

# Unclaimed Veterans' Remains

VA OIG Report

Recommendation #2  
Response Report

October 1, 2022

**VA**



**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**  
Veterans Experience Office



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## Executive Summary

### Background

In response to the OIG Report - Improvements Needed to Ensure the Final Disposition of Unclaimed Veterans' Remains Project No. 2019-09592-BI-0004 (OIG Report), the VA recognizes the need for improved coordination across the enterprise to ensure dignified burials for Veterans whose remains are unclaimed. VA has since developed and implemented an Integrated Project Team (IPT) led by a senior leader to create actionable plans to ensure that the OIG's recommendations are fulfilled and that an enterprise-wide approach is taken to develop long-term solutions.

### OIG Recommendation #2

"Conduct a program evaluation of all VA benefits and services for deceased Veterans whose remains are unclaimed in compliance with applicable laws and VA regulations. This evaluation should consider the extent to which existing law requires the VA to conduct outreach on behalf of deceased Veterans whose remains are unclaimed. This evaluation should also ensure the benefits and services are assigned to the appropriate VA program offices, and the offices are given authority to administer these programs."

### VA Response

VA senior leadership drafted a memorandum outlining what the VA will do in response to the OIG report recommendations. VA's response to recommendation #2 is found in the subject report on pp. 1-2 and stated:

***"VA will form an Integrated Project Team (IPT) responsible for integrating and implementing the recommendations in this report and designing and conducting the program evaluation in accordance with 38 CFR § 1.15, standards for program evaluation. The overall scope of the program evaluation will include an assessment from stakeholders on current practices and recommendations for optimizing processes, quantitative assessment of existing data, qualitative and mixed-methods assessment of current business processes, surveys of stakeholder experience, and legal and policy analysis of regulations."***

## Integrated Project Team (IPT)

### Integrated Project Team Development

An IPT was established under the leadership of a senior accountable official. The IPT comprises subject matter experts and leadership throughout each administration to ensure cross-functional collaboration to enact the actionable plans directed by senior VA leadership.

### Workstream Responsibility

The Recommendation #2 Workstream designed and conducted the program evaluation along with making recommendations for optimizing processes. The Recommendation #2 Workstream will coordinate with other teams to integrate and implement the recommendations from this report.

## Program Evaluation

### Program Evaluation Design

The IPT designed and conducted the program evaluation in accordance with 38 CFR § 1.15, standards for program evaluation. Most notably, the program evaluation conforms to the four systematic research design principles outlined in 38 CFR § 1.15: rationale, relevancy, validity, and reliability. These four principles were used throughout the program evaluation as guidelines.

### IPT Charter Development & Approval

The IPT charter was approved on August 2, 2022 providing the IPT with the authority and responsibility to carry out the requirements of the OIG Report Recommendation #2.

**Rationale.** The research design for each evaluation should contain a specific rationale and be structured to determine possible cause and effect relationships.

**Relevancy.** It must deal with issues currently existing within the program, within the Department, and within the environment in which the program operates.

**Validity.** The degree of statistical validity should be assessed within the research design. Alternatives include evaluating the cost of data collection vs results necessary to support decisions.

**Reliability.** Using the same research design by others should yield the same findings.

### Stakeholder Assessment of Current Practices

The Veterans Experience Office (VEO), in close collaboration with the Unclaimed Veteran Remains (UVR) IPT, identified and mapped vital UVR processes for all three VA Administrations. The process maps were developed and validated through several interactions with critical stakeholders, including a series of comprehensive interviews with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) across the enterprise designed to gain a deeper understanding of current processes, associated pain points, and gaps.

Key findings from that assessment are outlined in detail in Appendix 1. The following findings are noteworthy:

#### **Need for a Singular Oversight Entity**

This was outlined in the OIG findings and identified throughout the program review. It is being addressed by Recommendation 1.0 *Governance* of this report.

#### **Increase Support Between VA Admins**

It was determined during the program evaluation that increased collaboration between the three VA administrations is critical to meeting external stakeholder expectations, developing robust internal processes, and complying with applicable laws and regulations.

#### **Statute Interpretation**

Each administration makes policy determination on how the laws will be applied within the regs, policies, and directives. This can result in duplication of effort or gaps in who is responsible for different process phases. See appendix 1.

### Conduct Quantitative Assessment of Existing Data

During the program evaluation, it was determined that each administration collected and analyzed data associated with the UVR process. Below, we discuss the quantitative data and associated reporting that was reviewed during the program evaluation, along with the intention of the report and any key insights gathered from reviewing the data.

#### **VHA Decedent Affairs Overview Report**

This report displays several key metrics associated with UVR including:

- **Total Cases.** This includes claimed and unclaimed remains.
- **Total - Within VHA Custody.** This includes claimed and unclaimed remains within VHA custody.
- **Total - Claimed Within VHA Custody.**
  - **Average Days Pending** - the report displays the average days pending for a claimed case.
  - **Longest Pending Days** - the report displays the longest pending claimed case.
- **Total Unclaimed Within VHA Custody.**
  - **Average Days Pending** - the report displays the average days pending for an unclaimed case.
  - **Longest Pending Days** - the report displays the longest pending unclaimed case.

## Program Evaluation

This report tracks the status of claimed and unclaimed remains by VISN and VAMC. Having the function to drill down to the VISN level allows VHA to determine where the outliers are and assist with root cause analysis and corrective action. Each VISN validates the data collected for this report monthly to ensure accuracy and reliability. During the program evaluation, the data in this report was trending in the right direction.

- Annualized FY22 total decedents is **trending lower** than FY21 total decedents: 23,887 in FY21 vs 21,249 in FY22.
- Annualized FY22 total unclaimed decedents is **trending lower** than FY21 total unclaimed decedents: 377 in FY21 vs. 353 in FY22.
- Annualized FY22 decedent pending days is **trending lower** than FY21 decedent pending days: 25 in FY21 vs. 16 in FY22.

### **NCA Unclaimed Remains with Funeral Home Contact Report**

This report contains information regarding requests for national cemetery burial eligibility made to NCA in which remains are unclaimed.

This report tracks the number of unclaimed Veteran remains that are eligible for national cemetery interment.

From Sept 2011 -July 2022, 13% of requests to determine the eligibility of an unclaimed decedent resulted in a determination that the decedent had qualifying service for national cemetery interment.

### **NCA Unclaimed Remains with Funeral Home Contact-MASTER Report**

This report is internal to NCA, and tracks cases marked as unclaimed to final disposition.

Key insights gained from this report allow for monitoring of interment and geographic analysis of interment by NCA region and cemetery.

### **VBA Training Report – Processing Unclaimed Remains**

This report tracks the annual completion of assigned TMS training for all Regional Office Directors and Indigent Veteran and Unclaimed Remains Coordinators (IVURCs). This report ensures that key internal VBA stakeholders are informed of the UVR process.

## Stakeholder Experience Survey

This workstream conducted and analyzed surveys with internal and external stakeholders, with the intent of determining the current processes, policies and procedures, outreach, and overall satisfaction with UVR processes. These are distinct from the surveys developed in response to Recommendation #5 of the OIG Report, which are intended to estimate the number of deceased Veterans whose remains are unclaimed awaiting burial.

### Internal Stakeholders

A thorough survey was conducted with 12 separate internal stakeholders that are SMEs in their respective areas of responsibility with the UVR process. The survey was conducted as a series of detailed interviews focused on the following areas:

- Policy and procedures for UVR findings
- Outreach for UVR findings
- Process mapping of the current state with a focus on five phases:
  - Receiving notification of remains
  - Verifying remains are veterans
  - Verifying next of kin
  - Identifying eligibility for burial benefits and reimbursement
  - Interment planning and execution

See Appendix 2.

### External Stakeholders

A comprehensive survey was conducted to measure the overall satisfaction of resources and support available by the VA to the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME), the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), and the Cremation Association of North America (CANA). With a total of 225 respondents across the United States this survey provided VA with valuable insights on the UVR program. A series of questions and open text comments were collected during the survey and analyzed post-survey with a few apparent themes.

**Training** - It was clear from the survey results that the external stakeholders would like to see more training and outreach focused on available VA resources and support.

**Centralized Contact** - The stakeholders would benefit from a more centralized intake function. They would prefer a central dial-in number and website where they can contact the VA.

**Proof of Eligibility** - Many stakeholder comments requested a more efficient way to obtain eligibility verification for burial benefits.

**Reimbursement for Burial Services** - Many respondents expressed interest in VA providing adequate reimbursement of incurred costs and a more efficient process for submitting reimbursement claims. See Appendix 2.



### Qualitative & Mixed-Methods

#### Assessment

The qualitative and mixed-method assessment was completed with a focus on outreach and policy and procedures.

#### Outreach

The outreach section of the assessment covers how each administration thinks about and participates in outreach to the various stakeholders involved in the UVR process. A few key findings from the evaluation are as follows:

- Each administration (medical centers, cemeteries, national offices) is doing its form of outreach to Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), custodians, Veterans, national stakeholder organizations like the National Funeral Directors Association, and the general public. Different processes are used for conducting this outreach and the communication information. As a result, it is unclear where external UVR stakeholders should be referred inside VA when seeking assistance.
- NCA and VHA note that overall responsibility for conducting outreach to the community is assigned to VBA by statute ( 38 U.S. Code § 7703) and that NCA and VHA's ability to conduct any reinforcing outreach (outside of broadcast through communication channels) is limited to the specific locations where VHA and NCA have facilities and qualified personnel that can conduct UVR outreach.

VBA indicates that they need additional resources due to the number of external stakeholders and their current staffing model.

- The lack of specific guidance around community partner outreach can result in coroners and funeral homes reaching out to VSOs and non-VA entities who may not have the most correct or pertinent information.

See Appendix 1.

#### Policy and Procedures

The Policy and Procedures section of the assessment explains how each administration pursues and reviews policy or directive considerations based on their needs in the UVR process. A few key findings from the assessment are as follows:

- Each VA Administration makes policy recommendations on how the laws will be applied within their respective regulations, policies, and/or directives, which can result in a duplication of effort or gaps in who is responsible for different process phases.
- State and local laws create due diligence procedures for searching for next of kin and timeliness for interment.
- Some SMEs attributed the absence of an oversight office to the lack of awareness of actions taken and policies/directives followed between VHA, VBA, and NCA.

See Appendix 1.



### Legal and Policy Analysis of Regulation

A legal and policy analysis of regulations was performed in two phases during the program evaluation.

Phase I focused on conducting a sample audit of standard policies and procedures used in the UVR process to identify the validity and relevancy of those procedures, along with key findings.

Phase II focused on a deeper dive into identifying all applicable statutes, VA regulations, and VA directives associated with UVR processes across all three administrations. The deep-dive utilized a comprehensive policy crosswalk document that lists all of the applicable statutes, VA regulations, and VA directives and noted whether there is sufficient oversight in place, whether compliance and consistency were low/medium/high, and a gap analysis that captures any gaps identified during the crosswalk.

- 87% of the laws, regulations, and directives have oversight, and 13% do not.
- 87% have high compliance, and 13% have low compliance.
- 75% have high consistency, 12% have medium consistency, and 13% have low consistency.

The deep dive results will set the framework for a robust document control process led by the newly formed National Program Office and UVR Council.

See Appendix 3.

### Develop Recommendations for Optimizing Processes

VEO and the Recommendation #2 Workstream conducted additional process mapping workshops focused on developing the future state that addressed many of the pain points identified in the Phase I process mapping workshops. As a result, the workstream identified and agreed that the following recommendations would yield positive results and address many of the deficiencies identified in the program evaluation.

