried him on Saturday. There is the potential here that she'll receive a bill from the funeral home and wait a year for her earned veteran benefit for her husband who died with a service-

connected disability. That is simply unacceptable, and what we have to do is piece these things all together to make sure that, one, the veteran and their spouses are served correctly. And two is that we're good stewards of the taxpayer dollars.

I can tell you that I'm confident our folks at the VA and everyone in this room's overall and number one mission is to make sure we serve our veterans to the best of our ability, but we need to take advantage of best practices. We need to learn from things that didn't go right. We need to continue to lean forward. And I think today's hearing and listening to our witnesses we're going to hear in a minute will give us some great ideas to go back.

I have a colleague from California who served quite a few terms in the State Assembly in California, now is a member of Congress, has told me he's been working for quite some time to figure out how to get a state veterans' cemetery near where he thinks it needs to be in his district. And so I hope I learn some things from you. I hope we bring back some fixes for folks and once again do our job of providing for veterans.

So with that, I'm going to yield back to my good friend, the Chairman of the Committee, and look forward to your testimony.

Mr. RUNYAN. I thank the gentleman, and I just want to be conscious of everybody's time, and we are in a little bit of a tight time frame here so we're going to try to keep the questions timely and effective. I know we had somewhat of a problem with some people in——

Mr. WALZ. He was referring to me specifically, I think.

Mr. RUNYAN. No, but I just know everybody is on a time schedule so we'll get started.

Today we're joined by a long list of people, and I'm going to run through the list of everyone testifying, and then we'll start the testimony in one minute. But today we are joined by Steve O'Connor, the Past State Commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. We're also joined by Lucy Barth, a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom; Nathan Pike, County Service Officer from Olmsted County; Chuck Amunrud, the Fillmore County Commissioner; Karen Brown, Fillmore County Coordinator; Jon Martin, Fillmore County Solid Waste Administrator; The Honorable Jeremy Miller, Minnesota State Senator; David Swantek, the Cemetery Director for the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs; and Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations at the National Cemetery Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, who is accompanied by Joshua de Leon, the Director of Veterans' Cemetery Grant Service at the National Cemetery Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Just to remind you, each of you will have five minutes to summarize your testimony, but I know some of your testimonies weren't that lengthy, as I've already read them, so I appreciate that, any time you can spare. And with that being said, your full and written statements will be made part of the hearing record and, Mr. O'Connor, we will begin with you for your oral testimony.



**STATEMENTS OF STEVE O'CONNOR, PAST STATE COMMANDER, VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS; LUCINDA BARTH, SERGEANT, MN ARMY NATIONAL GUARD, OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM AND OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM; NATHAN PIKE, COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE OFFICER, OLMSTED COUNTY**

**STATEMENT OF STEVE O'CONNOR**

Mr. O'CONNOR. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Congressman Walz, for the opportunity to testify on this important issue pertaining to our country's veterans and the veterans of southeast Minnesota.

For the record, my name is Stephen J. O'Connor. I'm a Past State Commander for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Department of Minnesota, a retired Army officer and service-connected Viet Nam veteran.

The Veterans' Cemetery Grant Program provides an opportunity for the Federal, state, and local governments, in this case Fillmore County, to work together to provide area veterans a final resting place honoring their service to their country.

I feel certain that the construction of a state veterans' cemetery in southeast Minnesota would not be a possibility if it were not for the commitment and willingness of the Fillmore County Commissioners to work with local veterans' organizations, the state legislature, and the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs and local communities to identify and develop a suitable site. Fillmore County along with surrounding municipalities have always stood firmly in support of the men and women who have served this Nation. They participate in the County Veterans' Service Officers Program, which offers assistance to veterans reestablishing themselves in civilian life and have donated 155 acres of county property as a final resting place for those heroes who have answered the last call. The local branches of government have partnered with both veterans and private and public entities to provide for its veterans.

As a veteran, I'm extremely pleased that there will be a cemetery where I can be interred with my comrades. Although there will be comrades from many different wars, from many different eras, we all share an experience that can never be explained to the protected and doesn't need to be explained to the warrior. It is fitting that there should be a hallowed place designated for our final rest.

Thank you. That ends my testimony, and I will be pleased to answer any questions the Committee may have.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. O'Connor.

[The prepared statement of Steve O'Connor appears on p. 34.]

Mr. RUNYAN. Ms. Barth, you're now recognized.

**STATEMENT OF LUCINDA BARTH**

Sergeant BARTH. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the veterans from the surrounding area.

My name is Lucinda Barth. I'm a Sergeant with the Minnesota National Guard and a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. I'm also a service-connected veteran.

It's approximately 140 miles to the Veterans' Affairs National Cemetery located at Fort Snelling in Minneapolis. The state veterans' cemetery is located 236 miles in Little Falls, Minnesota.

These cemeteries are a great distance to travel for a veteran that would like to be interred in a veterans' cemetery, not to mention the inconvenience to a loved one who would have to endure—sorry, to visit the site of their loved one. I believe that if the Department of Veterans Affairs would approve the grant for the cemetery here in Fillmore County, that the surrounding veterans and their families will want their loved ones memorialized at that cemetery.

I have traveled the world and seen many beautiful places. None of it compares to the beauty that we have right here in Fillmore County, especially in Preston. It's not only beautiful, but it's serene. I believe that this is the ideal location for a cemetery where we want our veterans and families to feel their loved one is at peace.

I have been told on several occasions that it takes a special kind of person to join the Armed Forces and to fight for this country. Whether we joined during the—or were told to join during the Viet Nam area or joined when it became all volunteer, we still have—we are still that special kind of person. Preston would provide a final resting place that those veterans so honorably deserve to have.

I strongly encourage you to go back to DC and vote in favor for Fillmore County to be the final resting place for so many veterans in this area. They deserve to have a place that will bring them and their families the peace that they need after the loss of a dear loved one. I know that Preston can bring that peace to so many families.

Thank you for this opportunity again, and I will answer any questions you may have.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Ms. Barth.

[The prepared statement of Lucinda Barth appears on p. 34.]

Mr. RUNYAN. Nathan Pike, you are now recognized.

#### **STATEMENT OF NATHAN PIKE**

Mr. PIKE. I've been here before. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and the rest of the Committee. I'd like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify on behalf of over 23,000 veterans and their families in southeast Minnesota, and that includes the following eight counties that I got that number from, which is Fillmore, Olmsted, Mower, Dodge, Goodhue, Wabasha, Winona, and Houston counties. This is an excellent opportunity to testify on the important issue of gaining a veterans' cemetery in Fillmore County.

My name is Nathan Pike, and I am a veteran of the active Army and a retired Army National Guard noncommissioned officer with over 21 years of service. I served two tours of duty in support of KFOR operations in Kosovo and a tour as an embedded trainer to the Afghan National Army in 2005. I am also a service-connected disabled veteran.

In the spring of 2010, I applied and received the job of Fillmore County Veterans' Service Officer. In the summer of 2011 I started that position in Olmsted County. I am a current resident of Fillmore County residing in Spring Valley. As a CVSO, my job is to provide local assistance—to provide assistance to local veterans and their families through the Department of Veterans Affairs benefits, state veteran benefits, and anything remotely related to vet-

eran issues and concerns for the veterans and their families of Olmsted County, Minnesota.

The first point I would like to address is it is my sincere belief and that of many of our other veterans, including many in this room, that the Department of Veterans Affairs holds the responsibility of caring for the servicemember upon discharge to grave, and if need be, assisting the surviving widow/widower with benefits should they be eligible for said benefits. The VA can easily serve the veterans of southeast Minnesota with a veterans' cemetery specifically located in Fillmore County. The Fillmore County Board of Commissioners has graciously authorized the donation of land for this project. The excellent support is evident within the veteran service organizations of Fillmore County, which includes the Fillmore County Council of the American Legion, the oldest legion county council in the Nation, as well as unanimous support from the people and towns in Fillmore County. Even southeast Minnesota's largest print media, the *Rochester Post-Bulletin*, has endorsed the idea of a veterans' cemetery in Fillmore County. Providing a veterans' cemetery in Fillmore County has the potential of serving over 23,626 veterans and eligible family members for the benefit and aid of burial in a veterans' cemetery. I researched that number from the American Community Survey from 2010 and that just includes the eight counties that I mentioned, not counties further west. The Committee should also take into account that even with the Iraq war winding down and being done, there will be more veterans returning to southeast Minnesota, most notably the return of the Minnesota Army National Guard First Brigade of the Red Bull Division.

The second point I want to quickly address is the veterans' cemetery is an excellent opportunity for work. It will provide economic stimulus to Fillmore County. Whether the work is provided through local contractors or otherwise, there will be a need for workers to have access to local businesses in a variety of ways. After the cemetery is completed, there will be an added benefit of jobs providing an active cemetery and possibly employ up to a dozen people.

Here are my final thoughts, I'll reiterate my two points, why a veterans' cemetery in Fillmore County. The first is that the Department of Veterans Affairs has a responsibility of caring for veterans and their families from discharge to death. The veterans' cemetery would be well-suited for a final resting place for our Nation's veterans. The land is free, and there will be economic stimulus to a rural county that is in need of such stimulus. I can tell that while working as the Fillmore County Veterans' Service Officer, I knew of three families that are patiently waiting for the creation of this cemetery so they can bury their loved ones here, and of course this is my end-of-life plan as well as a final resting place, should this come up.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to discuss this important issue, the veterans' cemetery for Fillmore County, Minnesota.

If you have any questions, I'll gladly answer them. Thank you, Committee, Mr. Chairman.

[The prepared statement of Nathan Pike appears on p. 35.]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. Pike. And all three of you, thank you for your service to our country. We appreciate it. My first question is for Mr. O'Connor. Obviously we're here today telling a story and the need that we have here, but from your opinion, can you explain what the opportunity to be buried in a veterans' cemetery means to you and your former comrades.

Mr. O'CONNOR. Well, for me specifically, a little personal matter, I was 3 years ago diagnosed with lung cancer from Agent Orange. I'm in pretty good shape now, but if you're a betting man, you can bet that I'm going to be gone in the next 2 years because there's a 25 percent chance of survival at 5 years. I made my life serving this country and serving with people, you know, my comrades here, and there's no greater honor than to be placed beside them. And that's something that wouldn't happen if we don't have a cemetery in this area because my wife and family are not going to go to Minneapolis or to Little Falls, you know, other than just to inter me there. So for me and for the people I know, the people that serve in our organization, you know, it means that we can be, as I said in my testimony, we can be with our comrades. We can be recognized for our service. And I hope that answers your question, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you. And it does because it is truly, I know—it's a special, unique thing that all of you volunteered to do and serve the country. And it is truly—to have a final resting place with your other comrades, it is an honor.

The next question is for Mr. Pike. Why do you believe the County Board of Commissioners donated this land, besides the fact that there was a need here? Were there other underlying issues that needed to be addressed to honor our fallen?

Mr. PIKE. To the best of my knowledge, Mr. Chairman, is that this was done wholeheartedly just to honor veterans. There's empty land that's just sitting there. I think they might be collecting minimal rent for farming. And I believe one of the Commissioners or Ms. Brown would be able to better answer that. But I truly believe that in their heart of hearts as Fillmore County Commissioners, that they looked for a good idea, to say we have an opportunity to take care of our veterans and honor them with a final resting place, and other counties around this area did not have the land available that Fillmore County has.

Mr. RUNYAN. And going back, you were talking a little bit about the impact that it will have on the community, on the local economy. Can you expand on that a little bit? I was talking to a gentleman upstairs about that and he said you would be walking down a path next to the river and looking up on the hillside and seeing that. It is something to come and see, to honor those who have served. Can you kind of explain how we draw in and actually can, not only honor veterans, but also benefit the community?

Mr. PIKE. The bottom line is after the completion of the cemetery, surrounding families would come to this area to visit their loved ones on the important days of like Memorial Day, Veterans' Day, Independence Day, and they would stop and either get flowers at a local flower shop, they'd stop at a gas station, spend some money on gas, get a Coke, go out to eat, they would see this. They would see the other things that Fillmore County has to offer with

trout fishing or biking or anything else. But I do truly believe that with the cemetery here, it will draw people in. And if they have to drive a distance, say, from Steele County or Freeborn County, which is about an hour away, they will probably want to stop and get something, whether it's gas or flowers and pay respects to their loved ones that way.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you.

Mr. PIKE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. RUNYAN. Ms. Barth, just quickly, not to press you too hard. I know you're a little bit nervous. But just talking about, as you mentioned in your opening statement, talking about distance and location, what is your opinion on why this is the perfect location for this cemetery?

Sergeant BARTH. It's—I'm sorry, I'm really nervous.

Mr. RUNYAN. Don't worry about it.

Sergeant BARTH. The cemetery would be within a reasonable distance from their loved ones, and there's so many veterans in this surrounding area that really need a place that they can memorialize their loved ones. And just to refer back to—you know, I've been around the world and I've seen, you know, I've seen places, but Preston is—the beauty here, the river, the trees, the green. It's just every time I come home from being—whether it was in Iraq or Afghanistan, you become in awe of the beauty that's around here, and it's just a very peaceful place to live. And it's a peaceful place where the loved ones that, you know, when they bury their loved ones, they know that are going to be at peace. And it's a place that they can come and visit them and be at peace themselves with the passing of their loved one.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you for that. And with that, I'll yield to the gentleman from Minnesota, Mr. Walz.

