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NFDA Champions Veterans' Burial Benefit Access in Congressional Hearing

Brookfield, Wis. – The National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) was invited to testify before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs at an oversight hearing titled "Our Nation's Hallowed Grounds: A Review of America's National Cemetery Funeral Operations for Veterans and Servicemembers."

The hearing focused on assessing and improving the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) efforts to meet the needs of military families. NFDA was called upon to testify due to its critical role in ensuring that veterans receive dignified funerals and burials, and in advocating for the high standards of funeral service that are vital in honoring their sacrifice.

NFDA's Senior Vice President of Advocacy, Lesley Witter, MPA, CAE, who has built a strong legacy of advocating as the voice of funeral service and veterans on Capitol Hill, testified before the Subcommittee on Wednesday, November 13, 2024.

Acknowledging the strong partnership between NFDA, the VA, and the DoD, Witter pointed out that while the VA and DoD are responsible for providing funeral and burial benefits, as well as ensuring proper military honors, it is funeral directors who assist families in organizing personalized services that both celebrate the life of their loved one and honor their service to our country. She elaborated that funeral directors coordinate with the VA and DoD to schedule funeral and burial services, educate and assist families in filing benefit claims, ensure veterans receive the proper grave markers, and collaborate with the DoD and veteran service organizations (VSOs) to provide the appropriate military honors.

In preparation for the testimony, NFDA conducted a comprehensive survey of funeral service providers to gather insights into the accessibility of funeral and burial benefits for veterans and their families. The findings from this survey were presented by Witter to Congress, offering valuable data to inform the discussion on improving these services.

While NFDA and the VA collaborate closely to educate funeral directors about funeral and burial benefits, the NFDA survey indicates a discrepancy between knowledge of government resources (81.4%) and ease of use with only 11.6% of respondents finding it easy to locate information on the VA/NCA website.

NFDA urged the VA to strengthen its educational outreach to veterans and their families well before they are in immediate need, ensuring that expectations were clearly communicated and understood from the outset.

Furthermore, Witter stated that funeral directors who assist families in filing benefit claims are the ones who see firsthand the real-world impact of the VA's educational efforts. She noted that the 2024 NFDA veteran survey highlighted confusion among veteran families about which funeral and burial benefits they are entitled to and what is covered by the VA. Among those who experienced

challenges, several recurring themes emerged, particularly a lack of education and understanding among veteran families regarding the funeral and burial benefits they are entitled to. And, while NFDA is encouraged that less than 25% of families have problems accessing benefits, it is funeral directors who spend a great deal of time working with families to help them through a tiresome and burdensome process. Witter stressed NFDA's desire to see the VA improve the speed and ease of receiving funeral and burial benefits.

Witter raised another area of concern. Funeral directors and families have experienced significant problems with delays when trying to schedule burials in Arlington National Cemetery. Almost half (46.3%) of respondents have arranged a funeral at Arlington in the past five years. Of those only one-third (33.8%) of respondents said it was either "very easy" or "easy" to schedule services at Arlington. NFDA encouraged the DoD to review and refine its processes for scheduling burials at Arlington National Cemetery and urged Arlington to collaborate and work closely with funeral directors to address the challenges faced by both funeral professionals and grieving families.

"Having just had the honor of hosting a Veterans Day Ceremony at our Veterans Garden of Honor November 11 in South Carolina, I am reminded of the sacrifices all veterans have made to protect us and allow us the freedom we enjoy in the USA," said NFDA President Christopher P. Robinson, CFSP, CCO, president and general manager of Robinson Funeral Home in Easley, South Carolina. "Freedom is not free, and I am truly grateful for the men and women answering the call to serve and serving with honor all across the globe."

"We as funeral directors are honored to make sure that all deceased veterans receive the military rites to which they are entitled as well as the benefits they deserve," added Robinson. "I am so thankful that NFDA has a strong voice in Washington, D.C., and that our full-time lobbyist, Lesley Witter, testified before Congress on what we believe so strongly as funeral service professionals."

A recording of Witter's testimony will be available here:
<https://veterans.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=6577>

About NFDA

NFDA is the world's leading and largest funeral service association, serving 20,000 individual members who represent nearly 11,000 funeral homes in the United States and 49 countries around the world. NFDA is the trusted leader, beacon for ethics and the strongest advocate for the profession. NFDA is the association of choice because it offers funeral professionals comprehensive educational resources, tools to manage successful businesses, guidance to become pillars in their communities and the expertise to foster future generations of funeral professionals. NFDA is headquartered in Brookfield, Wis., and has an office in Washington, D.C. For more information, visit NFDA.org.

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