#### 1.0 Governance

As a result of the program evaluation, the workstream recognized the need for improved governance and program oversight. The workstream recommends establishing a robust governance structure that consists of a National Program Office (NPO) an Unclaimed Veterans Remains Council (UVRC), and central oversight in VHA. The new governance structure will create a mechanism to identify and address the issues identified in the OIG Report.

See Appendix 4.

# Program Evaluation

## 1.1 National Program Office (NPO)

Create an NPO that will act as the oversight governing body for all three administrations to include the full scope of benefits and services provided on behalf of deceased veterans whose remains are unclaimed. A program director will oversee the NPO and act as the senior accountable official. The NPO will rely on the UVR Council for guidance, direction, and decision making. The NPO will be responsible for legislative compliance and implementation along with authority to work on cross-administration solutions such as IT, regulations, and directives. Separate from this report, the creation of an NPO will be further discussed in upcoming responses to Recommendation #1 of the OIG Report.

## 1.2 UVR Council

The UVR Council will comprise Executive Leadership Team members from each administration to provide oversight, provide direction, and promote cross-cutting collaboration. The UVR Council will monitor the program's health, analyze program data, and foster ongoing collaboration between the administrations.

## 1.3 VHA Central Oversight

VHA will create a central oversight program office to ensure all UVR processes associated with VHA are standardized. This program office will update and maintain policies, program metrics, and knowledge management content (job aids for field staff). In addition, it will institute quality assurance monitoring, compliance, and field engagement based on analysis of program metrics. Based on the analysis of work to be performed, this IPT recommends that VHA perform a feasibility review for aligning a

DAPO within VHA Patient Care Services (PCS), Care Management and Social Work (CM/SW) or other appropriate VHA office. See Appendix 5.

## 2.0 Outreach

As a result of the program evaluation, the IPT concluded that each administration was performing outreach to key stakeholders, but VA lacked a consistent and integrated approach. It was determined that the outreach communication materials are different, and sometimes unclear or confusing, for the VA customers/stakeholders. It was also occasionally unclear who VA customers should be routed to when they reach out to the wrong administration. Changes in how VA conducts outreach, to the extent of the law, are necessary to ensure the stakeholders have the most accurate information.

### 2.1 Stakeholder Communication

Establish clear communication with external stakeholders on how to work with the VA and ensure all communication materials are consistent throughout each VA administration.

### 2.2 Stakeholder Resources

Provide reference materials to stakeholders. The reference materials will be consistent across the three administrations to ensure a unified voice from the VA to the stakeholders.

### 2.3 Outreach Cadence

Develop standards on outreach cadence to regional partners and stakeholders. The materials will be clear, concise instructions across all administrations, and include specific POCs and localized content.

### 3.0 Training

To implement the improvements recommended in this report, VA must ensure that all stakeholders associated with the UVR process are appropriately trained and competent to perform the assigned tasks. VA has effective training and certification programs and procedures, so the changes to the UVR process will need to be integrated into the existing training plans to include new-hire orientation and annual training plans.

#### 3.1 New Employee Orientation Training

Develop collective awareness of all three agencies and their relationship to decedent affairs. New hires associated with UVR processes will review the policy and procedure changes resulting in the new UVR processes during their employee orientation.

#### 3.2 Annual Training

Annual training for all administrations will be conducted to include demonstrated proficiency and competency. Training proficiency and competency measurements will be established to ensure effective training.

### 4.0 Operations

During the program evaluation, operational efficiencies were identified and reviewed by the IPT. UVR operations across all administrations are in place ; however, consolidating some of them will improve operational efficiency. The IPT recommends the following to streamline the UVR processes further:

#### 4.1 Centralized Financial Processing

In conjunction with OIG Recommendation #6, VA will explore centralizing benefit payment processing related to unclaimed Veteran remains. It is crucial that the Recommendation #6 Integrated Project Team (IPT), which is tasked with implementing controls for payments on behalf of such Veterans, examine opportunities for more centralized financial processing within VA's legal authority and to the extent that essential infrastructure can be put in place prior to implementation of such changes.

#### 4.2 VHA Warm Hand-Off to VBA

When VHA receives community inquiries regarding VBA-administered burial claims for unclaimed remains, they will provide them authoritative publicly available resources and conduct a warm hand-off to VBA for further information regarding Veteran's burial benefits and provide options to the stakeholder.

### 4.3 NCA and VBA Joint Collaboration

4.3.1 NCA is always ready to schedule an interment if a custodian of remains is ready to inter and does not need unique assistance. When NCA receives UVR inquiries other than requests for burial eligibility or scheduling the interment, such as inquirers do not have possession of the remains or are searching for next of kin, NCA will conduct a warm hand-off to VBA to gather additional information and provide options to the inquirer.

4.3.2 When VBA has made a preliminary determination that a decedent may be a Veteran or an individual entitled to Veteran's benefits, VBA will coordinate with NCA for burial eligibility determination and act as a liaison between the stakeholder and NCA if needed or between the stakeholder and a closer VA grant funded cemetery to achieve dignified interment. NCA processes interment requests for NCA cemeteries, requests from State and Tribal cemeteries for headstones and markers and all requests for casket and urn monetary reimbursement. VBA processes all other monetary benefits related to burial.

### 4.4 Service Level Agreements (SLAs)

Develop and monitor SLAs to ensure the program functions based on the law's intent. The SLAs will be monitored by the NPO and UVRC and become a key component of the governance structure.

### 4.5 Data Sharing

Improve data sharing and shared resource directories across administrations. Improved data sharing will enhance the VA's ability to identify adverse trends so that meaningful corrective actions can be taken. IPT for Recommendation #3 addresses data sharing between administrations within the VA and other federal, state and local partners.

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**White House VA Hotline**

1-855-948-2311

**Veterans Crisis Line**

1-800-273-8255 and press 1, [Chat](#), or Text 838255.

**Download the VA Welcome Kit**

<https://www.va.gov/welcome-kit/>

**VA events calendar**

<https://www.va.gov/outreach-and-events/events/>

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# **Appendix 1**

## **VA Unclaimed Veterans Remains Report\_508\_041122**



# VA PROCESS MAP

## Unclaimed Veteran Remains (UVR)

Prepared for the Veteran Unclaimed Remains Integrated Project Team (IPT) by VA Veterans Experience Office, Enterprise Measurement and Design Directorate

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# PROJECT PURPOSE

## INTRODUCTION

### Process Map Background:

The Veterans Experience Office (VEO) Enterprise Measurement and Design (EMD) team, in close collaboration with the Veteran Unclaimed Remains Integrated Project Team (IPT), identified and mapped key Veteran Unclaimed Remains processes for all three VA Administrations:

- National Cemetery Administration (NCA)
- Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)
- Veterans Health Administration (VHA)

The process map was developed and validated through several interactions with key stakeholders:

- 12 Subject Matter Expert (SME) interviews
- 2 workshop sessions
- 3 content reviews with each Administration

### Process Map Purpose:

The process map was developed to provide an integrated, unified perspective that was intended to enlighten the IPT and other vested VA Administration stakeholders to find common ground when pursuing updates to this process from a collaborative perspective.

*The information captured throughout this document is based on data provided by the designated SMEs for this effort and may not be reflective of process improvement efforts that have taken place after March 2022.*

## HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

The process map is divided into five phases that were identified to take place across NCA, VBA, and VHA regarding the process of handling unclaimed Veteran remains.

**Phase 1:** Receiving Notification of Remains

**Phase 2:** Verifying Remains are Veteran

**Phase 3:** Verifying Next of Kin

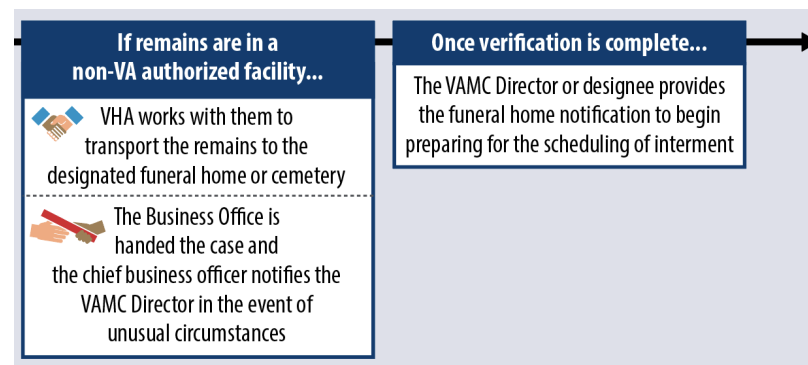
**Phase 4:** Identifying Eligibility for Burial Benefits and Reimbursement

**Phase 5:** Interment Planning and Execution

Two additional phases that take place continuously throughout the process, **Policy and Procedures for UVR** and **Outreach for UVR**, are also considered within the process map, but fall outside of any timeline considerations.

### How the Information is Displayed

- Each phase will be represented one at a time on their own page
- Each phase is briefly described and includes key findings noted across all three VA administrations
- Within each phase, the various tasks to be performed by each administration are clearly represented in boxes
- The main tasks on the top, indicated by a solid horizontal line, typically follow one after the other on a timeline
- Beneath each main task are actions or considerations associated with that task
- For purposes of viewing this process map note that each administration completes their tasks on a separate timeline that may be distinct from the others



Example for how information is displayed within the process map.

### Icons

The process map contains icons throughout to help supplement your understanding regarding the importance or implication of a certain task/action. The icons used to denote these significant events, moments, or decision points for consideration or action include the following:



Pain points that create challenges or obstacles within the process



Important information within a particular action or task



Service gap or something that leads to a gap in responsibility or tasks within the process



Hand-off between two entities either internal or external to VA



Collaboration occurrence between two entities either internal or external to VA

### Other Tips

#### How to Zoom

The breadth of information displayed at each phase required the use of a smaller font size throughout the process map. If you're having trouble reading any of the texts, please use these zoom features within the PDF to more clearly view the information:

- Use the plus (+) and minus (-) symbols on the top tool bar of the PDF to customize the level of zoom in the document.
- Next to the plus (+) and minus (-) symbols is a drop down that will allow you to manually enter or choose from the pre-determined percentages regarding the level of zoom.
- If your keyboard has a trackpad, you may pinch two fingers together to manually zoom out or reverse that same motion to manually zoom in on the document.

# THE NEED FOR A UVR PROCESS MAP

## DESIGN WORKSHOP 1 OVERVIEW

Members of the IPT group, through a series of design exercises, collaborated to identify what types of information they are most interested in learning and what their expectations were for the process map. The discussion resulted in a more unified understanding for content and design considerations to be included in the process map and why it would be useful to their respective administrations.

## THE LACK OF PROCESS CLARITY IMPACTS ALL VA ADMINISTRATIONS

- Administrations are duplicating or creating extra work because they don't know what other stakeholders have already completed for a specific UVR case.
- Often issues have become emergencies by the time the relevant team learns about their existence.
- It's hard to know who is responsible for certain tasks.
- It's difficult to consistently deliver and keep track of a service that is not standardized.

## CLARITY MAY BE ACHIEVED BY IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC TOPICS OF INFORMATION

- Information about other administration's unclaimed remains procedures.
- Information about existing efforts to collaborate with external stakeholders and where they fit into the overall process.
- Information about their own team's processes.
- Information about where hand-offs can/should be taking place.