Mr. WALZ. Sergeant Barth, well said, that was exactly beautiful, and I appreciate that. Often with my colleagues, they hear me talk about southern Minnesota and I can see them roll their eyes and go, oh, Walz represents Mayberry, every town in Mayberry, in Preston, in Fillmore County. So in every sense of this, there is a sense of home, and I think when you serve your Nation, that sense of home is felt here. I felt that sense of home with Congressman Runyan's constituents in New Jersey, and it doesn't all look like Jersey Shore, I can tell you, on the show.

Mr. RUNYAN. Which I do represent.

Mr. WALZ. He tells me they are all transplants from Queens. But that sentiment is very true. I've listened to all of you, and I can tell you, Steve, I'm not a betting man but we're not doing that burial for quite some years to come. But I do share that with you, as a fellow servicemember, I think there's something to be said about this. I always tell the story of when I went out to Walter Reed and visited one of our wounded warriors who came back and was a Marine, Sergeant Leonard. They introduced me, said this is Congressman Walz from the VA Committee, he's a retired Sergeant Major. And he never missed a beat. He said, "Oh, I'm sorry about that." I'm like thinking, oh, he's a Marine, he's going to get under my skin. I said, "What are you sorry about?" And he said, "I'm sorry you took the demotion to Congress, Sergeant Major."

I thought it was very interesting, though, the sentiment about that shared comradery that is hard to understand if you haven't been there. But to watch a community, I couldn't be prouder of this community. I think what we understood when I talked to the Chairman and the Committee staff about coming out here, I think we've got a model that can work in other places. I think what the County Commissioners have done and what our State Representatives and Senators have done in collaborating, and I'd like to mention, I think he's in the room somewhere, our Commissioner of Veterans' Affairs, Larry Shellito, is here today. Is General Shellito around? There he is in the back (indicating). The General was the Adjunct General of Minnesota and my commander, in full disclosure, at one point.

But this is collaborating together today, and I have a couple questions for you guys. This is an issue we always struggle with because as a nation, Chairman Runyan and myself and the 433 other Representatives there, we're trying to struggle with a limited amount of resources, trying to deliver the best quality of care, trying to make sure we prioritize, as all government entities do, that we're prioritizing our veterans first. One of the issues that we continue to struggle with is this mandate of having 80,000 veterans in a 75-mile radius. This is somewhat of a challenge for rural areas. And while the VA has made exceptions, as we were just discussing in eight states, to reduce that number down, other states like Wyoming and Idaho and other places, what ends up happening is that's why you have a state like Minnesota with a fairly equal distribution of population, that it might not meet those mandates. And so I guess I ask each of you, how do we—and I want to be very clear, Nathan, the numbers you gave, we also get to include my colleague, Mr. Braley down in Iowa, and his constituents, and Mr. Kind over in Wisconsin, about collectively coming together on this. Do you think we need to look at those numbers again, this 80,000 number, or do you think that makes sense? I'm troubled by areas that are more rural, how we serve our population.

Mr. PIKE. I believe, Congressman, they may need to be looked at again, and they may likely lower that number to 50,000 honestly, and that might better suit areas like the Midwest or in places less, like Wyoming and South Dakota, Montana, and that.

Mr. WALZ. I never get the feeling from my constituents that they're not willing to make sure we lay our veterans to rest. I think what they're unwilling to say are my tax dollars going to something that they should go to. So I always think that we have to consider how this goes, but it's very difficult in hearing the stories from my colleagues on the difficulty of getting a cemetery. It is really challenging, as our folks that are going to testify later from the VA are going to tell you. They are trying to deliver, but these are regulations that we set up to make sure that we guard those dollars.

Mr. PIKE. Maybe we should change the regulations, Congressman, and let's not forget that because of the veterans we have an operating democracy and a republic. The only reason we're sitting here is because of those who are shouldering a rifle in our defense right now overseas on our behalf and not in this country. That's the biggest statement I can say is don't forget we exist and have the freedoms and opportunities. We have free elections because there's

somebody there standing on a wall. There's somebody standing on a line overseas shouldering a rifle.

Mr. WALZ. Would the three of you think that we can get this thing done, collectively get this thing done, but are we already moving on to the next one where there's a need for more.

Mr. PIKE. I believe there will be a need for more, points west or even in northeast Minnesota.

Mr. WALZ. Do you think this is the model to make that happen.

Mr. PIKE. I believe so, Mr. Congressman, yes, sir.

Mr. WALZ. Okay. I will go back to the Chairman.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, gentlemen, and I thank each of you for your testimony and thank you all for your service, and with that, you are excused, and we'll welcome the second panel to the table.

Mr. WALZ. Thank you all.

Mr. RUNYAN. Our second panel consists of Chuck Amunrud, the Fillmore County Commissioner; Karen Brown, Fillmore County Coordinator; and Jon Martin, Fillmore County Solid Waste Administrator. Each of you will have five minutes to summarize your testimony, and your full written statements will be made part of the hearing record. And, Mr. Amunrud, you are up first. Thank you for your testimony.

**STATEMENTS OF CHUCK AMUNRUD, COMMISSIONER, FILLMORE COUNTY; KAREN BROWN, COUNTY COORDINATOR, FILLMORE COUNTY; AND JON MARTIN, SOLID WASTE ADMINISTRATOR, FILLMORE COUNTY**

**STATEMENT OF CHUCK AMUNRUD**

Mr. AMUNRUD. Thank you, Chairman Runyan, Mr. Walz. Just for the record, my last name is a Norwegian name. It's Amunrud. My great-grandfather took the E out and put the U in so he could get his mail on Sunday in church.

Mr. WALZ. My staffer's name is Kjeseth, which starts with a K, and I'll never understand that, so I'm with you, Chuck.

Mr. AMUNRUD. I first want to say thank you to the Committee for taking time to come to our beautiful Fillmore County. It is indeed an honor to be invited to testify on behalf of Fillmore County.

My name is Charles Amunrud, and I am a Fillmore County Commissioner representing the Third District.

I am also a 60 percent disabled veteran, enlisting in the United States Air Force from 1968 to 1972. I do get emotional when I talk about it.

My statement will mention the local collaborative efforts of our State Legislature, the State Department of Veterans Affairs, the Fillmore County Board, and our local veterans' groups, reasons for Fillmore County Board's decision to donate land for a veterans' cemetery.

The board was approached in 2009 by our then State Senator Sharon Erickson-Ropes, who at that time served on the State Senate Veterans' Committee, wanting to find land that would be suitable for a new veterans' cemetery in the southeast part of our state. The Fillmore County Board suggested that they would consider giving up a portion of land the county owned next to Preston that consisted of approximately 245 acres.

In November of 2009, the then current State Commissioner of Veterans' Affairs, Michael Puglisi, and staff visited the Fillmore County Board to discuss the possibility that our proposed site could be suitable and the need to do preliminary work on the site. We discussed the need to amend then the current state statute. The statute had set aside funding to acquire land and design for two new cemeteries in southwest and northeast Minnesota. We now needed the state legislature to amend the law to include southeast Minnesota for land acquisition and design.

During the 2010 session, State House Representative Greg Davids, who still represents our district, and the then State Senator Sharon Erickson-Ropes both were crucial in getting the law changed to include southeast Minnesota.

During this time frame, the Fillmore County Board was visited by our local veterans' groups who presented resolutions of support urging us to gift the land needed as a way of paying honor to our veterans from our citizens. The board agreed.

We then learned that we were not done at the state legislature. The new law would again need to be amended to include southeast Minnesota due to language in the original law as part of a bonding bill. It needed another hearing.

In 2011, our new State Senator, Jeremy Miller, along with State Representative Greg Davids, proposed legislation that passed into law making Fillmore County a priority in funding for design to construct a new state veterans' cemetery. Our entire region is in support knowing that families will benefit from having their loved ones buried closer to home. New jobs due to construction and the ongoing operations will have a long-term benefit to our local communities.

Finally, I want to say thank you to the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, the Minnesota State Legislature, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, to my fellow county board members, two of which are here, Commissioner Duane Bakke and Commissioner Tom Kaase, if you would stand, (applause) in a very positive collaborative effort to benefit our past, current, and future veterans, I'll be happy to answer any questions.

[The prepared statement of Chuck Amunrud appears on p. 36.]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. Amunrud. With that, Ms. Brown, you are now recognized.

#### **STATEMENT OF KAREN BROWN**

Ms. BROWN. Good afternoon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Congressman Walz. We're very honored to have you in Fillmore County this afternoon, and we welcome you.

My name is Karen Brown, and I serve as the Fillmore County Coordinator. Part of my position is to serve as Clerk of the Board of County Commissioners. Since this is a special project for the board, I've supported their efforts in working with all parties that have contributed effort and expertise related to this project for a successful collaboration.

The grant process, as Commissioner Amunrud stated, began in actually 2008 when there was the legislative session that directed us to identify any potential site for a new veterans' cemetery in southern Minnesota. Subsequently a document produced by Mr.



David Swantek, the Cemetery Director of Minnesota State Veterans' Cemetery of Little Falls, which identified an underserved veteran population in southeast Minnesota. This report was reported or was presented to the board in 2010. The board began having conversations at that point about a possible transfer of the county land known as the county farm for use as a cemetery. This incredibly beautiful proposed site features scenic bluff lands, gentle valleys, and the Root River and would seem to be a perfect use for this land. Including populations of veterans in Iowa and Wisconsin, an estimated total of 40,000 veterans live within 75 miles of this proposed site.

After conversations about where the land transfer was considered by the board, the next step in the local process was to assess the wishes of the people. With land values increasing, the members of the board wanted to make sure that there was support before any transfer decisions were made. All veteran service groups and municipalities in the county were contacted and asked about their opinions about the cemetery. The result was unanimous. Fillmore County veteran organizations and city officials whole-heartedly supported the proposal with 30 resolutions of support on file. In addition, community support has been great. Commissioners to my knowledge have not heard opposition to this project.

In February 2010, the consensus of the board was to begin the process to move forward with the transfer of land. The 2011 Legislature in special session enacted legislation which supported the proposal. Further, the legislation included language asking for a priority designation by the Commissioner, since the land was proposed to be donated in southeast Minnesota. Following that legislation, collaborative discussions have occurred with all levels of government, countless documents have been submitted, field assessments have been completed, and land records have been reviewed in preparation for the cemetery site approval.

Throughout this process, all of those involved have been very cooperative in providing support for the project. The County Board made the land available, and municipalities supported the donation. Minnesota Veterans' Affairs officials have been most helpful in answering our questions and by providing information. Our Minnesota Senators and Representatives have passed the enabling legislation and are aware of the state's ongoing responsibilities for a cemetery in Fillmore County. Last but not least, Federal officials have been essential in this partnership of governments by funding the Veterans' Cemetery Grants Program.

The keys to an effective process seem to be the following:

Willingness for local elected officials to donate the significant amount of land.

Willingness for local elected Minnesota Representatives and Senators to carry and support the legislation.

Willingness of State of Minnesota agencies to work together in a cooperative manner to come to agreement to finalize these agreements, the transaction.

And willingness of the Federal Government to provide grant funding to finance the construction of the cemetery.

And finally, willingness of the State of Minnesota to fund the ongoing operation and maintenance of the cemetery.

If I might end on a personal note, I would like to add that I've been married to a Viet Nam vet for 42 years in March. Much has changed for the better since he came home. He was discharged from the Navy in '69. As you know, that was not a popular war. There were very few thank you's when those veterans came home.

Today due to national efforts by the Veterans' Affairs and other veterans' advocacy groups to promote support of military personnel and veterans, all of that has changed. Veterans now returning from their tours of duty are welcomed back as heroes, as they should be. Now there are often welcome home events with bands playing, veterans' groups at the airport, families and friends waving flags, and the media capturing it all for the evening news. That is a good thing and a tribute to the VA and the American people to recognize a job well done.

In closing, I would like to say that I feel the national grant process works well, and if successful, will benefit our county for many years to come. I will take any questions. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Karen Brown appears on p. 37.]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Ms. Brown. Mr. Martin is now recognized.

#### STATEMENT OF JON MARTIN

Mr. MARTIN. Good afternoon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Subcommittee members for inviting me to speak to you on the importance of the veterans' cemetery in Fillmore County and to give you some background on the land that Fillmore County is in the process of donating for this purpose.

Let me start by expressing my desire for this cemetery to become a reality in the very near future. This is an asset that is needed for the veterans in the southeast corner of Minnesota and also the veterans in Iowa and Wisconsin. With the travel time to either Minneapolis or Little Falls, the time it takes to register and walk to the grave site and then pay your respects, it takes most of the day. This process can be very exhausting and may be a cause for loved ones to not visit as much as they would like.

Now, some basic information on me. I started with Fillmore County in January of 1996 as a Transfer Station Attendant and held that job for a little over 2 years. In 1998, I was appointed to my present position of Solid Waste Administrator/Resource Recovery Center Manager by the Fillmore County Board of Commissioners. One of my charges there, Mr. Amunrud, likes to call me the gatekeeper of the county farm.

Over the course of my employment with Fillmore County, I have been involved with the land that's called the Fillmore County Farm. This is a piece of property that had a couple of old farmsteads on it that were combined into one parcel. This property was purchased by Fillmore County to build a transfer station when the only solid waste landfill in Fillmore County closed. Over the course of the years, a building was built to house the Source Separated Composting Facility and the Recycling Center. Later on, a new building was built with state grant money to allow the composting operation to be moved under cover and produce a better-finished product. A household hazardous waste building was added to allow for the collection, sorting, packaging, and shipping

of hazardous waste to a licensed shipper for proper disposal. Composting was discontinued in the year 2000 due to a number of reasons, and the recycling center was changed to a single-stream collection system where recyclables are shipped out for processing and marketing. The recycling center and the composting building have now been repurposed for use by the Fillmore County Highway Department for a maintenance shop and a sand and salt shed.

