

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

March 10, 2016

The Honorable Ronald E. Walters
Interim Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs
National Cemetery Administration

Dear Secretary Walters,

I write to you today to ask the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to consider conducting an additional round of selections for the Rural Veterans Burial Initiative. As a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to contact you on this important issue that impacts Nevada and our nation's rural veterans.

Like all Americans, I believe every veteran deserves a dignified burial and should have the opportunity to choose a cemetery near their home. That is why I was pleased that the VA carried out its Rural Veterans Burial Initiative, which identified eight rural locations, including Elko, NV, to build small National Veterans Burial Grounds within existing public or private cemeteries.

While Nevada has two state cemeteries in the north and south, many rural veterans remain unserved, and these state cemeteries are an extremely far distance due to the rural nature of Nevada and sheer size of the state. This concern is further confirmed by the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) report from July 2014 that audited the Rural Veterans Burial Initiative. Specifically, the OIG found that the Rural Initiative did not adequately identify the number and percentage of veterans living in rural areas who need additional access to burial areas, and the OIG concluded that as many as 4,600 veterans in five Nevada counties remain unserved. That is why I believe the VA should conduct another round of consideration for the Rural Veterans Burial Initiative and partner with rural areas with the ability to establish these veteran cemeteries.

As an example, the City of Mesquite intends to build a new cemetery and has identified an area in the cemetery that could be utilized solely for veteran burials. Not only would this cemetery be able to serve veterans in Mesquite, but it also would benefit surrounding veteran communities within Lincoln County. It is areas like this that would be well served by a partnership with the VA to ensure a dignified burial close to home to benefit both veterans and their family members. In light of the demonstrated need to address veteran burial locations, I respectfully request answers to the following questions:

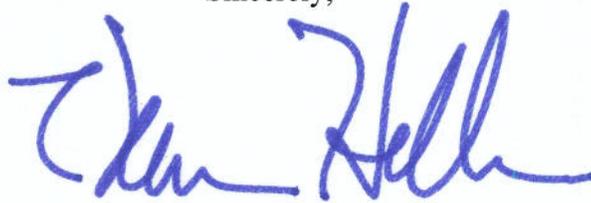
1. Given the findings in the OIG's report, does the VA plan on conducting additional rounds of consideration for the Rural Veterans Burial Initiative? If so, please describe the

process that will be utilized for identifying and selecting each National Veterans Burial Ground.

2. If local governments, like the City of Mesquite, have identified an opportunity to partner with VA on a National Veterans Burial Ground, how can these stakeholders engage with VA to create a partnership and establish such a burial ground outside the scope of the original Rural Initiative?
3. In the absence of a veteran burial ground, how is VA currently ensuring that rural veterans, including the 4,600 veterans in five of Nevada's counties, are served?
4. What is the status of completing the National Veterans Burial Ground in Elko, NV, which was planned for under the original Rural Veterans Burial Initiative?

Again, I strongly encourage VA to explore options that would allow for additional National Veterans Burial Grounds and look forward to working with you on this matter. As always, thank you for your attention to this request, and please provide a response by March 24, 2016.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dean Heller". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and "H".

DEAN HELLER
U.S. Senator