# UVR PROCESS MAP VALUE CONSIDERATIONS

## DESIGN WORKSHOP 1 FINDINGS CONTINUED

### VALUE DERIVED FROM CLARITY

- **Process Clarity:** Milestones, tasks that need to be accomplished from beginning to end, and what others are doing during different phases.
- **Relationship Clarity:** A better understanding of what other administrations are doing during certain phases and where there might be areas of duplication or gaps.
- **Silo Breakdown Clarity:** Finding opportunities to simplify the process, rethink who is responsible for different tasks to reduce duplication of efforts and create clearer moments for handoffs.
- **External Partner Clarity:** Understanding how the actions of external partners impact the process from VA's perspective, so that outreach and education can be done to reduce confusion.
- **Providing Higher Quality Services to Veterans**

### NECESSARY FEATURES OF THE UVR PROCESS MAP

- Defining all necessary **tasks, milestones, and corresponding responsibilities.**
- A depiction of the **full process** of handling unclaimed remains from death/notification that remains exist to final interment and benefit payout.
- A list of **the internal and external stakeholders** and their roles and responsibilities.
- The **amount of time** it takes to complete each task/phase/milestone.
- Points in the process **where an action needs to take place** (hand-offs, research, payment).
- Required **technology systems** used throughout this process.
- Areas of **potential risk or resource constraint.**
- Explanation of which **policies and procedures** influence different parts of the process.



# POLICY AND PROCEDURES FOR UVR FINDINGS

The *Policy and Procedures section for UVR* explains how each administration pursues and reviews policy or directive considerations based on their needs in the unclaimed Veteran remains process.

This section does not align to a particular point in time, but is continuously updated and refined as required throughout this process.

## VHA FINDINGS

- Various Codes of Federal Regulations (CFRs) exist with responsibilities related to handling unclaimed Veteran remains at VA Medical Centers (VAMCs). However, the current VHA Directive from 2017 does not fully outline standard processes, which has created a lack of consistency across the enterprise.
- The process established for policy review by VHA's Office of Regulations, Appeals and Policy (RAP) is useful for bringing together relevant stakeholders, but the lengthy coordination procedures can make it difficult for the VHA Program Office to implement changes in a timely manner.
- VHA Member Services issued VHA Directive 1601B.04 (Decedent Affairs) in 2017 but has not been resourced to serve as the VHA Program Office for Decedent Affairs. Without dedicated oversight staff in place, it is difficult for VHA to map processes that can vary across the enterprise.

*NOTE: The VHA information captured throughout this document is based on data provided by the VHA SMEs available for this effort and may not be reflective of processes at all VAMCs.*

### VHA Policies and Procedures for UVR include:

- 38 CFR 3.1605 - Death while traveling under prior authorization or while hospitalized by the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- 38 USC 2303 - Death in Department Facility; Plot Allowance.

## VBA FINDINGS

- Policy is distributed through the Web Automated Reference Manual System (WARMS), calendar notifications via email, and leadership meetings to communicate changes to the applicable personnel.
- Training is updated when policy or procedures change. Policy changes are based on legislation while procedures are updated as needed or through annual reviews.

### VBA Policies and Procedures for UVR include:

- 38 CFR 3.1706 - Burial allowance for a veteran who died while hospitalized by VA.
- 38 CFR 3.1707 - Plot or interment allowances for burial in a State veterans cemetery or other cemetery.
- 38 CFR 3.1708 - Burial of a Veteran whose remains are unclaimed.
- 38 CFR 3.1709 - Transportation expenses for burial in a national cemetery.
- 38 USC 7703 - Functions of the Administration - assigns responsibility for outreach.
- Procedural manual M21-1, Part XI, Subpart iii, Chapter 1, Section B - Burial benefits.
- Procedural Manual M27-1 Benefits assistance service procedures, covers outreach that is coordinator specific.

## NCA FINDINGS

- Cemeteries follow a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) that was developed by the VA Central Office (VACO). Individual cemeteries create their own business processes, but not their own forms, to suit their site's specific needs.
- State or county offices may create SOPs that inform how funeral homes and coroner's offices in different states handle remains, which is sometimes in conflict with NCA procedure.
- There is a desire for custodians and VA to be on the same page about rules and regulations, so that everyone is following the same protocol on the same timeline.

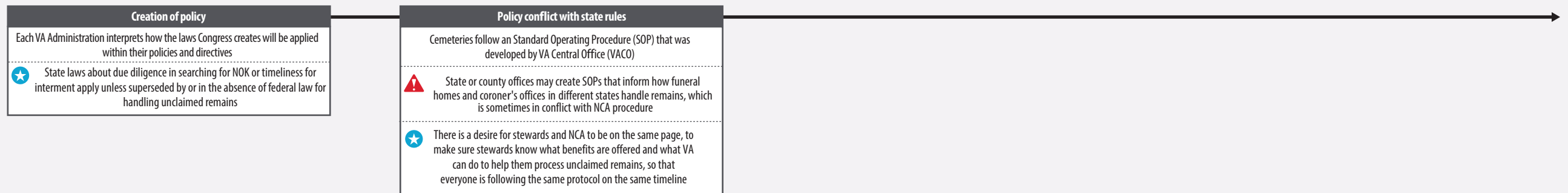
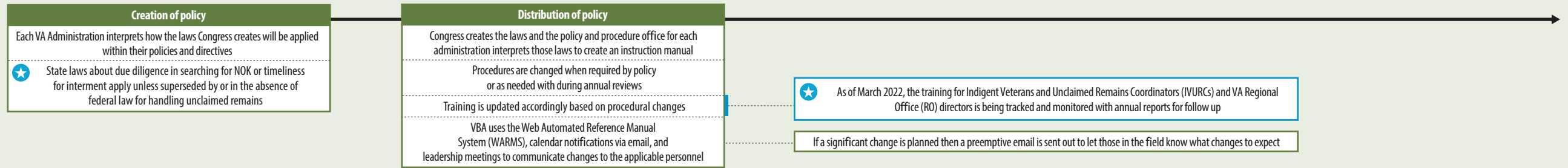
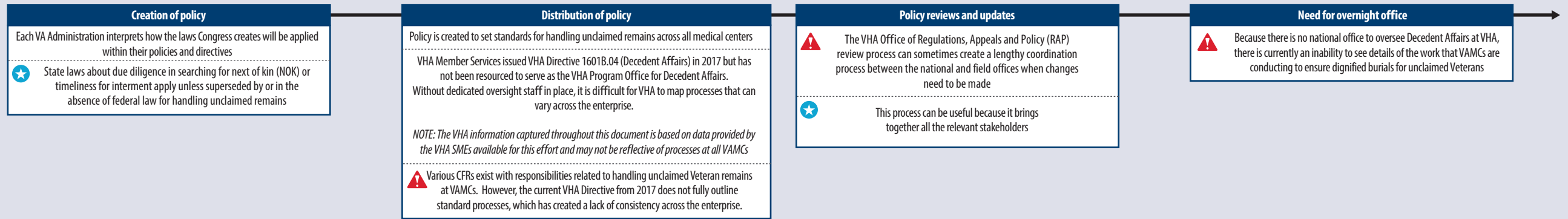
### NCA Policies and Procedures for UVR include:

- NCA 41-SOP-004 - Reimbursement for Caskets and Urns for Unclaimed Remains of Veterans Interred in National, State, or Tribal Cemeteries.
- NCA 41-SOP-005 - Eligibility Requirements.
- NCA 41-SOP-011 - Unclaimed Decedents and Unaccompanied Decedents.
- 38 USC 2402 - Persons eligible for interment in national cemeteries.
- 38 CFR 38.620 - Persons eligible for burial is a corresponding regulation to 38 USC 2402.
- 38 CFR 38.628 - Reimbursement for caskets and urns for unclaimed remains of Veterans.
- Interment Operations Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)-41-005 is the eligibility SOP for NCA.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Each VA Administration interprets how the laws Congress creates will be applied within their regulations, policies, and directives, which can result in a duplication of effort or gaps in who is responsible for different process phases.
- State laws about due diligence in searching for next of kin (NOK) or timeliness for interment apply unless superseded by or in the absence of federal law for handling unclaimed remains.
- Some of the SMEs that were interviewed attributed the absence of an oversight office to the lack of awareness for actions taken and policies/directives followed between VHA, VBA, and NCA.

# Policy and Procedures for UVR by Administration



**Legend**

- Pain Points
- Hand-off Occurrence or Leads to a Hand-off
- Service Gap or Something that Leads to a Gap
- Important Information
- Collaboration Between Two Entities

# OUTREACH FOR UVR FINDINGS

The *Outreach section for UVR* covers how each administration thinks about and participates in outreach to the various stakeholders involved in the unclaimed Veteran remains process.

This section does not align to a particular point in time, but is continuously updated and refined as required throughout this process.

## VHA FINDINGS

- There can be lack of coordination and understanding between national and field offices about best practices and responsibility for outreach, but community partnerships tend to fall to local VA facilities who know the local funeral home ecosystem and which ones are amenable to working with VA.
- VHA interacts with funeral homes and other community partners through vendor contracts, but in some areas struggle to establish contracts with funeral homes based on pricing and a low frequency of service.

## VBA FINDINGS

- The individual regional offices are responsible for conducting UVR outreach, they sometimes collaborate with NCA and VHA to do so. The need to collaborate may be amplified due to the high number of potential community partners and the fact that there may only be one primary and one alternate Indigent Veterans and Unclaimed Remains Coordinators (IVURC) outreach coordinator for each state.
- In January 2022, the M27 manual was revised to establish policy to be more proactive in building relationships regarding UVRs, data tracking, and establishing the IVURC as the first point of contact instead of NCA.

## NCA FINDINGS

- National cemeteries conduct outreach to community partners to ensure they know what to do if they become aware of unclaimed Veteran remains. This outreach, however, is limited to the geographic areas of the cemeteries, and NCA is not in many areas of the country.
- NCA also conducts outreach by attending national funeral industry events and conferences at the “strategic level.”
- NCA responds to numerous inquiries from VHA hospitals and VBA offices regarding how to direct external customers.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Each administration (medical centers, cemeteries, national offices) is doing their own form of outreach to Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), custodians, Veterans, national stakeholder organizations like the National Funeral Directors Association, and the general public — the process for conducting this outreach and the communication materials/talking points used across them are different and it is sometimes unclear who VA customer should be routed to when they reach out to the wrong administration.
- Each administration believes the responsibility of conducting outreach to the community should be the responsibility of a different administration or that they need additional support due to the imbalance between the number of potential external partners and their number of staff.
- Although formalized documents for creating hand-offs between the administrations were among the initial work of the IPT. Now we need to implement and execute those documents, and, if necessary, make changes.
- The lack of specific guidance around community partner outreach can result in coroners and funeral homes reaching out to VSOs and non-VA entities who may not have the most correct or most pertinent information.

# Outreach for UVR by Administration



VHA

**Clarifying outreach responsibilities**

- There can sometimes be a lack of communication between the national and field offices, which can create confusion about outreach best practices, who is responsible for outreach, and standards for pricing of contracts with funeral homes
- In most cases, the local VA facilities will establish the relationship with a funeral home because they know the local funeral homes and each one's willingness to accept the payment that VA will offer
- It may be difficult for VHA to conduct outreach, so they rely on VBA and NCA to create relationships with local morticians and funeral directors

**VHA vendor contracts**

- A vendor contract is established with a funeral home and is owned by the Business Office
- A funeral home must complete VA Form 10091 Financial Services Center (FSC) Vendor File Request and have vendor status if VHA is paying for funeral or transportation services
- Some areas do not have contracts due to lack of interest from funeral homes based on pricing and a low frequency of service, which makes VHA rely on a rotational list of local funeral homes

A rare case of remains not being handled in a timely manner may occur in between contract periods



VBA

**Clarifying outreach responsibilities**

- The individual regional offices are responsible for conducting outreach regarding unclaimed Veteran remains (UVRs) but they do at times collaborate with NCA and VHA to do so
- Coroners and funeral homes may be reaching out to Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) or other non-VA entities who may not know to reach out to an IVURC for guidance
- There is not specific guidance, uniform coordination, or policy around UVR outreach, which may be a reason external partners aren't sure if they can or who to reach out to regarding UVRs
- The lack of formalized procedures between the RO and IVURC also led to a lack of what the RO Director needed to do in order to coordinate a dignified burial for UVRs
- There may only be one primary and one alternate IVURC outreach coordinator for each state, possibly making it difficult to inform and coordinate with all potential external partners
- Outreach coordinators may be provided burial information materials (pamphlets, etc) for outreach. They may also be provided directives through the RO, but without policy and procedures it may be left up to them to determine how, when, and if to apply it.