Fillmore County was involved in a program in the early '90's that required the planting of trees on some of the farmland. Fillmore County planted a mix of red and white pines and some walnut trees. These areas have now grown into beautiful spots to walk through and are a haven for all kinds of wildlife.

Speaking of wildlife, Fillmore County allowed hunting on the farm up until last year. With the cemetery moving forward and the need for soil borings, the artifact discovery process, wetland surveying, and the need for people to be out there doing their jobs, Fillmore County decided to close the farm to hunting. Many, many people used the farm for hunting. Some drove a long way because there was not land available for them to hunt on near home. Every fall I would have a list of 30 to 40 people that would ask to hunt there. Everyone was supposed to ask permission to hunt and were given a list of rules to follow. This worked out well for the most part. When Fillmore County decided to close the farm to hunting, very few people were upset when I told them the reason for closing was to facilitate the process of getting a veterans' cemetery here.

In closing, I would like to reinforce to you the support that I have received from hunters that used the farm, hikers that enjoyed walks through it, people that use the transfer station and recycling facility, fishermen and boaters that use the river, and the many people and veterans that I talk to on a daily basis that want to make this veterans' cemetery a reality in Fillmore County.

Thank you for your time and your consideration of this project.

[The prepared statement of Jon Martin appears on p. 38.]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. Martin. I appreciated all of your testimony. Mr. Amunrud, thank you for your service. Ms. Brown, tell your husband thank you for his service. And thank you both for testifying about the collaborative efforts between the state and the state legislature and the state VA and the County Board. At this time, have these groups had any interaction with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs?

Mr. AMUNRUD. These groups, the State Department of Veterans Affairs and the U.S., have had relations. They've had contact. In fact, we've had I think this is the second visit from Washington out to look at the site. They find it spectacular, and they are quite excited.

Mr. RUNYAN. That was my next question, how that interaction has been perceived and how it's going forward.

Mr. AMUNRUD. Yes, and we really, really appreciate that because, you know, when you get collaboration from the top—

Mr. RUNYAN. The Federal Government.

Mr. AMUNRUD. The Federal Government all the way down to the local citizen and it's all smiles, it's all great, everybody wants to see this happen, and we've had absolutely no dissension on any of this. It's all been very good, and I appreciate it. In fact, the State De-

partment of Veterans Affairs has worked very hard internally to help us make this happen, and I want to thank them. I know they will be up to testify.

Mr. RUNYAN. And I want to go there because we're here obviously to, as Congressman Walz said, to make this a model and learn from this experience. We know we don't live in a perfect world, so I think Mr. Martin made a comment about maybe even some people disagreeing with it, but to learn these lessons—Ms. Brown said there was no opposition to it, but there had to be one or two people here and there, and could you give us some examples of that.

Mr. MARTIN. Just some of the people that were not necessarily from the area, but they would—they've been hunting on the farm for years and years and years. They call up and we have to inform them this year that we have closed the farm to hunting. You know, right away, well, what am I going to do now? I don't understand what happens in New Jersey, but hunting is a pretty big deal down here in the southeastern part in Minnesota. And when you close a piece of ground for people to hunt on, some of them get upset. There's no doubt about it. But when you tell them that this is why we're closing it, give them a reason other than, well, we don't want you hunting there anymore, somebody wounded a deer and left it lay, things like that, you tell them it's going for a veterans' cemetery. We're going to have people up there that are doing the wetland surveys, doing the artifacts discovery, surveying, soil borings, stuff like that, they understand. They say that's a great thing. They will find someplace else to hunt. Whether they did or not, that I couldn't say, but they were okay with it after you explained it to them.

Mr. RUNYAN. There are hunters in New Jersey, by the way. I'm actually fortunate enough to own a nice parcel of land, 23 acres, and I have a couple of people that ask to hunt on my property all the time.

Mr. MARTIN. And people that don't ask.

Mr. RUNYAN. Very true. Therefore it must be posted all the time. Maybe for Mr. Amunrud, you had a glowing testimony, but again, where can the process be improved?

Mr. AMUNRUD. Well, Mr. Chairman, Congressman Walz, you mentioned this number, a mandated number. It doesn't seem to make sense for the Midwest. It just doesn't. And I could see it possibly in more denser population areas, but when you start to spread out, I think that's where you could make your improvement, if you could massage that number, you know. I don't know what that number would be, but 80,000 seems just really out there. And that would be one thing I could say.

One of the positives, I always try to think of positives, is that people sitting in this room today is testament to our collaborative efforts. And I want to thank you and your committee for taking the time to have the field hearing here where we could meet and talk with you folks. I'm so pleased with the State of Minnesota, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and I'm pleased with the visits from Washington that have been very fruitful and they were very kind, and the community accepted and welcomed them here. And I think

they felt welcomed as well, and I hope everybody else does feel welcome.

Improvements? I think we've done just about everything we could, and I believe we've done a good job. And I think the government has done a good job. It's in your rules. If you ask me, if there's going to be an improvement, it would be somewhere in your numbers. That's all I have, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. RUNYAN. I appreciate it. With that, I will yield to Mr. Walz.

Mr. WALZ. Again, thank you all. I can't tell you how proud I am to have a small piece in this. I often say I stand on the shoulders of giants, and it's no more true than today of the folks who have done the hard work. But I think the lesson here, and we often talk in our Committee about this and why I think it's so healthy, is the idea when these things are functioning correctly with communications out there, when it is collaborative, and when the best interests of all of our taxpayers as well as those things that we have responsibilities to deliver, like care of our veterans, is put on the forefront—the things that we can achieve are unlimited. So I can tell you this is one of the reasons we wanted to do this, to take a look at this project, to hear this. You've inspired others. So now we're in the southwest talking about it down in Pipestone and other areas. So you start to see what's happening is people want to know how we can replicate this. And I guess maybe in your testimony you explained this, but I think and I'm convinced that on almost anything you do, building that consensus and collaboration locally, allowing people to have a say on what's gone in on this is certainly the right way. Now, obviously if this were a solid waste generator or something, we may have a little more—or a tire burner, I wasn't going to bring it up. But since we all know where that goes, it's truly about the same process, about getting out there and communicating to them.

So I guess maybe I'm hearing from you is that would be your suggestion to other communities because you really have inspired others. And I think you recognize—I think maybe you do, this group does anyway, how far this has reached out to folks not just in Minnesota, but as I said, our colleagues in Congress want to know how we do this, how we make this happen, and how we collaborate together. It's very encouraging for us to hear that you're getting positive responses on things, that people are coming out.

Now, we just this morning, as I said, were discussing the other side of things. There may be some problems in delivering the benefits to those people once we try and inter them in this cemetery. Now, that's another issue we'll continue to improve upon. But from your perspective, if these other communities were going to try and make the case for this and they think that the numbers are approaching where they need to be in terms of veterans, what would your suggestions to them be? How do you start? How do you go do this, to get a cemetery? Go ahead.

Mr. AMUNRUD. Congressman Walz, if I could respond, I believe it would be essential for continuing to make an investment, and that would include a donation as an honorary. I really do. It's not very often—

Mr. WALZ. You think this land contribution pushed this forward? Would we have been able to get this land elsewhere, would there have been money to buy it.

Mr. AMUNRUD. Not really, sir. A limited amount of money from the state legislature was set aside.

Mr. WALZ. The community leader or if we have a private donor? That way, it would be the other way.

Mr. AMUNRUD. Correct. That's right. Yes.

Mr. WALZ. Do you think that's true, Ms. Brown?

Ms. BROWN. I definitely agree. I commend the board on their foresight and to gather the community support to do the transfer because land values in southeast Minnesota are quite high. So it was not an easy decision for the board to make. But they did, went through the process. They talked to the veterans' group. They talked to the communities. They talked to their constituents and had a thoughtful process to come to that decision to make this donation, and therefore had the support of the community and the county to do so.

Mr. WALZ. Once that decision was made, you speak of the process and, Chuck, you said it worked pretty smoothly to go through. Is the process laid out clearly? I mean, it's a wonderful testament to these legislators where we passed from one legislator to Senator Miller, who continued on that legacy and got it done. Is it laid out there how to do this, or were you kind of writing the rules as you went along?

Ms. BROWN. I think they had the political savvy to know what was needed to be done. Their consummate connections to their constituents and those local connections are what made it work. They have a very open process here at the county board. There's a lot of discussions. Our wonderful local newspapers are very good about reporting what the proceedings are from the county board. So there's continual information being given out to the people in the county and the contacts were made. So it's nothing written down. It was just a process to not move too quickly but to gauge the support.

Mr. WALZ. What's left to get this thing done? What has to happen until we start laying those warriors to rest with the honor they deserve?

Mr. AMUNRUD. Presently, Mr. Walz, Mr. Chairman, we are in a quiet title action for a little bit of right of way in the front from the Department of Transportation. There was some issue with the recorded deed that we decided to take care of during the quiet title action. And after that is finished, and we're nearing that now, we should be done with that here in the next couple of weeks. And then it begins the process of getting the site design done. We were trying to get our grant in before the June deadline. Of course we won't be able to make it until next year, so we're past the deadline. Yeah, it's designed and—

Mr. WALZ. Why is June the deadline?

Mr. AMUNRUD. Perhaps later Mr. Swantek, the Little Falls Cemetery Director, there's a grants program that has a deadline for submitting designs and the site to be approved, and I believe it's sometime in June your fiscal year ends. I'm not sure. He could better answer.

Mr. WALZ. I'll ask him some of the specifics, but the process you mentioned is not too cumbersome, it's fair?

Mr. AMUNRUD. Oh, the process is more than fair, and they have been right at our side. They've kept us informed, they have asked for information, and we've provided it. And we've asked them for information, and they were more than willing to provide it. It's been a great process. Yes, they can answer that part. But really now all we need do is begin digging.

Mr. WALZ. If I could be the devil's advocate in this, what if—what happens if we don't get the grant.

Mr. AMUNRUD. You'll have a lot of disappointed people. And I'm not only saying Minnesota, but we're talking western Wisconsin, northeast Iowa. They have all known—this is known. This has been out there for 3 years, going on 4.

Mr. WALZ. I think that's right.

Mr. AMUNRUD. And we've done everything we could possible, our legislature again, the State Department of Veterans Affairs, the planners from Stantec Corporation that are involved in the planning process.

Mr. WALZ. I'll ask when Senator Miller gets up here, I know he gets these letters from constituents who are waiting and you know these stories, that's why I said the June deadline. I would like to think maybe we could have multiple times to get things in so that we can continue to move. It might be an issue that if we're getting there and all our ducks are in order, the idea that a couple of weeks may make us wait an entire another year, does that make sense to you?

Mr. MARTIN. No, it does not. There should be a variance process or something that you can go through.

Mr. WALZ. That's the reason I asked about that. We'll ask that question coming up here.

Mr. AMUNRUD. I would appreciate that.

Mr. WALZ. I guess back to the Chairman.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, gentlemen, and thank all of you for your testimony. And with that, you're now excused.

Mr. AMUNRUD. Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Mr. RUNYAN. I'd like to welcome the third panel up here. This third panel consists of The Honorable Jeremy Miller, Minnesota State Senator, and David Swantek, the Cemetery Director at the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs. Each of you will have five minutes to summarize your testimony and your full written statements will be made part of the hearing record. Senator Miller, you may begin.

**STATEMENTS OF THE HON. JEREMY MILLER, SENATOR, MINNESOTA LEGISLATURE; AND DAVID SWANTEK, CEMETERY DIRECTOR, MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**STATEMENT OF THE HON. JEREMY MILLER**

Mr. MILLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. It feels a little different being on this side of the testimony today.

I'd like to begin by thanking all of you for being here today in Preston, Minnesota, here in Fillmore County. It's a great honor to have you.

Over the past couple years, it has been my honor to work closely with Representative Greg Davids, local officials from Fillmore County, local veterans' organizations, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, and several other officials here in Fillmore County to designate southeastern Minnesota as a location for a new veterans' cemetery. I'd also like to thank, publicly thank, former State Senator Sharon Erickson-Ropes for her work on this issue.

The many veterans in our aging population have created the need for additional cemetery space, and the National Cemetery Association concluded in 2008 that southern Minnesota was outside a recommended 75-mile service area for the state's two existing veterans' cemeteries at Fort Snelling in Minneapolis and in Little Falls in central Minnesota.

More than 30,000 veterans live within 50 miles of this site, and it would mean a tremendous amount to them and their families to know that this nearby spot will be their final resting place. I am proud to be part of honoring our veterans in this way.

Again, I'd like to extend my most sincere thanks to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs for holding this public hearing, and all those who have been involved in helping us make the tremendous progress in this issue before us. And, Congressman Walz, I have to say that you're absolutely right, the local officials, the members of the Fillmore County Board and all the staff have absolutely energized and enthused people about this issue, and they've done the heavy lifting on this.

[The prepared statement of Jeremy Miller appears on p. 39.]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Senator Miller. Mr. Swantek, you're now recognized.

#### **STATEMENT OF DAVID SWANTEK**

Mr. SWANTEK. Chairman Runyan, Congressman Walz, for the record my name is David Swantek. I work for the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, and I am the lead point of contact for the establishment of three proposed new state veterans' cemeteries in the state of Minnesota.

