

National Cemetery Development

One of the goals of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is to provide eligible Veterans with reasonable access to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) burial options. More than 80 percent of those interred in national cemeteries lived within 75 miles of the cemetery at time of death. To NCA, reasonable access to burial benefits means that a first interment option, for casketed or cremated remains in a national or state Veterans cemetery, is available within 75 miles of the Veteran's home.

To meet the burial needs of Veterans, NCA builds new national cemeteries in areas where large Veteran populations do not have reasonable access to burial options. NCA has opened 17 new national cemeteries since 1997 and is currently planning five new national cemeteries to serve Veterans. NCA also seeks to increase the long-term burial capacity of current national cemeteries by acquiring adjacent land, building columbaria where feasible and using innovative designs that maximize the burial space available. NCA

also manages the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program that encourages states, U.S. territories and tribal governments to build state Veterans cemeteries in areas unserved by a national cemetery. VA has helped establish more than 80 Veterans cemeteries through its grants program since 1980.

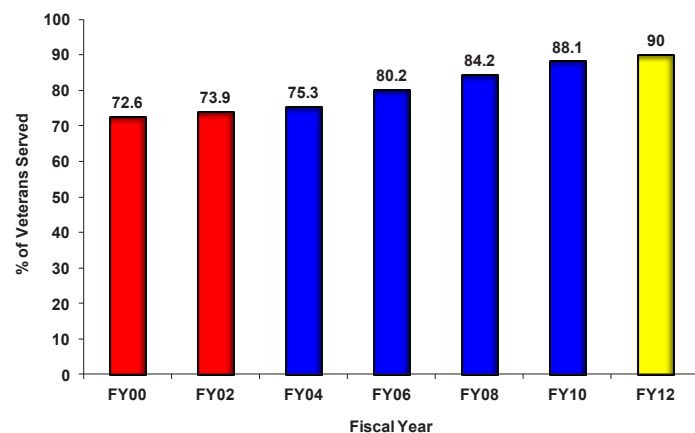
The percentage of Veterans with reasonable access to burial benefits at a national or state Veterans cemetery has increased from 65 percent in 1995 to approximately 90 percent today.

NCA follows a 6-step process to build a new national cemetery: site selection; environmental assessment; land acquisition; master planning and design development; construction documents preparation; and construction award and completion.

Site Selection

NCA identifies a geographic area with a large Veteran population that is unserved by a national or state Veterans cemetery. NCA canvases the local area for sites of the size needed to meet demographic forecasts. These sites are evaluated for their suitability for cemetery development and the top two to five sites advance to the next step in the process.

Percentage of Veteran Population Served



Population within 75 miles of a national or state veterans cemetery.

Environmental Assessment

To comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the top sites are assessed to determine the impact of cemetery development and operations on the environment. An Environmental Assessment document is prepared, identifying the VA preferred site. The site's assessment must result in a "Finding of No Significant Impact" (FONSI) in order to be considered for acquisition. If the NEPA evaluation results in a FONSI, then NCA makes the results available to the general public for a 30-day comment period. After the comment period, NCA makes a final recommendation to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, who decides whether to purchase the property.

Land Acquisition

In some instances, land is donated to VA. Federal and state lands have also been transferred to VA at no cost to establish some national cemeteries. Otherwise, land is purchased at the fair market value established by a real property appraisal. Before the final sales contract is signed, the Department of Justice, acting on behalf of VA, reviews all documents to ensure that the contract and title meet all the requirements for a legal transfer of ownership.

Master Planning and Design Development

Once VA takes title to the land, proposals are solicited from architectural and engineering (A/E) firms to do the design work. NCA selects the best qualified A/E firm and a fee and contract is negotiated with the firm. A master plan for developing all phases of the cemetery on the entire site is prepared, followed by more detailed design development for the first phase of construction. The first phase usually includes the first active burial section and the requisite infrastructure to operate the cemetery. Subsequent phases generally include new burial sections and associated infrastructure in the new section. Typically, each phase of construction is designed to provide sufficient burial space to last 10 years.

Construction Document Preparation

Under a second negotiated contract, the A/E prepares plans and specifications that detail all aspects of phase one construction: active burial sections, administrative buildings, maintenance buildings, public information center, committal shelters, roads and other infrastructure. These documents provide the basis for contractor bids.

Construction Award and Completion

Finally, NCA solicits bids and awards a contract for construction of the new cemetery. The bid and award process takes about four months; actual construction of phase one takes about 24 months. Funds approved by Congress must be available in order to complete the various steps. Land purchases and construction require multiple appropriations, over several years of budgets, to complete each phase. Site selection, NEPA compliance, master planning, design and phase one construction usually require more than five years to complete.