As of January 2022, the governing M27 Manual is being revised to help coordinators solve for these pain points by establishing policy to be more proactive in building relationships regarding UVRs, data tracking, and establishing the IVURC as the first point of contact instead of NCA



NCA

**Clarifying outreach responsibilities**

- NCA conducts a great deal of outreach to local funeral homes, VSOs, coroner's offices and hospitals to make sure they know what VA can offer them
- NCA regularly provides information to make sure external stakeholders are aware of available benefits and the process for handling unclaimed remains for an honorable interment
- Web resources and pamphlets are a common tools used to educate external stakeholders about NCA capabilities

**Outreach to external remain custodians...**

- Sometimes hearing about the casket reimbursement program is what motivates a funeral home to reach out to VA on their own
- Outreach by national cemetery staff is limited to the geographic areas of the cemeteries, leaving much of the country uncovered
- Outreach is important because when a coroner's office doesn't know what to do with unclaimed Veteran remains they may leave them in storage for a long period of time and blame VA in the event of a media or congressional inquiry

**Outreach to VHA hospitals...**

- NCA also reaches out to VHA hospitals and VBA to inform them on how to direct external custodians when they are the first point of contact instead of NCA
- NCA is sometimes contacted by the general public asking about VA benefits because they don't know the difference between VBA, NCA, and VHA; this often creates confusion as it is unclear who NCA should contact from other administrations during this scenario
- NCA may be limited on the benefit advice they can provide regarding VBA benefits as this is not their area of expertise

**Legend**

- Pain Points
- Hand-off Occurrence or Leads to a Hand-off
- Service Gap or Something that Leads to a Gap
- Important Information
- Collaboration Between Two Entities

# PHASE 1: RECEIVING NOTIFICATION OF REMAINS

The *Receiving Notification of Remains* phase highlights the different avenues and processes by which the administrations learn about the existence of unclaimed Veteran remains. It focuses on which external stakeholders the different administrations most often work with, how they handle hand-offs between administrations, and the initial challenges endured.

## VHA FINDINGS

- VHA makes it a priority to assess whether a Veteran under their care has a next of kin before their passing, which can help with reducing surprises in the process.
- VHA decedent affairs staff work with external VA authorized care organizations to begin the unclaimed remains process. It's unclear if this process is standardized across the country.
- VHA often receives notifications about Veterans who have passed away outside of VA authorized facilities, and staff don't always know where to refer them. The national training usually teaches local facilities to contact VBA.
- VHA has been doing some assisting in helping to identify next of kin even when a Veteran passed away outside of VA authorized care.

## VBA FINDINGS

- External stakeholders sometimes don't know who to contact about UVRs, so they end up contacting VBA.
- VBA is not set up to share information other than burial allowances, which can make it hard for VBA to redirect calls they aren't equipped to address. They will often refer to the M21 manual for guidance, which was updated in March 2022 in collaboration with NCA and VHA to help alleviate gaps in knowledge for addressing local procedures or information regarding the overall process for interment and funeral arrangements.

## NCA FINDINGS

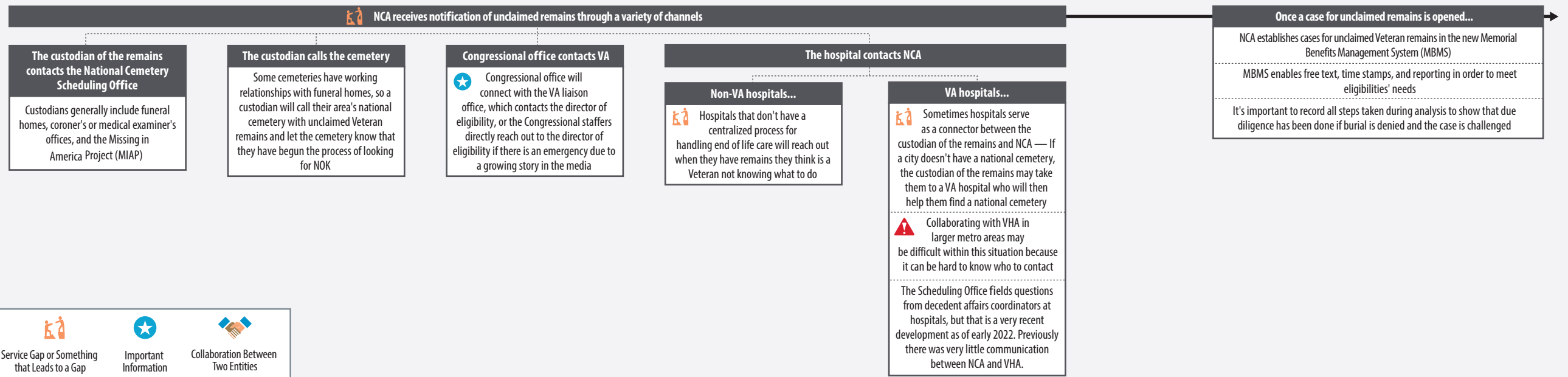
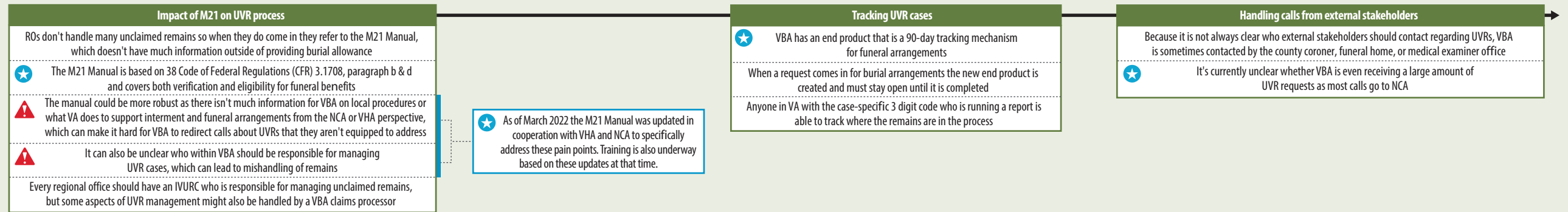
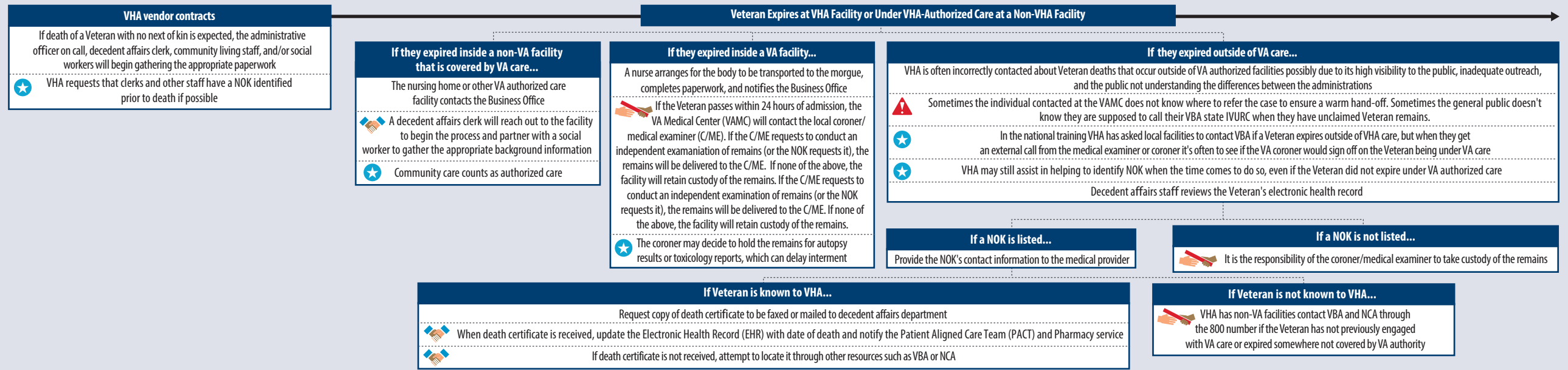
- NCA conducts a great deal of outreach to funeral homes and responds to inquiries from hospitals, VA and otherwise, to ensure that stakeholders know who to contact when unclaimed remains are received.
- Sometimes NCA relies on VHA hospitals or VBA to pass cases along to them, but it can sometimes be difficult to collaborate because it's not clear who to contact.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Each administration struggles with external organizations and the general public calling the wrong administration to address their need. There is also a lack of structure for cross administration communication that would allow facilitation of warm hand-offs across VA.
- The experience that custodians of remains and the general public have when contacting VA about unclaimed remains varies depending on the administration they contact first.
- The lack of guidance about who is responsible for different parts of the process or clear hand-off procedures means that sometimes administrations are taking on work that extends beyond their foundational capabilities.



# Phase 1: Receiving Notification of Remains by Administration



**Legend**

- ⚠ Pain Points
- ✋ Hand-off Occurrence or Leads to a Hand-off
- ✋ Service Gap or Something that Leads to a Gap
- ★ Important Information
- ✋ Collaboration Between Two Entities



## PHASE 2: VERIFYING REMAINS ARE VETERAN

The *Verifying Remains are Veteran* phase includes the responsibilities of each administration in verifying that the unclaimed remains they are notified of belong to a Veteran. It focuses on the varying standards of due diligence and the different tools and contacts used by each administration to conduct this research.

### VHA FINDINGS

- VHA completes verification of Veteran status upon check-in to a VA facility or VA authorized facility before a death takes place, which simplifies the process should the remains be deemed unclaimed.
- There are some cases where a patient may have initially been labeled a Veteran, but during the course of their stay is deemed ineligible. In this situation VHA will collaborate with external organizations to identify other methods for funding interment.

### VBA FINDINGS

- VBA's M21 Manual indicates that VBA must verify Veteran status of unclaimed remains, but there is a sense that NCA is usually responsible for this task.
- There is a desire for more collaboration with NCA to better understand which parts of the process the respective administrations are responsible for and ensure more standardized hand-offs, but the process of establishing data coordination between the two is a concern.
- While VBA does have a process for verifying the Veteran status of unclaimed remains, there are not formal quality requirements to ensure that all steps are followed outside of an expectation of due diligence.

### NCA FINDINGS

- Cemeteries sometimes do light research to make sure that remains are Veteran and can work with VSOs to do so, and although these responsibilities are clearly described within the SOP, there is still sometimes a lack of clarity about who is responsible for identifying unclaimed remains across the custodians, cemeteries, and NCA scheduling office.
- The NCA Scheduling Office also conducts research into the Veteran status of remains, often going back and forth between sources to piece together incomplete information.
- More requests for interment of unclaimed are denied than approved because many custodians request interment of all unclaimed remains without reason to believe the remains are those of Veterans. This creates resource issues for NCA because of the time and effort required before any case can be denied.

### KEY FINDINGS

- A variety of stakeholders are conducting their own form of Veteran status verification without clear delineation of who should actually be in charge of this effort, a lack of shared standards for what due diligence standards are, and which resources should be use in this process.