It is a tremendous honor to be before you today in Preston, Minnesota for this hearing honoring our Nation's veterans, examining the Veterans' Cemetery Grants Program.

It was 150 years ago President Abraham Lincoln promised a war-torn nation that those that had borne the battle would be honored and not forgotten. A system of national cemeteries was the product of that promise. These national shrines remain today, a daily reminder to the tremendous cost of freedom and democracy, which we as American citizens have enjoyed since 1776.

It has been my deep privilege for the past 20 years to work with the families of American heroes, our veterans, during the greatest times of need. As a cemetery caretaker at the Oregon Trail State Veterans' Cemetery in my home state of Wyoming and for the past 16 years as the Director of the Minnesota State Veterans' Cemetery in Little Falls, Minnesota, I have been a direct witness on a daily basis to the profound gratitude that veterans' families experience



knowing their loved ones rest with honor in perpetuity next to their comrades in arms. The State of Minnesota is proud to provide this honor to those who seek our services, and we are committed to expanding access to this earned benefit throughout our great state.

In 1985, the Minnesota State Legislature passed legislation authorizing a state veterans' cemetery in Minnesota. The location was undetermined and the state had no formal plans to construct a state veterans' cemetery. In 1986, two World War II veterans from central Minnesota discovered the authorizing legislation from the previous year and were determined to have a state veterans' cemetery constructed in central Minnesota. As members of a local DAV chapter, these veterans identified a parcel of property, raised the funds necessary to purchase the property, and donated the site to the State of Minnesota to be used for a new state veterans' cemetery. Due to a lack of development funds, the State of Minnesota did not pursue the development of a cemetery and instead returned the donated land back to the local DAV chapter in 1989. Undeterred, this local group of veterans organized an association and began soliciting development funds from state veterans' service organizations, local businesses, and individual donors. This group of dedicated veterans built a ground swell of support in the legislature and ultimately with former Governor Arne Carlson.

Outside the control of the state, in 1994 a decision was made to begin operating burials of veterans at the cemetery in Little Falls. While understandable from the perspective of a dedicated group of veterans, it was detrimental to the early development of the cemetery in Little Falls.

In 1995, the State of Minnesota was awarded its first grant from NCA. At the time, the grant program was a 50 percent matching grant, requiring the state to provide 50 percent of the costs for construction.

In 1999, Congress authorized NCA to begin providing up to 100 percent of the development costs to construct, expand, or improve state veterans' cemeteries, and the State of Minnesota applied for a second grant from NCA in 2001 for our cemetery in Little Falls. Last July the cemetery in Little Falls was recognized by the State Veterans' Grants Program for excellence of appearance. Only four of 86 state veterans' cemeteries in operation have been awarded this honor. And I'm especially proud of this recognition, given our humble beginnings and difficult circumstances under which the cemetery in Little Falls was established.

In 2007, Governor Tim Pawlenty announced that the state would construct an additional state veterans' cemetery in northeast Minnesota.

And during the 2008 legislative session, it was necessary to amend the authorizing legislation to allow the state to operate additional cemeteries in Minnesota.

In 2009, we reported to the state legislature that the areas of southeast and southwest Minnesota also had population centers that would support the construction of new state veterans' cemeteries in southern Minnesota.

In 2010, we provided information to Fillmore County about the requirements of a suitable site in this area, and they were sup-

portive and offered a donation of the 155 acres that we're talking about today. It required, as has been mentioned in earlier testimony, that there was some necessary amendments to the language in the state legislature for the authorization of a cemetery in southeast Minnesota. And I'm happy today to report that we've made significant progress in doing site suitability work, environmental and cultural assessment, soil borings, grading analysis, and other requirements that are necessary to construct a state veterans' cemetery.

Since 1994, the state committed to provide our Nation's heroes with a final resting place which commemorates and honors their sacrifice and service to our country.

Because of the cooperation of state, Federal, and local officials, I'm confident that in the near future we will gather again to dedicate a new national shrine in Fillmore County to honor our American heroes. I'll be happy to take your questions.

[The prepared statement of David Swantek appears on p. 39.]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. Swantek. With that, I'll start the first round of questions. Going back to what we asked the panel earlier as to lessons learned, and Congressman Walz made an example out of this, Senator Miller, can you further explain the legislative efforts that went into this, the new veterans' cemetery and that process?

Mr. MILLER. Sure. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. We had to make some language changes basically first to designate southern Minnesota and then later to give Fillmore County a priority for a veterans' cemetery. I can't say enough again about the local officials here in Fillmore County. They really have done the heavy lifting. I can't say enough about the Minnesota Veterans' Affairs and their department. It has just been an honor and a privilege to work with them. And this proves that although government sometimes works slowly, that it does work, and it's been an honor and a privilege to work again with these folks.

Mr. RUNYAN. The next question is for Mr. Swantek. Given your experience with the cemeteries here in Minnesota, what is your overall impression of the Veterans' Cemetery Grants process?

Mr. SWANTEK. Well, I've been involved with the grants program for a lot of years. We've had a couple multimillion dollar projects in Little Falls. I find the grants office to be very easy to work with, very responsive to questions that we might have regarding design, the submittal process that's required in their office. And, you know, over the years they've had different directors in that office out there, and we continue to find that they are hiring very capable individuals, and our experience in Minnesota has been very positive with that office.

Mr. RUNYAN. You said in your testimony that it can be difficult to find a site and obviously you said as directors move through, sometimes it is difficult. So from your experience, what are the things that you look for as we use this as a model? What are the things you use in looking for a site?

Mr. SWANTEK. Mr. Chairman, we have an extensive list of site standards, everything from aesthetics to environmental concerns, cultural concerns. A mistake a lot of people make in other areas of the state when we've gone and looked at potential cemetery

properties is you walk out on a site, just like here in Fillmore County, and aesthetically it's magnificent. I've looked at pieces of property in Duluth for a cemetery that we've proposed up there that are some of the most impressive pieces of property I've ever stepped foot on overlooking Lake Superior. But we're concerned also with what the development potential is ten feet below the surface. Our day-to-day operation is a cemetery, and so what may look very beautiful, may not work for a cemetery. So the process of almost seeing it as maybe a subdivision or some kind of community development project is more how you have to look at it from the perspective of aesthetics and a long other list of criteria. And to find a local government partner like Fillmore County to step forward, to donate a suitable piece of property has been key. We've been looking for property in Duluth since 2008, and while we've had cooperation from the county government in St. Louis County, we've just not been able to produce a suitable site up there, which is a frustration for the veterans community in northeast Minnesota.

Mr. RUNYAN. Was it hard, in your mind, to move this site into the suitable site category?

Mr. SWANTEK. Mr. Chairman, no. When we did some of the initial studies, there were no significant red flags that came about. We've done environmental work. We've done cultural work. We've done wetland delineation on the property. Fillmore County, not knowing maybe fully what we expected for a cemetery site, offered up as close to a perfect donation for a cemetery site as possible.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you very much. With that, I will yield to Mr. Walz.

Mr. WALZ. Well, thank you both indeed for your testimony. And, Senator Miller, I want to thank you for your work on this, along with Representative Davids. I'd also like to note your graciousness to former Senator Ropes. It honors the democracy, and I'm very appreciative of that, so thank you for that upon delivering for our veterans and making that the highest priority.

Senator, we're hearing this again, to try and, you know, we want to make sure that we're working on metrics, the number of veterans. You heard the numbers that I was giving from the VA's requirements. But I would also make the argument that there needs to be some variance in that based on geographic location. How important is this local collaborative effort in helping you make the case that you made to your colleagues to pass this and move it into Mr. Swantek's court, and basically of us moving into the next step? Again, I'm trying to look for these other communities, what they can do to make this work?

Mr. MILLER. Sure. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Congressman Walz. In this scenario, Fillmore County made it easy. They made it easy for us because they donated the land, a prime piece of property in a beautiful part of the state. So we certainly can use this as an example. It's extremely important for the constituents here in southeastern Minnesota as well as in Wisconsin and Iowa. It's not just a Minnesota thing. It is regional, and that's very important. But we can truly use this as a model, and maybe there's a way that we can encourage other communities to donate the land as well because it's worked very well. We know that money is tight

at the Federal level. It's tight at the state level. It's tight at the local level. So anything we can do to encourage collaborative effort for our local units of government to work together with us at the state level and you folks at the Federal level, it will be extremely helpful.

Mr. WALZ. Well, I think that public/private partnership is the key. My fear is to watch somebody on a, if you will, and not an oversimplification, but on a bureaucratic line say, well, you don't have 80,000, a better location would be here when there is no community involvement, there has been no effort of collaboration, and now all of a sudden we're just picking a spot where we say this would be a better geographic spot to meet our requirements of 80,000 veterans. And maybe to you, Mr. Swantek, is that something that can happen? Would you anticipate that could be an outcome of saying you simply don't have the volume of veterans, and we would feel if you moved closer towards Olmsted County or something, whatever, I just fear that when you've got a community, you've got by, and you've got the collaboration built, you've got the resources being compiled, could it happen, though, that would be the case of where they would choose to make this based on the metric of veterans.

Mr. SWANTEK. Mr. Chairman, Congressman Walz, I believe those—the veteran population centers when you get down under 80,000 is the perfect example of where a state veterans' cemetery comes in and provides a cemetery in the locations that don't meet that Federal criteria. If you look at the three projects that we have competing on the priority list for state cemetery construction funding, this project in southeast Minnesota has about 50,000 veterans. Our other two projects are down in the 20,000 range, but yet they compete very high on the state cemetery priority list. So if you can find a state, and I talk to colleagues of mine in other states, they do not have the support of their state legislature like we do in Minnesota.

Mr. WALZ. That's just making it harder. Is that why they're coming to me and saying this, so I have this in my questionnaire for Senator Miller, we set the priorities, we have a Federal grant process, it's going to be important to make this happen? But Senator Miller knows his constituents well, he knows this area well, and the case to make is if the state can make the case for this cemetery, that should be an overriding factor on the grant process to say we need to deliver because the Senator, the Representatives, the County Commissioners, everyone else has done their work, now we need to take the case. Because I think one of the fears is now all of a sudden the Federal Government's going to trump this whole decision-making, and that's very frustrating. So I think at this point it's worked the way it's supposed to, would that be fair to say?

Mr. SWANTEK. Mr. Chairman, Congressman Walz, absolutely. The process has worked, I don't want to say flawlessly, but worked very well in the State of Minnesota in my experience.

Mr. WALZ. Mr. Swantek, and my time is running out, but I just want to follow up on this, do you think there's any reason why we couldn't have multiple entry dates to try and get the grants.

Mr. SWANTEK. Mr. Chairman and Congressman Walz, it's a date that runs up against the end of the Federal fiscal year. So there are multiple dates along the way that we can submit design plans to the grants office. If we miss a deadline on May 15th, we just get right into the cycle. It doesn't mean we have to wait until May 15th the following year. We can make that submit along May 17th. It's just that we won't get funded from this cemetery, from the National Cemetery Administration, until—

Mr. WALZ. In September, that's wishful thinking—the process is so frustrating. I understand exactly what you're saying. The process is that is somewhat of an arbitrary date anyway as the appropriation process works its way out. I guess maybe I'm more like some of these veterans, I don't know how many years I can wait type of attitude on this. I think when it comes to serving our veterans, that this is one that my patience is—I'm so short fused on. I want to get it done as quickly as possible. And I think, yes, it's only a year, yes, we're in the process, yes, they'll get the grant, but that's slower time to get this thing built. So I appreciate your understanding that and that we can go forward, but if there's anything we can do to speed that up, I would certainly appreciate it. I'll go back to Chairman Runyan for more questions.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, gentlemen. I thank you, gentlemen, for your testimony, and you're now excused, and we'll welcome the fourth panel up.

The fourth panel consists of Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations of the National Cemetery Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. He's accompanied by Joshua de Leon, the Director of Veterans Cemetery Grants Service at the National Cemetery Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

**STATEMENT OF GLENN POWERS, DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR FIELD PROGRAMS, NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; ACCOMPANIED BY JOSHUA DE LEON, DIRECTOR OF VETERANS CEMETERY GRANTS SERVICE, NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Mr. POWERS. Thank you, Chairman Runyan and Representative Walz. I appreciate the opportunity to speak today regarding the efforts taken by the VA, Congress, and the State of Minnesota to honor our Nation's veterans with a specific focus on the Veterans' Cemetery Grants Program. I would like to submit my written statement for the record.

Mr. RUNYAN. The complete written statement will be entered into the hearing record.

Mr. POWERS. It is an honor to be here in Preston to be a part of the discussion on how to meet the burial needs of veterans in the state. I'm joined by Mr. Joshua de Leon, the Director of the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program.

Previously you heard from David Swantek, Director of the State of Minnesota, Little Falls Veterans' Cemetery. The VA has worked closely with Mr. Swantek on various successful grants for that cemetery. We continue to work with him in our review and processing

of a grant application request for funding for a state cemetery in Fillmore County.