## Phase 2: Verifying Remains are Veteran by Administration



**Verification of Veteran status is completed upon check-in to a VA facility or VA authorized facility and before death takes place**

- This process is often completed using the Enrollment System (ES) housed in the health eligibility center, but staff may also use the Veteran's Benefit Management System (VBMS), the DoD's Veteran's Information Solution (VIS) platform, and even partner with VBA, NCA, and VSOs to determine Veteran status
- There is a possibility that a patient is initially labeled a Veteran but during the course of their stay is identified as ineligible and would be treated on a humanitarian basis and not as Veteran eligible status

VSOs, other Veteran advocacy organizations, and the local agency of jurisdiction responsible for indigent burials in the area are instrumental and may be contacted to help identify methods to fund the interment of ineligible Veterans that expire within a VA facility



**The M21 manual states that VBA must verify the individual whose remains they have been notified of was a Veteran and then they must find a separate section of the manual that explains this process**

Even though the manual states that VBA must verify the Veteran status of the remains, they have been informed that NCA usually handles this task

**Process for verifying Veteran status...**

In some cases, it is simple for VBA to take care of this part of the process, such as when the individual whose remains are in question is already in the VA system and has received benefits at some point in their life

VBA may also verify the remains as a Veteran through the person making the claim for funeral arrangements by asking for a DD-214, certificate of discharge, or using Share, Veterans Benefit Management System (VBMS), Personal Information Exchange System (PIES), Veteran Information Solution (VIS), or the Defence Personnel Records Information Retrieval System (DPRIS)

- There are no formally established quality requirements to ensure that all steps were followed, but there is an expectation of due diligence
- In some cases, local quality review processes will result in cases randomly being pulled to ensure they are handled correctly

**Collaborating with NCA to verify Veteran status...**

- There is some confusion as to whether or not cases should be referred to NCA at this point because it is unclear if NCA is able to verify the Veteran status of unclaimed remains if they aren't eligible for burial in a national cemetery
- VBA wants to work more collaboratively with NCA when identifying if the remains are that of a Veteran. The goal is to standardize hand-offs and provide awareness of VBA actions throughout the UVR process, but there are concerns with data coordination.



**NCA verifies if the remains are Veteran, which may happen immediately after or simultaneously with notification of the remains**

**If the custodian reaches out to the VA cemetery directly...**

- Cemetery conducts light research to make sure that the Veteran is unclaimed
- Cemetery may work with VSOs to determine if remains are Veteran or to help organize the service
- VSOs can be helpful in augmenting VA staff by providing information as to determine Veteran status
- Responsibility for identifying Veteran status of unclaimed remains is unclear across the coroner's offices, cemeteries, and Scheduling Office

If Veteran status cannot be identified, the cemetery's responsibility ends and the remains are buried elsewhere

**If the custodian can provide proof of qualifying military service, or if proof is available in VA systems...**

The Scheduling Office will schedule the interment in any national cemetery with available space

If someone has ever, at any time submitted proof of service to the VA, verifying their Veteran status can take as little as same day/same hour because it can be accessed in the VA system

**If the custodian cannot provide proof of qualifying military service and such information is not in VA systems...**

The Scheduling Office's Eligibility Verification Division will initiate research and determine eligibility

A small number of analysts perform this task for every request for burial for unclaimed remains in a national cemetery

One analyst will work the case from beginning to end, requesting information and documents from all available sources, determining eligibility, and scheduling the interment or denying the interment

- Researchers often have to go back and forth with sources when presented with incomplete information, which can be very time consuming
- Unclaimed requests are often the most time-consuming because of the initial lack of information regarding the individual's military service

**Process for verifying Veteran status...**

The Scheduling Office has to determine if the remains are Veteran, a process that typically takes 7 days from the initial call to interment but can take as long as 3 weeks if the records are difficult to locate

The Scheduling Office uses the following resources to identify harder to track files: VBA/VHA system, National Personnel Records Center, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Civil Name Index

**If Veteran status cannot be proven...**

The request for burial is denied

- More unclaimed individuals are denied than approved because there are several county coroners or organizations like Missing in America that aren't doing their own due diligence prior to requesting NCA to investigate

**Once NCA decides that burial benefits are going to be denied...**

NCA notifies the custodian of the denial

Reviews of denials may be requested of NCA staff, and denials may be appealed to the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA). BVA remands very few NCA decisions.

**Legend**

- Pain Points
- Hand-off Occurrence or Leads to a Hand-off
- Service Gap or Something that Leads to a Gap
- Important Information
- Collaboration Between Two Entities

## PHASE 3: VERIFYING NEXT OF KIN

The *Verifying Next of Kin* phase covers the responsibility of each administration in searching for a next of kin to claim the Veteran remains. It focuses on who this responsibility belongs to, how it is completed, the complexities that can arise when timeliness standards vary, and the challenges that arise when a next of kin comes forward later in the process or are identified but are unwilling to claim the remains.

### VHA FINDINGS

- VHA has to balance the importance of conducting due diligence and searching for NOK in a timely manner.
- Decedent affairs staff collaborate with external stakeholders like VSOs, County Clerk's Offices, non-VA hospitals, as well as VBA to identify NOK when they are not listed in a Veteran's medical records.
- In some cases VHA has to be prepared for NOK being identified but not wanting to claim remains for personal or financial reasons.

### VBA FINDINGS

- In cases where remains are brought to VBA, the funeral director or other custodian of the remains has often identified NOK already.
- As of March 2022, in cases where the custodian of the remains has not identified a NOK, IVURCs at VBA are now directed to conduct a search of the VBA records in an attempt to identify one.

### NCA FINDINGS

- In cases where remains are brought to NCA, it is the custodian of the remain's responsibility to identify NOK in accordance with their state's laws.
- NCA relies on the certification of the custodian in accordance with the laws of their own states.

### KEY FINDINGS

- There is a possibility of the Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS) software being used across VA collaboratively to manage unclaimed remains cases.
- A common challenge that all administrations face is that sometimes a Veteran's NOK can be found but they don't want to be involved in the process, or want to be involved but can't afford burial costs so they don't come forward.
- The responsibility and timeline for due diligence required to identify a NOK varies across administrations, which can create a challenge in cases where NOK try to claim remains after burial or when there is public interest in how long Veteran remains have spent in storage.

# Phase 3: Verifying Next of Kin by Administration



### Process of Identifying NOK

The decedent affairs coordinator conducts and documents due diligence to identify NOK in the Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS) decedent affairs tracking tool software, which is checked once monthly by their VISN director. Review medical records, EHR, VA Form 10-2687 Inventory of Funds and Effects, chaplain and medical provider notes and contact any listed individuals to assist with identifying NOK, and work with a decedent affairs clerk to contact NOK.

All actions to identify and notify NOK must be completed within 30 calendar days of the Veteran's death.

There is a possibility of the CPRS software being used across NCA, VBA, and VHA collaboratively to manage unclaimed remains cases as there is a comprehensive manual and all VAMCs are already trained to use it.

Currently there are no distinct POCs or cross-agency software that can be used to better communicate with NCA or VBA when identifying the existence of NOK.

### If a NOK is not listed

Decedent Affairs staff creates, tracks, and updates the Veteran's case in the VHA Decedent Affairs Data Collection Tool. Initiate a VA Form 119, Report of Contact (ROC) and document all efforts to identify and locate the legal NOK.

Notify the PACT and Pharmacy Service of Veteran's death.

If no contacts are listed, decedent affairs staff may request additional assistance from VHA policy, Social Work Service, VSOs, County Clerk's Office or Public Administrator's Office in the county where the Veteran died.

### All of these tactics may also be used by VHA to help identify NOK...

VHA has involved law enforcement in the past and even put a 10 day ad in a newspaper to help identify NOK, but this doesn't happen often. VHA may also contact the Social Security Administration (SSA) through the Health Eligibility Center (HEC) to help identify a NOK.

VHA may work with Non-VA community hospitals, which are usually good at finding NOK because they need to identify how they will be reimbursed.

Some facilities use state appointed probate examiners to conduct a cursory review, but there is a fee associated that can be covered if the Veteran made a deposit at admission to their patient funds.

An administrator of the court takes over the investigation to conduct legal research in terms of finding bank accounts, assets, and NOK.

### If NOK cannot be found or is not able to be involved in the interment of the remains

Obtain all documentation used to identify and notify NOK and request the Multidisciplinary Advisory Team assemble to review and validate all due diligence were completed and provide recommendation to the VHA facility director or designee that the Veteran's remains be deemed unclaimed and invoke VA authority.

Provide information from the multidisciplinary advisory team to the VHA facility director who will review the recommendation, determine if the Veteran's remains are to be deemed unclaimed, return completed VA Form 10-2065 to CBO or designee notifying them of the decision to deem remains unclaimed.

Notify the decedent affairs staff that the Veteran's remains have been deemed unclaimed, update the Veterans case in the VHA decedent affairs data collection tool.

If the facility does not have a multidisciplinary advisory team, the CBO or designee must complete this process.

### If a NOK or someone else to claim the remains is identified...

NOK may be identified but choose not to claim the remains due to personal or financial reasons.

Initiate a VA Form 119 and document all efforts to obtain VA Form 10-2065 Funeral Arrangements or other approved documents.

After 3 business days of the death notification, if the NOK is unwilling or unresponsive to provide completed documentation assigning a funeral director/mortuary send the correct Letter Template A: NOK contacted but hesitant to claim remains or B: NOK contacted by declined to claim remains. A copy of the letter is uploaded to EHR.

If the NOK does not respond after 2 business days of receipt of the certified letter, notify CBO or designee of the Veteran's remains.

### If a non-family member claims the remains...

Sometimes neighbors or significant others may be requested to claim remains if identified as a contact prior to death, but social workers may need to be involved to navigate potential conflict if other family members are identified.

If a Veteran established a Power of Attorney for healthcare with the Advanced Directive Form from VA it will expire at death unless they used the state template. This can create conflict between VHA and families who may disagree about who and how remains are handled. VHA has requested this be fixed.

### Timeliness of NOK research

After all efforts to exercise due diligence in identifying a NOK are complete the Chief Business Office (CBO) or designee of the Veteran's remains is notified that there is no NOK. At this point the medical center director becomes designated to make final arrangements.

Because of the importance of timeliness in this process, stakeholders come together to weigh ensuring due diligence in their search with preventing the perception that remains are being handled disrespectfully. The acceptable timeline is usually between 3-14 days, but can shift based on local guidelines.

Timeliness can become a larger issue when a NOK is engaged at first, but backs out toward the end of the process causing the search for another NOK to restart from the beginning.

### If remains are in a non-VA authorized facility...

VHA works with them to transport the remains to the designated funeral home or cemetery.

The Business Office is handed the case and the chief business officer notifies the VAMC Director in the event of unusual circumstances.

### Once verification is complete...

The VAMC Director or designee provides the funeral home notification to begin preparing for the scheduling of interment.



As of March 2022, the IVURC will conduct a search of records within the VBA system if the funeral director has not identified a NOK



If remains are brought to NCA, it is the custodian of the remains responsibility to identify NOK in accordance with their state's laws

### Once the custodian begins the process of identifying NOK...

NCA has no way of knowing a custodian correctly performed the search for NOK and must rely on the certification of the custodian.

VA has no authority to compel custodians of remains to have remains interred in national cemeteries but may likely be blamed for Veteran remains left in storage.

### Not all NOK want to be identified as such....

Sometimes NOK are identified but don't want to be involved.

In these cases the cemetery will treat the burial as unclaimed remains but the custodian will continue outreach to secure payment from the family.

Sometimes there are NOK who want to be involved but can't pay.

In cases where NOK is identified but are unable to pay, the funeral director will send ceremony information to them and make sure they know they won't have to pay anything, so they can be involved even though the remains are technically "unclaimed".