I would also like to acknowledge the many representatives from various local veteran service organizations and the many local veterans here today. The VA seeks to ensure that eligible veterans and their loved ones are provided a burial option in a national, state, or tribal veterans' cemetery. The National Cemetery Administration managed the system of 131 VA national cemeteries in 39 states and in Puerto Rico. The Veterans' Cemetery Grants Program, which was authorized by Congress in 1978, provides a critical partnership with the states in ensuring grant funding is available to establish state, tribal, and U.S. territory veteran cemeteries. Grant-funded cemeteries provide a burial option in places where veterans are not fully served by the VA National Cemetery. For Minnesota veterans, Fort Snelling National Cemetery, located over 115 miles or 2 hours away from Preston, serves veterans in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. It is the fourth busiest cemetery in our nationwide system. Minnesota veterans are also served by the Minnesota State Veterans' Cemetery near Little Falls. This is close to 4 hours from Preston, with VA and the state playing important roles in supporting and administering grant applications. VA may fund up to 100 percent of development costs for projects to establish, expand, improve, and maintain a state, tribal, or U.S. territory veterans' cemetery.

Since 1978, VA has awarded over 275 grants totaling more than 482 million dollars to 86 veterans' cemeteries. State and tribal organizations are responsible for acquiring the land and maintaining the cemeteries once they become operational. These federally funded cemeteries must operate solely for the interment of eligible veterans and their eligible spouses and dependents. They are required to conform to VA prescribed standards and guidelines for site selection, planning, construction, appearance, and operations. They are to meet the same national shrine standards as our VA national cemeteries. VA awards grants based on processes and implementing regulations. These are designed to ensure a fair and equitable grant administration that benefits the greatest number of veterans. Applicants are ranked on a priority list based upon the size of the veteran population to be served and the type of grant, either to expand an existing cemetery, to keep it open, or to establish a new cemetery. The state or tribal organization must pass legislation authorizing the project and providing the necessary architectural and engineering funds to allow the project to be developed. One hundred percent of these costs are reimbursable following the grant award.

We are pleased to work with the State of Minnesota on their plans to continue to ensure more veterans will have access to a burial option. The State of Minnesota has applied for a VA grant to expand and improve the Minnesota State Veterans' Cemetery in Little Falls. This grant is included as part of the department's current year, fiscal year 2012 operating plan. The proposed Minnesota State Veterans' Cemetery in Fillmore County would be a critical need in providing an estimated 50,000 additional veterans with a burial option within 75 miles of their residences. Mr. de Leon and I walked the proposed site today which the county generously plans

to donate for the proposed state cemetery. The VA will continue to work with the State of Minnesota for the fiscal year 2013 prioritization process.

I appreciate the Subcommittee's continued interest in improving access to burial options for veterans, and I'm available to take your questions.

[The prepared statement of Glenn Powers appears on p. 41.]

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. Powers. Can I have a status update on the proposed site including, where we're at in the process? Have you had any discussions at that level?

Mr. POWERS. I'm going to defer to Mr. de Leon. Obviously we had status updates with Mr. Swantek today when we walked the site.

Mr. DE LEON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Congressman Walz. First off, I just want to talk about the overall relationship with the State of Minnesota and Mr. Swantek and Mr. Shellito. We are very proud to have them as state partners. We also have a very long history dating back to 1995 with the Little Falls State Veterans' Cemetery in Minnesota. I also want to point out in terms of this overall package, it's a very good package. We'd love to see this happen in terms of what Mr. Powers mentioned, over 50,000 veterans. Just to clarify, we're not limited by the 80,000 specials for national cemeteries on the state cemetery program. So that said, there are four programs in the priority list for FY '12 for the State of Minnesota. Three of those four were opted to be deferred by the State of Minnesota. But three of those four are new establishment projects, all 50,000 and as Mr. Swantek mentioned, 20,000 each in terms of the unserved veteran population. So in terms of again the State of Minnesota and our partnership, we're very proud of that and would love to see these projects go through. That said, in terms of overall status with the Preston, Minnesota, MN 10-05 project, the project was to establish a new establishment of the preapplication submitted on June 29, 2010. A grant opportunity letter was sent to the State of Minnesota on October 1st of 2011, just last year. On October 12, 2011, the land for the proposed cemetery was walked by a project manager from my office as well as members of Mr. Swantek and other members from the State Department of Veterans Affairs in Minnesota. The State of Minnesota accepted the grant opportunity on October 15, 2011. The process that was in play at the time from the—from October 15th through about February—or I'm sorry, the January time frame was site suitability determination, which is basically on the shoulders of Minnesota State to complete the suitability determination. That work was in progress. The project was deferred on February 16th of 2012. From that point, the deferral, the deferral project for our program are automatically placed in the next cycle for priority list, so this project would automatically be a preapplication. It would basically be a default preapplication submission for the FY '13 priority list process.

The other thing I want to point out in terms of whether this project places, again talking about the threshold of 80,000 and 50,000, that not being necessarily a threshold for our program. That said, the way the Veterans' Cemetery Grants Program priority list was in Minnesota, southeast site in Preston, the proposed project ranked number 11 out of 104 projects for FY '12 in terms

of our priority list. That is very high, okay? In terms of the priority grouping, so as referenced in our written testimony, there are four priority groups. All of the new establishments are placed in priority group two. In terms of priority group two, this ranked the highest in terms of unserved veteran population. So we're very confident in this project and are very—again, it's an open process on an annual basis. We're confident that it should fare well in FY '13.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thanks for that. That answered most of the questions I had for you. But going back and again trying to use this as a platform for other states to do similar things, are there any other factors that are taken into consideration before a grant is approved other than the steps that you've outlined? For example, if the cemetery meets all of this criteria, is the proposal automatically approved?

Mr. DE LEON. I'm sorry, sir, can you clarify the question?

Mr. RUNYAN. If you meet all the criteria, are you automatically approved, or is it constantly having to go through the process over and over.

Mr. DE LEON. Sure. Thank you, sir, for the question. In terms of the completion of the criteria for the grants process, again, it's on an annual basis. Mr. Swantek had mentioned a May 15th deadline. Also in addition to site suitability, since this work is going to be contracted out for development construction work, I think one of the other gentlemen in the earlier panels mentioned that there's construction planning that goes on, and the process actually has to go out to bid. So some of this in terms of the deferral, I think the State of Minnesota actually graciously deferred the project, seeing how many steps were required to actually meet the deadline. It wasn't necessarily the deadline. The process was open, and the state actually deferred based upon where it landed in the planning process.

Mr. RUNYAN. And in your dealing with that, how long on average does the grant program application process usually take?

Mr. DE LEON. Let's say the site suitability went through and the earlier mentioned title action was not an actual issue, if everything had gone and as you had mentioned, full completion of criteria for the grant program, sir, all grant applications would have been viewed by July 15th for completion, with the completion of all the criteria. From that point in time, the secretary of the VA then reviews and approves by 30 September of that same year the grant package, and probably less than a week later grant award letters are sent out notifying the state of the grant award, with work being able to begin immediately.

Mr. RUNYAN. So in your experience, has this project taken any more or any less time than average.

Mr. DE LEON. Sir, in terms of new establishments, you know, we typically have, from what I've seen, various issues that come into play. Deferrals are relatively common for new establishments. Site acquisition is tough for any state. There's also resource issues involved with planning. I mentioned some of the other, you know, contract processes that are in play, getting available vendors to participate and come in with the state guidelines, which we defer to the states in terms of their process. But in terms of how this ranks with other projects that are deferrals, I would say this is ba-



sically par for the course. I mean, this is common for new establishment projects. Again, in terms of once these issues are worked out, our process works by an annual cycle, within one cycle, one fiscal year cycle.

Mr. RUNYAN. Just one last question, not to get too far into the weeds, but obviously a lot of the burden of proof is put on the state to come to you. Does the program itself challenge any of their—whether they are geological or water surveys, all that kind of stuff, or do you leave it all up to them, or do you come in and duplicate those surveys? Being stewards of the taxpayers' money, is it a dual process there?

Mr. DE LEON. Yes, sir, and it's a good question, thank you. It's actually a very fine line we walk. We talk about optimizing taxpayer dollars, including the right to any of the following court regulations, court and Federal regulations, and in our case that's project 39, which we try to use as C. That said, on my staff I have project managers who are actually landscape architects. When I mentioned that we walked the site after the opportunity letter went out in October, within a week after the letter went out, my staff actually flew out here and did the site walkthrough. We want to see these projects go through. I'm a veteran myself, Mr. Powers is a veteran, and we're proud to serve in this capacity, and we would like to see these projects go through.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Mr. de Leon. I'll yield to Mr. Walz.

Mr. WALZ. Thank you, Chairman. It's a nice segue, and I wanted to thank you both for that. I wanted to thank you for choosing your professional lives to serve our veterans' interment. This is an incredibly important part of that process. I would argue it's a very important part of our country, of how we take care of those willing to serve. So thank you for that. And it's very helpful for me to hear you lay these things out, this criteria, and I'm glad to hear because I think the word was more maybe anecdote than anything, those concentration numbers were seen as more of a priority than they are. But what I'm hearing from you is the whole package, the whole proposal, you may not have a concentration of 60,000 or 80,000, it may be 20,000. But if that's in the right area and the state comes through with the proper proposal, they are going to be viewed with the same favorable eye as another one. That's very helpful. Any chance, I know this is the chance you take again as you said this project was 11 out of 104. The first ten were additions to the existing facility, priority one, which you have to keep those going?

Mr. DE LEON. Yes, sir.

Mr. WALZ. So they were the first of the new constructions, first on the list of new construction. I guess we face the possibility that there could have been others coming in this year that would do that, but my take is, of those 104, how many will be funded?

Mr. DE LEON. Of the 104 served, Federal RFY total priority list fell in about half of that list. So in terms of our priority groups, for FY '12 our approved budget, and again thank you for your support in terms of the Subcommittee. We were able to fund all priority one—priority group one, two, and three and a good portion of our priority group four projects with our FY '12 budget, sir.

Mr. WALZ. That was my next question on that. Are there adequate resources, consistently approving adequate dollars into this program to make sure we care for our veterans, and I understand this is a question that goes all the way to the secretary's level when he makes his budget, but is that—in your opinion, are we getting there.

Mr. DE LEON. Sir, again, thank you for the question. We appreciate the Committee's continued support for the Veterans' Cemetery Grants Program. We work closely with the state and also the tribes to make sure we're meeting their needs based on our annual appropriations and our priority list. And in FY '12, if that's any indication, we were able to successfully fund priority groups one, two, and three projects, which are our highest priority projects through FY '12.

Mr. WALZ. That's great. In what you've heard today from the folks in here, starting with the local veterans who came back and made the case to this, to the County Commissioners who made this layout, to the State Representatives who spanned election cycles and parties to still continue to get this done, you said on time-wise it's about par for the course, but is this the proper approach to this, in your opinion, with the State of Minnesota's input from the Veterans' Affairs? You guys see this all over the country. You get to see a 50,000-foot view of everybody doing this. Is this the proper way to approach this?

Mr. POWERS. Sir, from everything I've seen, it is. I mean, you need community support. Once that cemetery is built, that community support has to stay there. In order for that cemetery to function as sacred ground, the people there have to know that it's sacred ground. The community revolves around that cemetery. We see that in our larger cemeteries and our smaller cemeteries. And if I may, the question of adequate support, I'd just like to comment that in 2004 in terms of our criteria of how many veterans were served, NCA considered 75 percent of our Nation's veterans were served with a cemetery at the appropriate distance. Because of this fabric of our national cemeteries, our State Cemetery Grants Program, we are at 90 percent, and by 2015 our strategic goal is to achieve 95 percent. So these are overlapping things. That's why when you talk about 80,000 here, that's the criteria for the national cemetery. But then when we come down to the state cemetery grants program, any state cemetery, any state legislature can put their applications in.

Mr. WALZ. So we really have given more control back to the local states, given back control to the local regions to make these with support from the Federal Government.

Mr. POWERS. We give them that ability. Actually we look at that window. They operate in below the 80,000 mark, come up with, you know, obviously the criteria does place some emphasis on concentration of population, and that's why this particular cemetery with 51,000 veterans, I think some people mentioned earlier in testimony 26,000. I think they were only looking within the Minnesota boundaries, but you've got Wisconsin and Iowa there too. So this one, although there are no guarantees when that slate comes up for fiscal year 2013, you've got a large concentration of 50,000 veterans. That achieves our strategic goals because when we lay out

strategic goals in NCA for serving veterans, the states are our partners in how we do that.

Mr. WALZ. So you say if Chairman Runyan and myself go back and we talk to our colleagues and in our districts also, other places here, kind of lit a fire under a lot of folks to see some potential, if we go talk to our colleagues on this, we can lay out this collaborative effort, this nature of getting those partnerships of making sure that your application stresses all of those things, plus those commitments, and that will ensure they've got a better chance to get this off and funded.

Mr. POWERS. It's all about collaboration, and Mr. Swantek has long been part of our fabric. He goes to our training activities. Our engineers visit his cemetery that's been in operation to advise, assist, whatever we can do. It's all part of the team.

Mr. WALZ. And I might add, it feels like I spent a lot of my life up at Camp Ripley, and I can tell you that that facility is second to none. And that cemetery is a real sense of pride. A lot of veterans go through those gates right down the road to Ripley. A lot of veterans have gone through there as they got deployed then and left for elsewhere, and that cemetery is certainly part of the fabric, so I thank you both for that. I yield back to Mr. Chairman.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, gentlemen. I thank both of you for your service to this country's cause on both fronts. Thank you both. And with that, that completes our oversight hearing today. In closing, I want to say to Minnesota veterans and all veterans, that the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and my Subcommittee will continue to listen to your needs and work to fix several issues that we discussed here today.

Congressman Walz, I want to thank you for inviting me here to your district today and helping make this important hearing possible. It's been a pleasure having you serve as my Ranking Member at this hearing. And I know veterans and the Subcommittee benefit greatly from your dedication and your military service. Thank you for that. Do you have any closing remarks?