Legend

- Pain Points
- Hand-off Occurrence or Leads to a Hand-off
- Service Gap or Something that Leads to a Gap
- Important Information
- Collaboration Between Two Entities

# PHASE 4: IDENTIFYING ELIGIBILITY FOR BURIAL BENEFITS AND REIMBURSEMENT

The *Identifying Eligibility for Burial Benefits and Reimbursement* phase highlights the responsibility of each administration in explaining and allocating burial benefits to the custodians of the Veteran remains, next of kin, and the general public. It focuses on who pays which benefits, the methods used to educate stakeholders about what they are eligible for, and the challenges of tracking reimbursement.

## VHA FINDINGS

- If a NOK is identified, VHA will work with VBA to help them apply for reimbursement of burial benefits they may be eligible for. Because VHA staff are not able to make determinations about benefits, it is important to ensure a seamless hand-off.
- If a NOK is not identified, the VAMC pays the allowable amount under 38 USC 2303 and the invoice is paid by the business office to the funeral home once interment is complete.
- VAMC staff may not be aware of the allowable amount under 38 USC 2303 and receive an invoice above the amount. These situations may require the Office of General Counsel (OGC) to intervene and/or provide guidance.

## VBA FINDINGS

- VBA pays out burial benefits for unclaimed remains as long as they didn't pass away in a VA hospital or under VA care.
- VBA's manual states that VHA must provide documentation to VBA when they have paid reimbursement in order to avoid duplicate payments, but this does not always happen.
- The type of reimbursement that a claimant receives can be influenced by the state and county that the remains are located in.
- IVURCs and claim processors within a regional office help to educate claimants about the benefits they are eligible for, but these two might not coordinate throughout the process.

## NCA FINDINGS

- Once remains have been approved for burial in a national cemetery, NCA reaches out to custodians to inform them of quality standards required for casket and urn reimbursement and to inform them of other available benefits. Custodians may opt not to utilize these programs.
- All VA factsheets concerning unclaimed Veteran remains have been recently updated, but the complexity of the various programs and application processes through different administrations are confusing for custodians of remains.
- NCA sometimes finds it difficult to convince funeral homes to apply for the casket reimbursement program because of the perceived complexity of the application and the fact that VA only reimburses at wholesale prices.
- NCA has been challenged when custodians decide not to use the casket reimbursement and present remains in a container perceived by the community attending as less than dignified.

## KEY FINDINGS

- There is some concern that if VHA, VBA, and NCA are not actively communicating about which claims have already been paid, that a funeral home could potentially be reimbursed twice.
- It may seem like there is double dipping for payout from NCA and VBA but this may be due to both administrations reimbursing different claims within burial allowances.



# Phase 4: Identifying Eligibility for Burial Benefits and Reimbursement by Administration



**If a NOK or someone else to claim the remains is identified**

- NOK is notified and provided benefit information by decedent coordination affairs, VHA works with VBA to help NOK apply for reimbursement
- VHA staff may not determine or adjudicate eligibility of burial benefits that are administered by VBA or NCA, but should refer NOK to the appropriate office
- Social workers are usually brought in to help discuss the financial considerations of claiming remains with NOK if it is seen as a sensitive issue
- NOK would be asked to contact their own funeral home and inform them that their deceased is a Veteran
- Coordinate with the chaplain service to assist with NOK bereavement counseling and assist the family member with completing VA Form 27-20008 Application for United States Flag for burial purposes

**Process for paying benefit claims**

- The VAMC pays the costs of funeral services and transportation services via VA Form 2237 or a purchase order for each Unclaimed Veteran who dies under VA-authorized care at their facility, or community care facility
- An invoice is paid by the business office to the funeral home once interment is complete
- If VHA and VBA are not actively communicating about which claims have already been paid, a funeral home could potentially double dip and be reimbursed twice
- VAMC staff may not be aware of the allowable amount under 38 USC 2303 and receive an invoice above the amount. These situations may require the Office of General Counsel (OGC) to intervene and/or provide guidance.
- Financial accounting and auditing of benefit payout varies across VAMC Contracting Officer's Representative (COR), Fiscal, or the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) HAS/MAS, it is unknown if there are standard quality checks for this
- There are future plans to create a process to contact VBA about notification of payment
- As of early 2022, decisions on the nuances of billing are currently under review and subject to change

**Collaboration to identify additional benefits**

- VHA may work with VSOs to help with identifying state and federal benefits
- VHA make work with VBA and NCA to identify other VA benefits

Industry partners the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) and the International Cemetery, Cremation & Funeral Association (ICCF) may assist in locating vendors to provide services within the legal dollar amount



VBA determines eligibility for reimbursement or burial allotment for UVRs that have not been claimed by relatives or friends, don't have sufficient resources to cover expenses, or are not the responsibility of another state federal agency, including VHA

VA form 21P-530 is anticipated to be replaced by VA form 21P-530EZ Notice of Evidence Necessary to Substantiate a Claim for Burial Benefits in January of 2023

**Some forms that may be required are...**

- In order to determine eligibility, VBA must have a death certificate and VA form 21P-530 Application for Burial Benefits
- If the form is incorrectly filled out, VBA may be able to approve it with a follow up phone call with the claimant
- There may be more flexibility for burial arrangements compared to requests for burial allowances

**If under VHA care...**

- VBA does not pay burial benefits if the Veteran dies while in a VA hospital or under VA care as those tasks are taken on by VHA instead
- VHA may not be aware that VBA's manual states that VHA must provide documentation to VBA when they have paid reimbursement in order to avoid a double payment on claims
- VHA directives to provide this documentation to VBA have been updated as of early 2022

**If already buried...**

If already buried, VBA will still consider eligibility for burial benefits for up to 2 years

**Impact of location on benefits...**

The type of reimbursement can depend on if the Veteran was eligible for burial in a national or state cemetery

The location of the remains may dictate where they are interred, which can be effected by state requirements, space availability and distance to the cemetery

**If buried in a state or national cemetery...**

The plot or interment allowance of up to \$807 will not be reimbursed to an individual, such as a funeral director. It is instead paid to the state cemetery.

The funeral director may still receive an allotment for a burial allowance

If VHA is not involved, VBA will also reimburse claimants for transportation of remains if the remains are buried in a national cemetery

**If buried in other than a state or national cemetery...**

Plot or interment allowances of up to \$807 can be reimbursed to an individual, such as a funeral director

**For duplicative benefits payouts...**

IVURCs and claim processors within an RO will help educate claimants about eligible benefits, but these two roles might not coordinate during this process

- A single POC within VA could be assigned for the various burial reimbursement needs between VBA and NCA but it would require a lot of training
- It may seem like there is double dipping for payout from NCA and VBA but this may be due to both admins reimbursing different claims within burial allowances
- An ideal system may consist of a single program that highlights what each administration specifically paid for during this process
- It may be difficult to know if payment to an individual is appropriate based on state or local payouts

**If denied...**

Only a small percentage do not have their claim approved, often because they are unreachable, incorrectly filled out information, or filed a claim after the 2 year period has ended



Once Veteran status and lack of NOK have been established, NCA will determine eligibility

**If request is denied by NCA...**

- The analyst contacts the custodian and denies interment in the national cemetery. The remains are the coroner/funeral home's responsibility to bury.
- If NCA denies interment of a non-Veteran who served only in the National Guard or reserves, recent changes in law permit states and tribes to decide whether they will inter in VA grant funded cemeteries
- NCA does not directly determine eligibility for VA grant funded state and tribal cemeteries, but has assisted these cemeteries by researching and advising whether individuals would be eligible for interment in national cemeteries. NCA will likely create a system to determine eligibility for government furnished headstones and markers in these cemeteries in the near future.
- IVURCs (within their regions of responsibility) will need to know the state and tribal cemeteries and who they permit to be buried in order to assist custodians if an individual is not eligible for interment in a VA national cemetery

**If the decedent is determined eligible for burial...**

- The analyst contacts the custodian and schedules the interment or transfers the case to the individual cemetery to be scheduled there
- The cemetery will send casket and travel reimbursement benefits and standard operating procedures to the custodian in an email
- NCA has a two page fact sheet, which was updated as of early 2022, that explains monetary benefits to custodians
- It can sometimes be unclear what benefits particular cases are entitled to which means that things are paid for that may never receive reimbursement

**Explanation of minimum casket requirements...**

- NCA informs the custodian of the minimum casket requirements and asks what type of casket they plan on using
- Sometimes funeral homes don't adhere to the basic requirements for caskets because they don't plan to submit for reimbursement
- NCA may not know until the day of the funeral if a VA form 40-10088 request for a casket or urn reimbursement has been submitted and the funeral home needs to be reimbursed or if someone else is paying for the casket
- This can create concerns because the cemetery doesn't know what type of vessel the remains are going to show up in, which can result in negative publicity if the container is perceived as undignified
- Cemeteries may be able to influence the choices funeral directors make regarding interment vessels through conversations before interments, but they cannot compel funeral directors to choose the most dignified vessels or request reimbursements

**If the custodian of the remains chooses to apply for the casket reimbursement...**

- The funeral director applies for reimbursement from the Scheduling Office through a one page application that they take with the casket to the national cemetery
- The cemetery signs off on the form verifying that the casket has met NCA minimum requirements for reimbursement
- The custodian submits paperwork at the national cemetery office, which is sent to the finance team
- There are concerns regarding consistent use by VHA Decedent Affairs clerks of NCA's casket and urn program
- The fact that VA will pay for the wholesale value of the casket and not the funeral home's resale price has led many claimants to say it's not worth their time, which may result in the funeral home placing the remains in a less dignified casket rather than applying for reimbursement
- Funeral directors may not submit claims due to the complexity of the form for casket reimbursement

**Legend**

- Pain Points
- Hand-off Occurrence or Leads to a Hand-off
- Service Gap or Something that Leads to a Gap
- Important Information
- Collaboration Between Two Entities

# PHASE 5: INTERMENT PLANNING AND EXECUTION

The *Interment Planning and Execution* phase includes the ways in which each administration contributes to the preparation and interment of unclaimed Veteran remains. It focuses on how external stakeholders are managed, cross administration communication and the hand-off of remains during the planning process, and how these cases are tracked and closed out once interment has been completed.

## VHA FINDINGS

- VHA will collaborate with NCA to determine if remains are eligible for burial in a national cemetery.
- VHA coordinates with the funeral home to make sure that the body is prepared for interment.
- VHA will monitor the preparation and treatment of the remains until after the ceremony to make sure that all the proper protocols are upheld.

## VBA FINDINGS

- As of March 2022, the responsibility of working with custodians has been reassigned to IVURCs and is no longer the responsibility of Regional Office (RO) directors.
- IVURCs work with funeral homes on funeral arrangements and ensuring they understand burial, plot, and interment allowances.
- If VBA is working with a coroner, they will help them identify a licensed individual/funeral home to prepare the remains for interment.