Mr. WALZ. Just again, thank you, Chairman, for coming out, the commitment, and I hope for all of you—you're a great example for all of us. I see that that spirit of collaboration and stewardship of taxpayer dollars, as well as fulfilling our moral obligation to our veterans is alive and well. I would like—and I think Mr. Powers really hit on this, and I can assure you it may not show up as a tangible in the application for this, but this community understands this. They understand that this will transform Preston into already a very special place, but it will be hallowed ground and that peace, you can feel it amongst the people. You can feel the sense of pride. So I think that's why the sense of urgency to get this done, to show what's possible, and to honor those veterans is so strong. So with that, Mr. Chairman, thank you for all the hard work you do and hopefully you got a little taste of southern Minnesota. So with that, I yield back.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you very much. I ask unanimous consent that all members have five legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks. Hearing no objections, so ordered. Once again, it's been my pleasure to be with you all here today, and I thank all the esteemed witnesses for their testimony, and my good

friend Mr. Walz for inviting me and being present here today. With that being said, this hearing is now adjourned.  
[Whereupon, at 3:48 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

## A P P E N D I X

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### Prepared Statement of Hon. Jon Runyan, Chairman

Good morning. Usually when we hold our DAMA Subcommittee hearings, we are sitting in Washington. Today, I am honored and happy to be here with all of you at the Fillmore County Courthouse, in the District of my colleague and good friend, the Honorable Timothy Walz.

I would like to personally thank Mr. Walz for inviting me to his district, and I'd like to thank everyone for being with us today.

Although we are far away from our normal hearing room on the Hill and the CSPAN cameras, this is still an official Congressional oversight hearing of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, and therefore hearing rules of hearing conduct apply.

Therefore, I would respectfully request that everyone be courteous to our witnesses and remain silent until the hearing is formally adjourned.

In Chairing the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, I have had the opportunity to work on many issues that affect our Nation's veterans, whether they are in my home district of New Jersey, here in Minnesota, or elsewhere across the Nation.

From working on these issues, I have learned firsthand that a veteran's final resting place is a subject of the utmost importance, not just to those who have served our country, but also to their families and loved ones.

As our veteran population continues to age, and as we wind down two overseas conflicts, the placement of our national and state veterans' cemeteries becomes increasingly important.

Accordingly, we are here today to talk about the Veterans' Cemetery Grants Program and the possibility of placing a new veterans cemetery right here in Fillmore County.

It is my understanding that the need for a veterans' cemetery exists and a suitable location has already been determined. I look forward to hearing more from the citizens of Fillmore County, as well as the VA, in today's testimony.

It is my hope that by bringing all parties together here today, we can make progress in evaluating the Veterans' Cemetery Grants Program and, ultimately, to serve the needs of our veterans as best we can.

As I'm sure many of you are aware, cemeteries established under the grant program must conform to the standards and guidelines pertaining to site selection, planning, and construction, as prescribed by VA.

These cemeteries must be operated solely for the burial of servicemembers who die on active duty, veterans, and their eligible spouses and dependent children. Further, any cemetery assisted by a VA grant must be maintained and operated according to the operational standards and measures of the National Cemetery Administration.

So, we are here today to examine this process, not from afar in Washington DC, but right here in Fillmore County where this program has a chance to make a direct impact.

Currently, there are approximately 45,000 veterans in southern Minnesota who would be eligible for burial in a veterans' cemetery. It is my understanding that VA is aware of the need for a veterans' cemetery in this area, and I hope that through our efforts here today, we are able to accomplish this goal of ensuring that this need is fulfilled.

Before jumping ahead to the specific steps of how ensure the establishment of a new veterans' cemetery, I'd like to welcome our witnesses here today who will be speaking in detail on the need for a cemetery here in Fillmore County, and the steps that have been taken thus far.

Again, I am delighted to be with you today and I will now yield to the gentleman from Minnesota, and my good friend, the Honorable Tim Walz.

**Prepared Statement of Steve O'Connor, Past State Commander, Veterans of Foreign Wars**

MR. CHAIRMAN, MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE; THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO TESTIFY ON THIS IMPORTANT ISSUE PERTAINING TO OUR COUNTRY'S VETERANS AND THE VETERANS OF SOUTHEAST MINNESOTA.

FOR THE RECORD MY NAME IS STEPHEN J. O'CONNOR. I AM A PAST STATE COMMANDER OF THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS DEPARTMENT OF MINNESOTA, A RETIRED ARMY OFFICER AND A SERVICE CONNECTED VIET NAM VETERAN.

THE VETERANS CEMETERY GRANT PROGRAM PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE FEDERAL, STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, IN THIS CASE FILLMORE COUNTY, TO WORK TOGETHER TO PROVIDE AREA VETERANS A FINAL RESTING PLACE HONORING THEIR SERVICE TO THEIR COUNTRY.

I FEEL CERTAIN THAT THE CONSTRUCTION OF A STATE VETERANS CEMETERY IN SOUTHEASTERN MINNESOTA WOULD NOT BE A POSSIBILITY IF IT WERE NOT FOR THE COMMITMENT AND WILLINGNESS OF THE FILLMORE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS TO WORK WITH LOCAL VETERANS ORGANIZATIONS, THE STATE LEGISLATURE, THE MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES TO IDENTIFY AND DEVELOP A SUITABLE SITE. FILLMORE COUNTY ALONG WITH THE SURROUNDING MUNICIPALITIES HAVE ALWAYS STOOD FIRMLY IN SUPPORT OF THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO HAVE SERVED THIS NATION. THEY PARTICIPATE IN THE COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICER PROGRAM, WHICH OFFERS ASSISTANCE TO VETERANS REESTABLISHING THEMSELVES IN CIVILIAN LIFE AND HAVE DONATED 155 ACRES OF COUNTY PROPERTY AS A FINAL RESTING PLACE FOR THOSE HEROES WHO HAVE ANSWERED THE LAST CALL. THE LOCAL BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT HAVE PARTNERED WITH BOTH PRIVATE AND PUBLIC ENTITIES TO PROVIDE FOR ITS VETERANS.

AS A VETERAN, I AM EXTREMELY PLEASED THAT THERE WILL BE A CEMETERY WHERE I CAN BE INTERRED WITH MY COMRADES. ALTHOUGH THERE WILL BE COMRADES FROM MANY DIFFERENT WARS, FROM MANY DIFFERENT ERAS, WE ALL SHARE AN EXPERIENCE THAT CAN NEVER BE EXPLAINED TO THE PROTECTED AND DOESN'T NEED TO BE EXPLAINED TO THE WARRIOR. IT IS FITTING THAT THERE SHOULD BE A HALLOWED PLACE DESIGNATED FOR OUR ETERNAL REST.

THANK YOU AND THAT ENDS MY TESTIMONY. I WILL BE PLEASED TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS THE COMMITTEE MAY HAVE.

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**Prepared Statement of Lucinda Barth, Sergeant, MN Army National Guard  
Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom**

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of Veterans from the surrounding area. I take great pride in representing them here today as I testify in front of the Veterans Affairs Subcommittee.

My name is Lucinda Barth. I am a Sergeant in the Minnesota National Guard and a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. I am also a service-connected disabled veteran.

It is approximately 140 miles to the Veterans Affairs national cemetery located at Fort Snelling in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The state veterans' cemetery located in Little Falls, Minnesota is 236 miles. These cemeteries are a great distance to travel for a veteran that would like to be interred in a Veterans' cemetery. Not to mention the inconvenience a loved one would have to endure to visit the site of their loved one. I believe that if the Department of Veterans Affairs would approve the grant for this cemetery here in Fillmore County that the surrounding veterans and their families will want their loved ones memorialized at that cemetery.

The number of veterans in the Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin area that this cemetery would serve is well over 43,000 veterans; each and every one of these veterans deserve to have the right to choose to be interred in veteran cemetery within a reasonable distance from their loved ones. This cemetery will give those veterans and their families the opportunity they didn't think was possible before.

I have traveled the world and seen some beautiful places; none of it compares to the beauty that we have right here in Fillmore County, in Preston. It's not only

beautiful but it's serene; I believe that this is an ideal location for a cemetery where we want our veterans' families to feel that their loved one is at peace.

I have been told on several occasions that it takes a special kind of person to join the Armed Forces to fight for this country. Whether they were told to join during the Vietnam era or joined when it became an all volunteer military; we are all still that special kind of person. Preston would provide that special final resting place that those veterans so honorably deserve to have.

I strongly encourage for you to go back to Washington DC and vote in favor for Fillmore County to be the final resting place for so many veterans in the surrounding area. They deserve to have a place that will bring them and their families the peace that they need after the loss of a dear loved one. I know that Preston can bring that peace to so many families.

Again thank you for this wonderful opportunity to voice my opinion on this matter.

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### **Prepared Statement of Nathan Pike, County Veteran Service Officer Olmsted County**

First off, I would like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify on behalf of over twenty-three thousand veterans and their families of southeast Minnesota which includes the following eight counties: Fillmore, Olmsted, Mower, Dodge, Goodhue, Wabasha, Winona and Houston. This is an excellent opportunity to testify on the important issues of gaining a veterans cemetery in Fillmore County.

My name is Nathan D. Pike. I am a veteran of the active Army and a retired Minnesota Army National Guard non-commissioned officer with over twenty-one years of service. I served two tours of duty in support of the KFOR operations in Kosovo and a tour as an embedded trainer to the Afghan National Army in 2005. I am also a service-connected disabled veteran.

In the spring of 2010 I applied and received the job of Fillmore County Veteran Service Officer. In the summer of 2011 I started the position of County Veteran Service Officer in Olmsted County. I am a current resident of Fillmore County residing in Spring Valley. As a CVSO my job is to provide assistance to local veterans and their families with Department of Veterans Affairs benefits, state veteran benefits and anything remotely related to veteran issues and concerns for the veterans and their families of Olmsted County, Minnesota.

My first point I would like to address; it is my belief and that of many other veterans, that the Department of Veterans Affairs holds the responsibility of caring for the servicemember upon discharge (veteran) to grave, and if need be, assisting the surviving widow/widower with benefits should they (surviving family members) be eligible for said VA benefits. The VA can easily serve the veterans of southeast Minnesota with a veteran's cemetery to be specifically located in Fillmore County. The Fillmore County Board of Commissioners has graciously authorized the donation of land for this project. The excellent support is evident within the veteran service organizations of Fillmore County which includes the Fillmore County Council of the American Legion (the oldest Legion county council in the Nation) as well as unanimous support from the people and towns of Fillmore County. Even southeast Minnesota's largest print media Rochester Post Bulletin has endorsed the idea of a veteran's cemetery in Fillmore County. Providing a veterans cemetery in Fillmore County has the potential of serving over 23,626 veterans and eligible family members for the benefit of burial in a veteran cemetery. I researched the number of veterans from the American Community Survey from 2010 which provided the current and most relevant data that I could find concerning veteran population in southeast Minnesota. The Committee should also take into account that even with the Iraq War done there will be more veterans returning to southeast Minnesota; most notably the return of Minnesota's Army National Guard First Brigade of the 34th "Red Bull" Infantry Division from their deployment in Iraq and Kuwait making the returning soldiers to be considered as veterans. Between the eight counties of southeast Minnesota that I have mentioned, there are two Infantry companies and two support companies all of the Minnesota Army National Guard, and Reserve units which has two company sized units in the Rochester area.

The second point for a veterans' cemetery in Fillmore County that should be addressed is that there is an opportunity for work through the construction process of said cemetery which in turn would provide some economic stimulus to Fillmore County. Whether the work is provided through local contractors or otherwise there will be a need for the workers to have access to local businesses for a variety of needs. After the cemetery is completed there would be the added benefit of jobs pro-

vided by having an active cemetery that could possibly employ up to a dozen people. A good, economic, unintended consequence with the addition of the cemetery there will be the many visitors that would be expected to visit during special holidays such as Memorial Day, Independence Day and Veterans Day. The visitors in turn would spend money in the local economy as they are travelling through Fillmore County.

Here are my final thoughts to reiterate my two my points of why a veteran's cemetery in Fillmore County, Minnesota, the first is that the Department of Veterans Affairs has the responsibility of caring for veterans and their families from discharge to death. The veterans' cemetery would well be suited for a final resting place for our Nation's veterans. The land is free and there would be economic stimulus to a rural county that is need of such stimulus. I can tell that while working as the Fillmore County veteran service officer I knew of three families that are patiently waiting for the creation of the proposed site so they can bury the cremated remains of the veteran loved ones; and finally the veteran cemetery is in my own end-of-life plans for a final resting place.

Again thank you for this opportunity to discuss the important issue of a veterans' cemetery for Fillmore County, Minnesota.

If you have any questions I will kindly answer them.

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#### **Prepared Statement of Chuck Amunrud, Commissioner, Fillmore County**

I FIRST WANT TO SAY THANK YOU TO THE COMMITTEE FOR TAKING TIME TO COME TO OUR BEAUTIFUL FILLMORE COUNTY. IT IS INDEED AN HONOR TO BE INVITED TO TESTIFY ON BEHALF OF FILLMORE COUNTY.

MY NAME IS CHARLES (CHUCK) AMUNRUD AND I AM A FILLMORE COUNTY COMMISSIONER REPRESENTING THE THIRD DISTRICT.

I AM ALSO A 60 percent DISABLED VETERAN. ENLISTING IN THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE FROM 1968 TO 1972.