## NCA FINDINGS

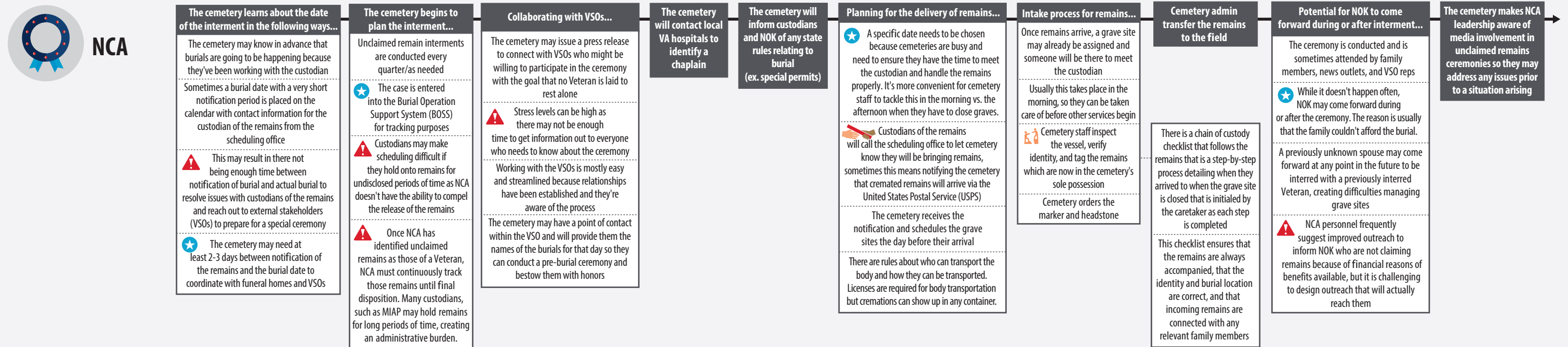
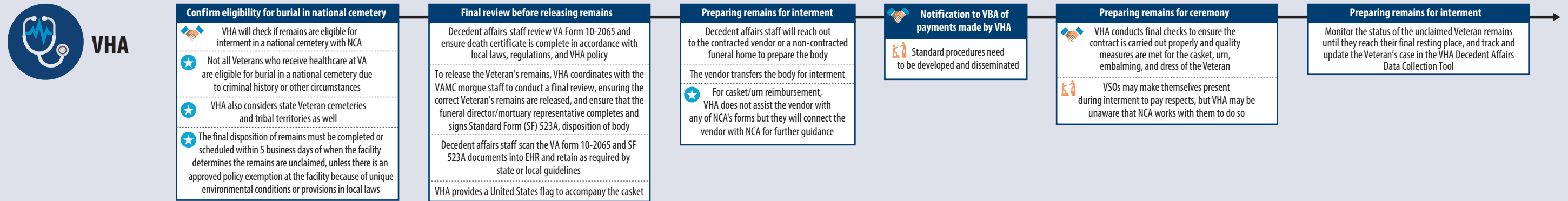
- NCA sometimes learns about scheduled unclaimed remain burials without enough time to coordinate with VSOs or ensure that custodians are going to bring the remains in appropriate containers.
- When custodians hold onto the remains for long periods of time it creates a staffing burden for NCA because they are required to call the custodian once a week to check in from the time the remains are identified through interment.
- NCA cemeteries have specific processes to ensure that all checks are done between the remains arrival at the facility and the final interment, but processes and level of specificity vary across locations.
- Making sure that unclaimed Veteran ceremonies are conducted professionally and honorably is important due to the heightened attention they receive from the press and the public.
- Occasionally a NOK may come forward during or after the ceremony to claim the remains.

## KEY FINDINGS

- According to VHA, the final disposition of remains must be completed or scheduled within 5 business days of the facility determining that the remains are unclaimed, but there are provisions in state law or the amount of notice the cemeteries need to adequately plan for interment that may challenge that timeline.
- While there are moments in this process where the administrations are currently sharing progress updates on cases or conducting warm hand-offs, it is unclear what systems are being used to track and document this information sharing.



# Phase 5: Interment Planning & Execution by Administration



# FUTURE COLLABORATION BETWEEN VA ADMINISTRATIONS

## DESIGN WORKSHOP 2 OVERVIEW

Members of the IPT group, through a series of design exercises, collaborated to identify potential forms of continued collaboration that may be necessary between the VA administrations. The IPT group also discussed how a singular oversight entity might find success within the UVR process.

### THERE ARE SEVERAL AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY TO INCREASE SUPPORT BETWEEN VA ADMINISTRATIONS

- Consistent and more coordinated collaboration between each administration.
- Clear, concise instructions across all administrations with specific POCs and localized content.
- Methods to better understand how an oversight entity can foster collaboration without impairing or impeding the process.
- Ease data sharing and shared resource directories across administrations.
- Improve relationships and communication with external partners.

### INCREASED COLLABORATION MAY BE CRUCIAL IN THE SUCCESS OF A SINGULAR OVERSIGHT ENTITY

- Success of a single oversight entity may require increased simplification and collaboration throughout the process.
- Success of a single oversight entity may require increased external relationship development.
- Success of a single oversight entity may require new forms of resource distribution for staffing and assistance to families who may be hesitant to claim remains due to financial reasons.

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# **Appendix 2**

## **Survey of the Handling of UVR Results**

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# Unclaimed Veteran Remains Recommendation 5

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**Tamara Lee, OEI/DGA**  
**Ernest Lawley, NCA**  
**August 9, 2022**




# Survey


- The survey was composed and fielded in a collaborative effort with National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME), and Cremation Association of North America (CANA).
- This five-question customer service survey had four purposes:
  1. To get a point in time estimate of total remains and those who are Veterans in custodians' possession.
  2. To help identify unclaimed Veterans and ultimately get them the dignified interments and honors they earned.
  3. To promote awareness of and inform industry professionals about VA programs available to them.
  4. To understand concerns of industry professionals and learn how VA can better assist them.


## Survey of the Handling of Unclaimed Veteran Remains


\*1. Please select the organization you are most closely associated with. 

2. Overall, how satisfied are you with the resources and support available to you when it comes to handling unclaimed Veteran remains? 


Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. In an effort to better understand the extent of this issue, please share the number of unclaimed remains under your control and if applicable the number of these remains that are Veterans (for example: 10 Total Unclaimed/2 Veteran/1 Unknown). 


4. In what state do you do business? 

5. Do you have any suggestions as to how VA can better assist you to ensure the remains of unclaimed Veterans receive the dignified interments they deserve, such as additional resources, support, or training? We appreciate your candid and specific responses. 

THE PAPERWORK REDUCTION ACT OF 1995 requires us to notify you that this information collected in accordance with the clearance requirements of section 3507 of this Act. The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 3 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering needed data, and completing and reviewing the information. No person will be penalized for failing to furnish this information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. Your obligation to respond to this survey is voluntary and failure to furnish this information will have no adverse effects.

"The confidentiality of all information collected is governed by the Privacy Act of 1974 (5 U.S.C. 522a and the VA's confidentiality statute (38 U.S.C 5701) as implemented by 38 CFR 1.526(a) and 38 CFR 1.57(b). Disclosure of information involves release of statistical data and other non-identifying data for the for the improvement of unclaimed Veteran remains process and associated administrative purposes. Although an estimate has been provided for the time to complete the survey, time will vary depending upon the individual case. Any comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this collection of information, email the National Center for Veterans Analysis & Statistics for mailing information on where to send your comments." 

Done

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See how easy it is to [get started](#).



Choose  VA

Recommendation #2 Report Appendix

VA

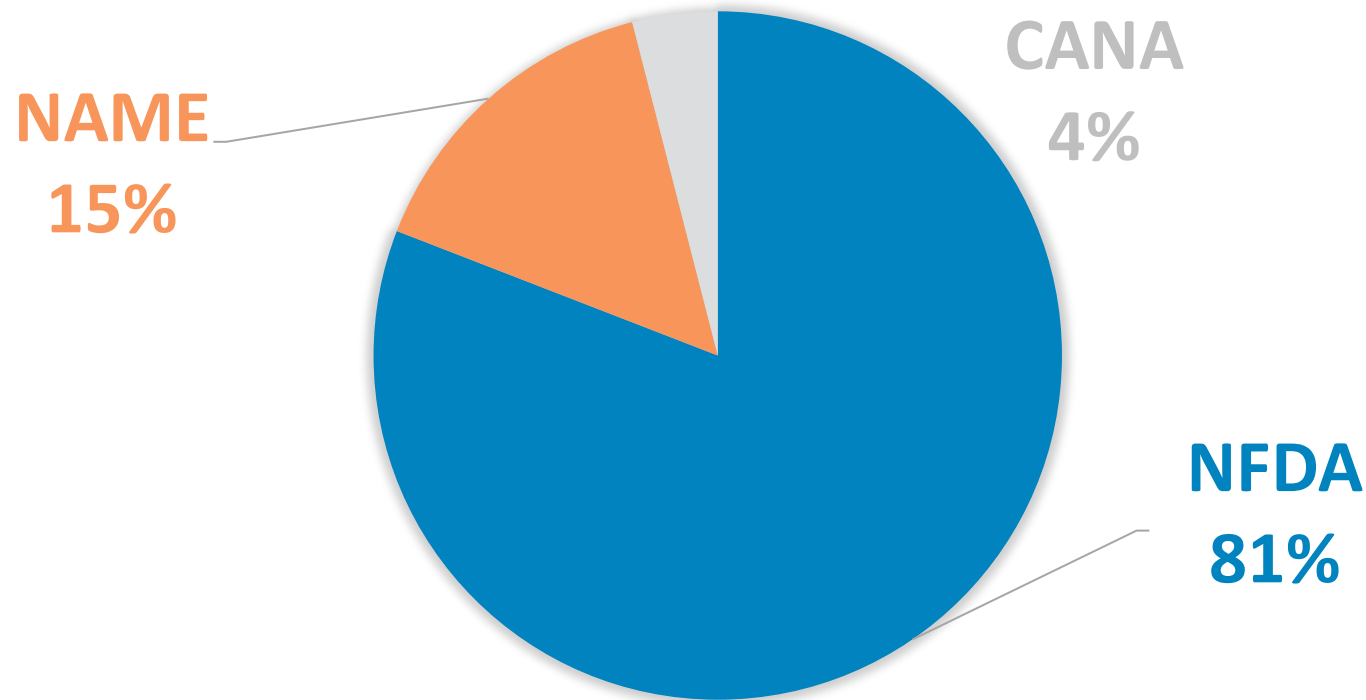


U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

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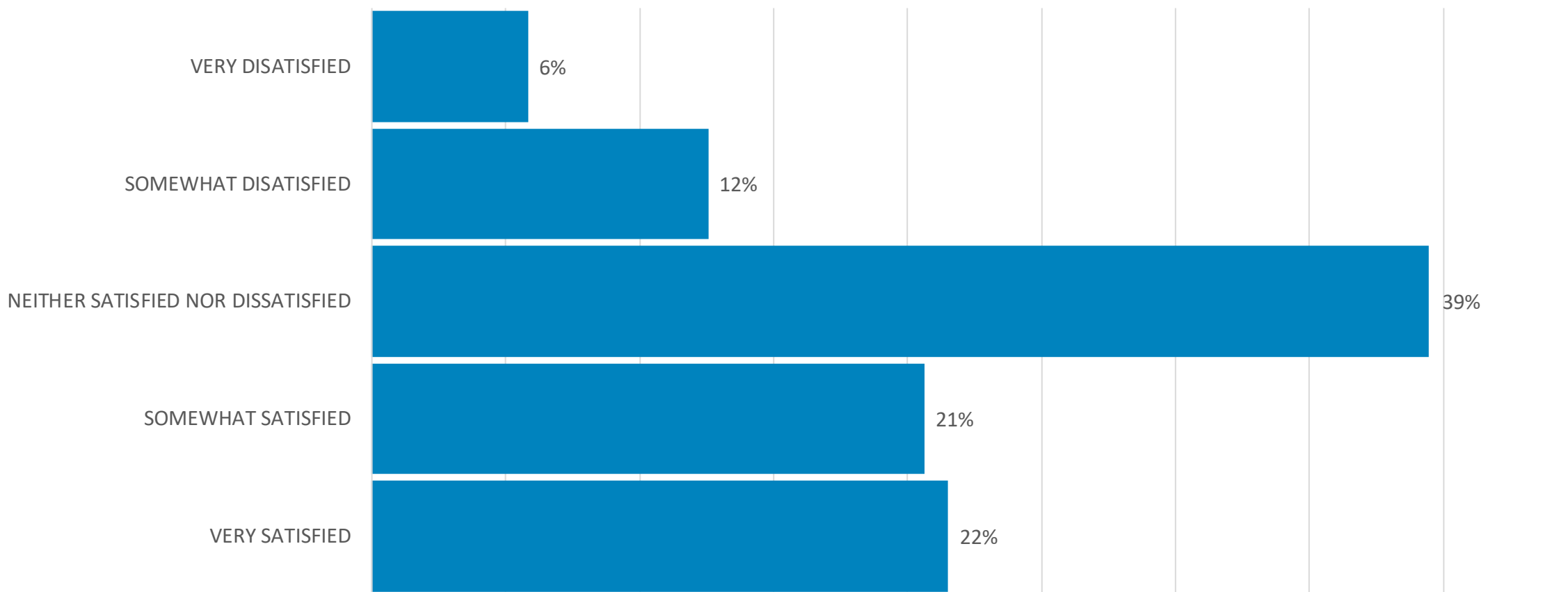
# Survey Questions and Responses

Q1. Please select the organization you are most closely associated with.