MY STATEMENT WILL MENTION THE LOCAL COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS OF OUR STATE LEGISLATURE, THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, THE FILLMORE COUNTY BOARD, AND OUR LOCAL VETERANS GROUPS. REASONS FOR FILLMORE COUNTIES BOARD DECISION TO DONATE LAND FOR A VETERANS CEMETERY.

THE BOARD WAS APPROACHED IN 2009 BY OUR THEN STATE SENATOR SHARON ERICKSON-ROPES, WHO AT THAT TIME SERVED ON THE STATE SENATE VETERANS COMMITTEE. WANTING TO FIND LAND THAT WOULD BE SUITABLE FOR A NEW VETERANS CEMETERY IN THE SOUTH EAST PART OF OUR STATE. THE FILLMORE COUNTY BOARD SUGGESTED THAT THEY WOULD CONSIDER GIVING UP A PORTION OF LAND, THE COUNTY OWNED NEXT TO PRESTON THAT CONSISTED OF APPROXIMATELY 245 ACRES.

IN NOVEMBER 2009, THE THEN CURRENT STATE COMMISSIONER OF VETERANS AFFAIRS MICHAEL PUGLIESI AND STAFF VISITED THE FILLMORE COUNTY BOARD TO DISCUSS THE POSSIBILITY THAT OUR PROPOSED SITE COULD BE SUITABLE. AND THE NEED TO DO PRELIMINARY WORK ON THE SITE. WE DISCUSSED THE NEED TO AMEND THEN THE CURRENT STATE STATUTE. THE STATUTE HAD SET ASIDE FUNDING TO ACQUIRE LAND AND DESIGN FOR TWO NEW CEMETERIES IN SOUTHWEST AND NORTHEAST MINNESOTA. WE NOW NEEDED THE STATE LEGISLATURE TO AMEND THE LAW TO INCLUDE SOUTHEAST MINNESOTA FOR LAND ACQUISITION AND DESIGN.

DURING THE 2010 SESSION, STATE HOUSE REPRESENTATIVE GREG DAVIDS WHO STILL REPRESENTS OUR DISTRICT AND THE THEN STATE SENATOR SHARON ERICKSON-ROPES BOTH WERE CRUCIAL IN GETTING THE LAW CHANGED TO INCLUDE SOUTHEAST MINNESOTA.

DURING THIS TIME FRAME THE FILLMORE COUNTY BOARD WAS VISITED BY OUR LOCAL VETERANS GROUPS WHO PRESENTED RESOLUTIONS OF SUPPORT URGING US TO GIFT THE LAND NEEDED AS A WAY OF PAYING HONOR TO VETERANS FROM OUR CITIZENS. THE BOARD AGREED.

WE THEN LEARNED THAT WE WERE NOT DONE AT THE STATE LEGISLATURE. THE NEW LAW WOULD AGAIN NEED TO BE AMENDED TO INCLUDE SOUTHEAST MINNESOTA DUE TO LANGUAGE IN THE ORIGINAL LAW AS PART OF A BONDING BILL.

IN 2011 OUR NEW STATE SENATOR JEREMY MILLER ALONG WITH STATE HOUSE REPRESENTATIVE GREG DAVIDS PROPOSED LEGISLATION THAT



PASSED INTO LAW MAKING FILLMORE COUNTY A PRIORITY IN FUNDING FOR DESIGN TO CONSTRUCT A NEW STATE VETERANS CEMETERY. OUR ENTIRE REGION IS IN SUPPORT KNOWING THAT FAMILIES WILL BENEFIT FROM HAVING THEIR LOVED ONES BURIED CLOSER TO HOME. NEW JOBS DUE TO CONSTRUCTION AND THE ONGOING OPERATIONS WILL HAVE A LONG TERM BENEFIT TO OUR LOCAL COMMUNITIES.

I WANT TO THANK THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, THE MINNESOTA LEGISLATURE, THE MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, TO MY FELLOW COUNTY BOARD MEMBERS IN A VERY POSITIVE COLLABORATIVE EFFORT TO BENEFIT OUR PAST CURRENT AND FUTURE VETERANS.

I WILL DO MY BEST TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS.

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### **Prepared Statement of Karen Brown, County Coordinator, Fillmore County**

Good afternoon distinguished Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs. Fillmore County is honored to have all of you in our community today and welcome you to our county.

My name is Karen Brown and I serve as the Fillmore County Coordinator. Part of my position description is to serve as clerk of the Board of County Commissioners. Since this is a special project for the Board, I have supported their efforts in working with all parties that have contributed effort and expertise related to this project for a successful collaboration.

The grant process began in Fillmore County following a directive from the 2008 MN Legislative Session to identify any potential site for new State Veteran Cemeteries in southern Minnesota. Subsequently a document was produced by Mr. David P. Swantek, Cemetery Director, MN State Veterans Cemetery, of Little Falls, which identified an "underserved veteran population in southeast Minnesota". This report was presented to the Board in 2010. The Fillmore County Board of Commissioners began having conversations about a possible transfer of county owned land known as the "County Farm" for use as a veterans' cemetery. This incredibly beautiful proposed site features scenic bluff lands, gentle valleys and the Root River and would seem to be a perfect use for this land. Including populations of veterans in Iowa and Wisconsin, an estimated total of 40,000 veterans live within 75 miles of this proposed site.

After conversations where the land transfer was considered by the Board, the next step in the local process was to assess the wishes of the people in Fillmore County. With land values increasing, the members of the Board wanted to make sure that there was support before any transfer decisions were made. All veteran service groups and municipalities in the county were contacted and asked about their opinions about the cemetery. The result was unanimous: Fillmore County veteran organizations and city officials whole heartedly supported the proposal with thirty (30) resolutions of support on file. In addition, community support has been great—commissioners have not heard opposition to this project.

In February of 2010, the consensus of the Fillmore County Board of Commissioners was to begin the process to move toward the transfer of land to be used for a veterans' cemetery. The 2011 legislature, in special session, enacted legislation that supported the proposal. Further, the legislation included language asking for a priority designation by the Commissioner since the land was proposed to be donated by Fillmore County for a veterans' cemetery in southeast Minnesota. Following that legislation, collaborative discussions have occurred with all levels of government, countless documents have been submitted, field assessments have been completed, and land records have been reviewed in preparation for cemetery site approval.

Throughout the process, all of those involved have been very cooperative in providing support for the project. The County Board made the land available and municipalities supported the donation. MN Veterans Affairs officials have been most helpful in answering our questions and by providing information. Our MN Senators and Representatives have passed the enabling legislation and are aware of the State's on-going responsibilities for a veterans' cemetery in Fillmore County. Last but not least, Federal officials have been essential in this partnership of governments by funding the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program.

The keys to an effective process seem to be the following:

- Willingness for the local elected officials on the Fillmore County Board to donate a significant amount of land to make the proposal more desirable for a better priority designation

- Willingness for local elected MN Representatives and Senators to carry and support legislation for the initial costs for assessment and evaluation of the site
- Willingness of State of MN agencies to work together in a cooperative manner to come to agreement to finalize the transaction
- Willingness of the Federal Government to provide grant funding to finance the construction of the cemetery, and
- Willingness of the State of MN to fund the on-going operation/maintenance of the cemetery

If I might end on a personal note, I would like to add that I have been married to a Viet Nam veteran for 42 years in March. Much has changed for the better for veterans since my husband was discharged from the Navy in 1969. As you know Viet Nam was an unpopular war so there were very few thank you comments when he returned.

Today due to national efforts by the Veterans' Affairs and other veterans' advocacy groups to promote support of military personnel and veterans, all of that has changed. Veterans now returning from their tours of duty are welcomed back as heroes, as they should be. Now there are often big welcome home events with bands playing, veteran groups at the airport, families and friends waving flags and the media capturing it all for the evening news. That is a good thing and a tribute to the VA and the American people to recognize a job well done.

In closing, I would like to say that I feel the national grant process works well and if we are successful, this cemetery will benefit our County for many years and in many ways. This collaborative effort is the ultimate thank you to our military personnel to provide them with a final resting place that is near their families and friends and will forever acknowledge their service to our country.

Thank you for your attention and I would be happy to answer any questions that you might have.

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#### **Prepared Statement of Jon Martin, Solid Waste Administrator, Fillmore County**

Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you on the importance of a veteran's cemetery in Fillmore County and to give you some background on the land that Fillmore County is in the process of donating for this purpose.

Let me start by expressing my desire for this cemetery to become a reality in the very near future. This is an asset that is needed for the veterans in the southeast corner of Minnesota and also the veterans in Iowa and Wisconsin. With the travel time to either Minneapolis or Little Falls, the time it takes to register and walk to the grave site and then pay your respects, it may take most of the day. This process can be very exhausting and may be a cause for them not visiting as much as they would like.

Now some basic information on me. I started With Fillmore County in January of 1996 as a Transfer Station Attendant and held that job for a little over 2 years. In 1998, I was appointed to my present position of Solid Waste Administrator/Resource Recovery Center Manager by the Fillmore County Board of Commissioners.

Over the course of my employment with Fillmore County, I have been involved with the land called the Fillmore County Farm. This is a piece of property that had a couple of old farmsteads on it that were combined into one parcel. This property was purchased by Fillmore County to build a transfer station when the only solid waste landfill in the county closed. Over the course of years, a building was built to house the Source Separated Composting Facility and the Recycling Center. Later on, a new building was built with state grant money to allow the composting operation to be moved under cover and produce a better finished material. A Household Hazardous Waste building was added to allow for the collection, sorting, packaging and shipping of hazardous waste to a licensed shipper for proper disposal. Composting was discontinued in year 2000 due to a number of reasons, and the recycling center was changed to a single stream collection system where recyclables are shipped out for processing and marketing. The recycling center and the composting building have now been repurposed for use by the Fillmore County Highway Department for a maintenance shop and a sand and salt shed.

Fillmore County was involved in a program in the early 1990's that required the planting of trees on some of the farmland. Fillmore County planted a mix of red and white pines and some walnut trees. These areas have now grown into beautiful spots to walk through and area haven for all kinds of wildlife.

Speaking of wildlife, Fillmore County allowed hunting on the farm up until last year. With the cemetery moving forward and the need for soil borings, the artifact

discovery process, wetland surveying, and the need for people to be there doing their jobs, Fillmore County decided to close the farm to hunting. Many, many people used the farm for hunting. Some drove a long way because there was not land available for them to hunt on near home. Every fall, I would have a list of 30–40 people that would ask to hunt there. Everyone was supposed to ask permission to hunt and were given a list of rules to follow. This worked out well for the most part. When Fillmore County decided to close the farm to hunting, very few people were upset when I told them the reason for closing it was to facilitate the process of getting a veteran's cemetery here.

In closing, I would like to reinforce to you the support that I have received by hunters that used the farm, hikers that enjoyed walks through it, people that use the transfer station and the recycling facility, fishermen and boaters that use the river, and the many people and veterans that I talk to on a daily basis that want to make this veteran's cemetery a reality in Fillmore County.

Thank you for your time and your consideration for this project.  
Do you have any questions for me?

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#### **Prepared Statement of Hon. Jeremy Miller, Senator, Minnesota Legislature**

I would like to begin by thanking the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs for holding a public hearing in Preston, Minnesota, regarding the National Veterans Cemetery in Fillmore County.

Over the past couple years it has been my honor to work closely with Representative Greg Davids, local officials from Fillmore County, local veterans organizations, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs and several others to designate Fillmore County in southeastern Minnesota as a location for a new veterans cemetery.

The many veterans in our populations have created the need for additional cemetery space, and the National Cemetery Association concluded in 2008 that southern Minnesota was outside a recommended 75-mile service area for the state's two existing veterans cemeteries, at Fort Snelling in Minneapolis and in Little Falls in central Minnesota.

More than 30,000 veterans live within 50 miles of this site, and it will mean a tremendous amount to them and their families to know that this nearby spot will be their final resting place. I am proud to be part of honoring our veterans in this way.

Again, I would like to extend my most sincere thanks to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs for holding this public hearing and all who have been involved in helping us make the tremendous progress to get to where we are today.

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#### **Prepared Statement of David Swantek, Cemetery Director, Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs**

Chairman Runyan and Congressman Walz:

It is a tremendous honor to be before you today in Preston MN for this hearing: "Honoring our Nation's Veterans: Examining the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program".

150 years ago, President Abraham Lincoln promised a war torn nation that those that had borne the battle would be honored and not forgotten. A system of National Cemeteries was the product of that promise. These national shrines remain today, a daily reminder to the tremendous cost of freedom and democracy which we as American citizens have enjoyed since 1776.

It has been my deep privilege for the past 20 years to work with the families of American Heroes, our veterans, during their greatest times of need. As a cemetery caretaker at the Oregon Trail State Veterans Cemetery in my home state of Wyoming and for the past 16 years as the Director of the Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery in Little Falls, MN I have been a direct witness on a daily basis to the profound gratitude that veterans families experience knowing their loved ones rest with honor in perpetuity next to their Comrades in Arms. The State of Minnesota is proud to provide this honor to those who seek our services and we are committed to expanding access to this earned benefit throughout our great State.

#### **AUTHORIZING LEGISLATION**

In 1985, the Minnesota State Legislature passed legislation authorizing a State Veterans Cemetery in Minnesota. The location was undetermined and the State had no formal plans to construct a State Veterans Cemetery. In 1986, two WWII vet-

erans from central Minnesota discovered the authorizing legislation from the previous year and were determined to have a State Veterans Cemetery constructed in central Minnesota. As members of a local DAV Chapter, these veterans identified a parcel of property, raised the funds necessary to purchase the property and donated the site to the State of Minnesota to be used for a new State Veterans Cemetery. Due to a lack of development funds, the State of Minnesota did not pursue development of a cemetery and instead returned the donated land back to the local DAV Chapter in 1989. Undeterred, this local group of veterans organized an association and began soliciting development funds from Veterans Service Organizations, local businesses and individual donors. This group of dedicated veterans built a ground swell of support in the Legislature and ultimately with former Governor Arne Carlson. Governor Carlson signed into law the establishment of the Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery and the State would once again take ownership of the site near Little Falls on September 1, 1994.

Outside the control of the State, a decision was made in the summer of 1994 to start burying veterans on-site in Little Falls prior to the State taking ownership of the cemetery property. While understandable from the perspective of a dedicated group of veterans who had years earlier witnessed their donation of property to the State produce no cemetery, this decision was detrimental to the early development of a State Veterans Cemetery in Little Falls.

#### **VETERANS CEMETERY GRANT**

Even though the State of Minnesota had inherited an operational State Veterans Cemetery in the fall of 1994 and resources originally intended for development of a new cemetery had to be redirected towards operational needs, plans moved forward to seek financial assistance from the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) for development of the Little Falls cemetery.

In 1995, the State of Minnesota was awarded its first grant from NCA. At that time the grant program was a 50 percent matching grant, requiring the State to provide 50 percent of the costs for construction.

In 1999, Congress authorized NCA to begin providing up to 100 percent of the development costs to construct, expand or improve State Veterans Cemeteries and the State of Minnesota applied for a second grant from NCA in 2001 for our cemetery in Little Falls. This project provided for the major development that had been badly needed since 1994 and constructed the major infrastructure that has allowed our cemetery in Little Falls to become what it is today. Last July the cemetery in Little Falls was recognized by the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program for "Excellence of Appearance". Only 4 of the 86 State Veterans Cemeteries in operation have been honored with this award. I am especially proud of this recognition given our humble beginnings and the difficult circumstances under which the cemetery in Little Falls was established.

#### **EXPANDING AN EARNED BENEFIT**

In 2007, Governor Tim Pawlenty, announced as part of his veterans initiatives for the upcoming Legislative session, that the State would construct a new State Veterans Cemetery in northeastern Minnesota near Duluth. A grant pre-application was submitted to the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program for construction of a new State Veterans Cemetery and a search for suitable cemetery property began.

During the 2008 Legislative session it was necessary to amend the authorizing Legislation from 1985 to allow the State to operate more than one State Veterans Cemetery. The proposed expansion of the State's Veterans Cemetery program was supported in both the State House and State Senate. The veterans committee in the State Senate asked for a report on other potential locations, particularly in southern Minnesota, for a new State Veterans Cemetery.

In 2009, we reported to the veterans committee that locations in both southwestern and southeastern Minnesota had veteran populations that would support the construction of new State Veterans Cemeteries. By the end of the 2009 Legislative session, the MN Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), was successful in securing a \$1.5M appropriation to be used for the design of two new State Veterans Cemeteries in northeastern MN and southwestern MN. Following the session a pre-application for construction of a second new State Veterans Cemetery in southwestern MN was submitted to the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program. During this time we continued to search for suitable property in both northeastern and southwestern Minnesota. We worked with our State's Department of Natural Resources, local county government officials in both regions and potential private land donors. Though we have had several leads and viewed multiple properties, suitable cemetery sites have proved difficult to find.

### **MOTIVATED LOCAL PARTNER**

In 2010, MDVA was asked to present information to the Fillmore County Commissioners on the potential for a new State Veterans Cemetery in southeastern MN. The requirements of a suitable site for constructing a State Veterans Cemetery were discussed and Fillmore County expressed their interest in donating property to the State for the construction of a cemetery. While MDVA was interested in the offer from Fillmore County, the Legislature had not authorized a new State Veterans Cemetery in southeastern MN. During the summer of 2010 the Fillmore County Commissioners and County Administrator visited our current State Veterans Cemetery in Little Falls. The visit provided an opportunity for the County to see how a State Veterans Cemetery operates and what a new cemetery in Fillmore County could mean for veterans in southeastern MN. I believe that visit solidified the County's commitment to doing everything possible to make a new State Veterans Cemetery in Fillmore County a reality.

In 2011, MDVA successfully worked with Representative Greg Davids and Senator Jeremy Miller to once again amend authorizing Legislation to allow the Department to pursue construction of a new State Veterans Cemetery in southeastern MN, along with a creative fiscal amendment providing for cemetery design without the requirement for any additional appropriated funds. After passage of this Legislation, in the summer of 2011, MDVA submitted a third pre-application for the construction of a new State Veterans Cemetery to the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program.

Today I'm happy to report that significant site suitability assessment including environmental and cultural assessment, soil borings and grading analysis has been completed and the proposed property appears to meet the suitability requirements for constructing a new State Veterans Cemetery.

### **CONCLUSION**

Since 1994, when the State of Minnesota committed to provide our Nation's Heroes with a final resting place which commemorates and honors their sacrifice and service to our country, we have found inspired partners and supporters at every turn. From the two central Minnesota WWII veterans who wanted to see a State Veterans Cemetery built in the State of Minnesota and spent years raising funds and soliciting local and political support, to Members of Congress at the end of the last century who changed Federal law to allow NCA to provide States with the construction funding necessary to construct, expand or improve State Veterans Cemeteries in sparsely populated locations in rural America, to state legislators in Minnesota whose support of veterans issues across our State positively impacts the lives of our veterans, to the National Cemetery Administration whose support of State Veterans Cemeteries provides veterans with a burial option close to their homes, and local governments like Fillmore County who have the commitment and determination to do all they can to provide their part in continuing the promise made by President Lincoln 150 years ago.

Because of this cooperation, from Federal, State and Local partners I am confident that in the near future, we will gather again to dedicate a new national shrine in Fillmore County honoring our American Heroes.

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### **Prepared Statement of Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs, National Cemetery Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the critical contribution of the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) to the mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) National Cemetery Administration (NCA). I know that meeting the burial needs of veterans and their families is an issue of great interest to Minnesota veterans.

#### ***Ensuring Access to a Burial Option for our Veterans***

NCA's statutory mission under title 38, United States Code, is to provide burial and memorialization for eligible veterans and their eligible spouses and dependents, and to maintain those places of burial as national shrines. VA considers reasonable access to a burial option to mean that a first interment option (whether for casketed remains or cremated remains, either in-ground or in columbaria) in a national, State, or Tribal veterans cemetery is available within 75 miles of the veteran's place of residence.

To provide this level of access to our Nation's veterans, VA administers a nationwide system of 131 national cemeteries in 39 States and Puerto Rico, as well as 33 soldiers' lots and monument sites. In Minneapolis, Minnesota, VA operates Ft. Snelling National Cemetery, which is one of VA's most active cemeteries.

In addition to the federally-administered nationwide system, VA administers the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP), which establishes a critical partnership by awarding grant funds to States and Tribes to provide a burial option to our Nation's veterans. The program, established in 1978 by Congress under Public Law 95-476, awards grants for cemetery projects to serve the needs of veterans unlikely to be served by an existing national cemetery. VA may fund up to 100 percent of development costs for projects to establish, expand, improve and maintain a State, Tribal or U.S. Territory veterans cemetery. These federally-funded cemeteries must operate solely for the interment of eligible veterans and their eligible spouses and dependents, and they are required to conform to VA-prescribed standards and guidelines for site selection, planning, construction, appearance, and operations.

Since 1978, VCGP has awarded over 275 grants, totaling more than \$482 million to establish, expand or improve 86 veterans cemeteries in 41 States, Guam, and Saipan. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2011, these cemeteries conducted 29,491 burials for veterans and family members, representing about 20 percent of all veteran cemetery burials in the United States.

#### ***Administration of the Veteran Cemetery Grant Program***

The VCGP grant processes and implementing regulations are designed to ensure fair and equitable grant administration to benefit the greatest number of veterans. In order for VA to give the highest consideration to a pre-application, and before a project may be awarded a grant, the State or Tribal Organization must pass legislation authorizing the project and providing the necessary architectural/engineering (A/E) funds to allow the project to be developed. One hundred percent of allowable A/E costs will be reimbursed following grant award. This legislation and funding action will ensure that the pre-application receives the highest "Priority List" ranking. Annually, VCGP uses veteran population data, confirmation of legislation and funding action, as well as the grant type to prioritize completed applications into a "Priority List." VA categorizes each application in one of four priority groups:

- Priority 1 projects are gravesite expansion or improvement projects that are needed to continue service at an existing veterans cemetery that will deplete available gravesites within 4 years. This includes phased development of currently undeveloped land.
- Priority 2 projects are new cemetery establishment projects.
- Priority 3 projects are planned phased gravesite development projects that will deplete available gravesites after 4 years.
- Priority 4 projects are for other improvements to cemetery infrastructure, such as building expansion and upgrades to roads and irrigation systems that are not directly related to the development of new gravesites. This includes operation and maintenance projects that address NCA's national shrine standards of appearance.

This simple and open process ensures that grants are provided to fund projects that will improve or maintain access to a burial option.

As Congress appropriates the VCGP budget on an annual basis, grant opportunity letters are sent by VA for all projects on the "Priority List" that are above the approved budget line. Once a State or Tribe receives an opportunity letter, it has until the fourth quarter of that same fiscal year to complete all necessary planning work (design/architectural and engineering), receive vendor bid tabulations, and complete the remaining grant application documentation. Upon successful completion of these process steps, VA officially approves the grant award and work can begin immediately. VCGP continually monitors construction progress, with Federal grant funds reimbursed consistent with the progress of the project.

#### ***State of Minnesota VCGP Grants/Applications***

VCGP awarded grant funding totaling \$3.9 million to the State of Minnesota in 1995 and 2002 for the large scale expansion of the Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery in Little Falls. This cemetery has provided a burial option for nearly 4,000 veterans and their families since it was established in 1994.

Currently, the State of Minnesota has four different grant applications ranked at various positions on the FY 2012 Priority List. The first application (MN-11-06) would provide a grant to expand and improve the Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery in Little Falls. Minnesota has three additional applications to establish new

veterans cemeteries in South East (Fillmore County) (MN-10-05), Redwood County (MN-09-04), and in Duluth (St. Louis County) (MN-08-03).

Of the three establishment grant applications on the FY 2012 "Priority List," Minnesota initially opted to defer the Redwood County and Duluth (St. Louis County) applications, as land has not been acquired. States, Territories and Tribal governments are solely responsible for acquisition of the necessary land. The South East (Fillmore County) grant application would establish a new veterans cemetery for over 50,000 unserved veterans. The proposed site is approximately 155 acres. In February 2012, Minnesota deferred its application to allow Fillmore County to resolve title issues associated with the site. The application will be included on the FY 2013 "Priority List", and once all issues are resolved, the application can be considered for a grant award, as determined by the approved budget and per the processes outlined above.

***Recent Developments in VCGP Service to Veterans***

VA appreciates Congress' continued interest in the Veteran Cemetery Grant Program—both through annual budgetary support and recent statutory changes that further enhance VCGP's ability to support VA's mission to serve veterans. Under Public Law 109-461, VCGP may now administer grants to Tribal Organizations in the same manner and under the same conditions as grants to States. Since last fall, VA has awarded three grants for the establishment of Tribal veterans cemeteries on Tribal lands. Recipients were the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in South Dakota, the Yurok Tribe in California, and the Pascua Yaqui Tribe in Arizona. Additional Tribal governments have submitted applications for consideration in FY 2012. Under additional provisions of Public Law 110-157, VA may now offer operating grants to assist States and Tribes to achieve and maintain standards of appearance commensurate with national cemetery shrine status.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to share an overview of VA's Veteran Cemetery Grants Program—an expanding partnership between VA and State and Tribal governments which is critical to ensuring veterans have access to the benefits and services they have earned through their service and sacrifice. NCA's partnership with individual State departments and directors continues to grow—and grow stronger. Nearly 25 State Veteran Cemetery directors attended NCA's annual training event in Nashville, Tennessee last week, including the Director of the Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery in Little Falls.

I look forward to working with the members of this Subcommittee as we jointly meet the burial needs of the veterans we are entrusted to serve. I would be pleased to answer any questions.

**MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD**  
**Prepared Statement of The Hon. Gregory Davids, Speaker Pro Tempore,**  
**Minnesota Legislature**

As the Chair of the Minnesota House of Representatives Taxes Committee, and chief author of H.F. 226 that authorizes the planning of this cemetery, I would like to thank the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs for holding a public hearing in Preston, Minnesota regarding the National Veterans Cemetery in Fillmore County. I am looking forward to hearing your findings as you explore the grant process.

The veterans' cemetery in Fillmore County will fill a great need for our veterans and their families who have so selflessly served our great country. This cemetery will serve not only south eastern Minnesota, but northern Iowa, and western Wisconsin.

I would like to thank the Fillmore County Commissioners for their tremendous support of this cemetery and for their generous donation of the beautiful property that will serve those who have served our country. A special thank you goes to all the veterans' organizations and area cities for their strong support.

I would also like to thank Senator Jeremy Miller and former Senator Sharon Ropes for their tireless efforts to see this project come to reality. I am attending my daughter's graduation ceremony at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and I regret that I am unable to attend this hearing. I will continue to make every effort to see this project through until the end.

As Always Yours,

*Your Friend,*  
Gregory M. Davids