# Survey Questions and Responses

Q2. Overall, how satisfied are you with the resources and support available to you when it comes to handling unclaimed Veteran remains?



# Survey Questions and Responses

- Q5. Do you have any suggestions as to how VA can better assist you to ensure the remains of unclaimed Veterans receive the dignified interments they deserve, such as additional resources, support, or training? We appreciate your candid and specific responses.
  - Additional funds needed as the funds unclaimed take additional time. More, faster help with obtaining DD-214's.
  - At first the VA website is not user friendly. It takes a few times of accessing it to figure out how to navigate it. This makes it difficult to access the resources available on the website. It would be great if there was some literature on the step by step process of how to request burial benefits.
  - Paid for transportation and service provided to get the veteran to the cemetery.
  - Process the Claims in a timely and efficient manner. See my response on the survey that NFDA did. VA is terrible at processing claims. Recently had three unclaimed veterans and I had to redo paperwork because of VA error. NOT Buse Funeral Home error - bu VA error. No more unclaimed vets being buried by us until VA can prove they have straightened things out!! Donna B XXX-XXX-XXXX
  - Education of the Public that cremated remains can be Memorialized in a Veteran Cemetery /COLUMBARium or A Private COLUMBARium /Cemetery Change the death certificate from only cremation to read cremation and resting final resting place for the cremated remains as mandatory entry Conn has a good permit that shows that and makes the family responsible for the final resting place
  - If there were a funeral director database we could link with the VA over... perhaps this database just simply allows the funeral home to input the social security number to confirm if the unclaimed remains are that of a veteran. I think the hardest thing to do is to confirm if cremated remains are of a veteran - because those leaving them perhaps know less about the person / are less attached. If the VA admin had a flow chart / guidance of how to deal with unclaimed vet remains that would be useful too.
  - We struggle with understanding the various different channels for applying for benefits. A clear walk through video would be helpful.

# Survey Questions and Responses

- Q3 In an effort to better understand the extent of this issue, please share the number of unclaimed remains under your control and if applicable the number of these remains that are Veterans (for example: 10 Total Unclaimed/2 Veteran/1 Unknown).
- Q4 In what state do you do business?



# Assumptions

- FHs who answered that may have membership in both NFDA and CANA and non-FHs who answered that may have membership in both NAME and CANA were assumed not to be double-counted because they would have received an identical survey from each organization; we assumed that a respondent who would have answered one survey would have seen an identical survey from the other organization and would have not to respond to the second survey
- All members of NFDA, NAME, and CANA were based in the United States
- Question 3 in the survey asks: “In an effort to better understand the extent of this issue, please share the number of unclaimed remains under your control and if applicable the number of these remains that are Veterans (for example: 10 Total Unclaimed/2 Veteran/1 Unknown).”
  - If the respondent chose not to answer in this format (i.e. only reported one or two numbers), we assumed the following:
    - If a single value reported was 0, we assumed 0 Total Unclaimed/0 Veteran/0 Unknown
    - If a single value reported was >0, we assumed this value was the Total, with the Veteran and Unknown totals left blank (ie item nonresponse)
    - If only 2 values were reported, we assumed the first value for Total Unclaimed and the second value for Veteran
    - Responses for the question that said “None” were recorded as 0 Total Unclaimed/0 Veteran/0 Unknown
    - Responses for this question such as “Unknown” or “Many” were recorded as item nonresponse



# Methodology

- The methodology considered minimizing the impact of outliers in the data. Outliers were defined two different ways (thus two different sets of results):
  - Outliers that were classified as the greatest (i.e., largest) 10<sup>th</sup> percentile of FHs and non-FHs when counting **Total Unclaimed** remains; and
  - Outliers that were classified as any FH or non-FH that reported more than 3 times the value of the upper bound of the 3<sup>rd</sup> interquartile range (also known as the “outer band” outlier range) when counting **Total Unclaimed** remains.
- Results were also reported without minimizing the impact of outliers. These values resulted in gross overcounts.

# Results

## TOTAL UNCLAIMED REMAINS

	Estimate	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Outliers identified as greatest 10 <sup>th</sup> percentile	87,571	81,850	93,292
*Outliers where total # of unclaimed remains > 3 X IQR	85,967	80,351	91,583
No Outliers (gross overcount)	1,274,975	1,191,678	1,358,272

## TOTAL VETERAN UNCLAIMED REMAINS

	Estimate	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Outliers identified as greatest 10 <sup>th</sup> percentile	20,298	18,972	21,624
*Outliers where total # of unclaimed remains > 3 X IQR	19,861	18,563	21,158
No Outliers (gross overcount)	109,624	102,462	116,787

## PERCENT OF UNCLAIMED REMAINS WHO ARE VETERANS

	Percentage
Outliers identified as greatest 10 <sup>th</sup> percentile	23.2%
*Outliers where total # of unclaimed remains > 3 X IQR	23.1%
No Outliers (gross overcount)	8.6%

- Note: 3 times the upper IQR is considered an “outer” statistical outlier, actual values were:

- NFDA: 3 X IQR = 18.75
- NAME: 3 X IQR = 127.5
- CANA: 3 X IQR = 112.5

# **Appendix 3**

## **UVR Legal Procedural Guidance Crosswalk**

## Unclaimed Veteran Remains Crosswalk & Gap Analysis

This crosswalk addresses recommendation two; particularly phase two (crosswalk/deep dive into applicable law, VA benefits etc.) of the IG report. This worksheet is divided by administration and outlines the laws, VA regulations, VA directive and VA procedures associated with the UVR program. Please review the documents listed on each tab and add any laws, regs, directives and procedures that are not listed on this worksheet in the blank cells below.

Agency	Item #	Applicable laws (Statutes/USC)	VA Regulations (CFRs)	VA Directives	Brief Description	Oversight in place?	Compliance	Consistency	Gap Analysis	Comments
VHA	1	38 USC 2303 (section "a1A" only for VHA when Veteran is unclaimed)	38 CFR 3.1706	VHA Directive 1601b.04 - section 6a	Burial allowance for Unclaimed Veteran who died while hospitalized by VA (mortuary services)	No	Low	Low	Varying levels and methods of oversight in place at some VISNs and VAMCs. VHA to establish Decedent Affairs Program Office to institute national oversight of this objective.	FY amount is \$828. At a national level, there is no oversight to ensure VAMCs are adhering to this allowance. The UVR IPT is assessing the option of having VBA make these payments to address fraud possibilities stemming from potential duplicate payments (Rec 6).
		38 USC 2303 (section "a1B" only for VHA when Veteran is unclaimed)	38 CFR 3.1605	VHA Directive 1601b.04 - section 6c	Transportation expenses related to death while traveling under prior authorization or while hospitalized by VA	No	Low	Low	Varying levels and methods of oversight in place at some VISNs and VAMCs. VHA to establish Decedent Affairs Program Office to institute national oversight of this objective.	The UVR IPT is assessing the option of having VBA make these payments to address fraud possibilities stemming from potential duplicate payments (Rec 6).
	2	38 USC 8520	38 CFR 12.3	Financial Policy Volume VIII Cash Management Chapter 4 Personal Funds of Patients	Disposition of deceased Veterans' personal property	No	Low	Low	Varying levels and methods of oversight in place at some VISNs and VAMCs. VHA to establish Decedent Affairs Program Office to institute national oversight of this objective.	Ch 4 (see column F) only covers "funds" and not personal effects. VHA does not have documented guidance or oversight for handling personal effects.
	3	38 USC 2306 (section f)	38 CFR 38.628	VHA Directive 1601b.04 - section 6a, note only	Casket/urn	No	Low	Low	Varying levels and methods of oversight in place at some VISNs and VAMCs. VHA to establish Decedent Affairs Program Office to institute national oversight of this objective.	VHA's frontline staff at VAMCs (Decedent Affairs Clerk) should direct the vendor (funeral home) to engage NCA for casket/urn requirements and reimbursement.
	4	38 USC 2301		VHA Directive 1601b.04 - section 6a	Flags	No	Low	Low	Varying levels and methods of oversight in place at some VISNs and VAMCs. VHA to establish Decedent Affairs Program Office to institute national oversight of this objective.	While a flag accompanies an Unclaimed Veteran to interment, there may not always be someone to receive it.
	5	38 USC 2302		VHA Directive 1601b.04 - section 7	Funeral expenses for deaths of Unclaimed Veterans external to VHA care	No	Low	Low	Varying levels and methods of oversight in place at some VISNs and VAMCs. VHA to establish Decedent Affairs Program Office to institute national oversight of this objective.	VHA staff need to be aware of VBA benefits such as this one, and be able to provide appropriate referral.
	6		38 CFR 17.170	VHA Directive 1601b.04 - section 8	Autopsies	No	Low	Low	Varying levels and methods of oversight in place at some VISNs and VAMCs. VHA to establish Decedent Affairs Program Office to institute national oversight of this objective.	Oversight here may require coordination with VHA's Pathology and Laboratory Medicine Services (PALMS).
VBA	7	38 USC 101			Definitions	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1, 38 CFR 3.6, 38 CFR 3.7, and 38 CFR 3.1701.
	8	38 USC 5303			Certain bars to benefits	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through 38 CFR 3.12 and 38 CFR 3.13.
	9	38 USC 5303A			Minimum active-duty service requirement	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through 38 CFR 3.12a.
	10	38 USC 1701			Definitions (facilities of the department)	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1706.
	11	38 USC 2302			Funeral expenses	Yes	High	High		Compliance is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1702 and 38 CFR 3.1708.
	12	38 USC 2303			Death in department facility; plot allowance	Yes	High	Medium	Covering the full cost of transportation from a VHA facility to place of burial (VHA or VBA responsibility).	Compliance is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1702, 38 CFR 3.1707, 38 CFR 3.1708, and 38 CFR 3.1709.
	13	38 USC 2304			Claims for Reimbursement	Yes	High	Medium	Although VBA has procedures and policies in place to ensure payment is not duplicated by VHA, gaps in this could still be realized.	Compliance is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1703.
	14	38 USC 2306			Headstones, markers and burial receptacles	Yes	High	High	NA	Refers to NCA
	15	38 USC 2308			Transportation of deceased veteran to a national cemetery	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through 38 CFR 3.1709.
	16	38 USC 2402			Persons eligible for internment in national cemeteries	Yes	High	High	NA	Refers to NCA



Agency	Item #	Applicable laws (Statutes/USC)	VA Regulations (CFRs)	VA Directives	Brief Description	Oversight in place?	Compliance	Consistency	Gap Analysis	Comments
VBA	17		38 CFR 3.1		38 CFR 3.1 - Definitions	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart i, Chapter 1, Section B - Service Requirements and Verification of Eligibility.
	18		38 CFR 3.6		Duty Periods	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Section A - Establishing Veteran Status.
	19		38 CFR 3.7		Individuals and groups considered to have performed active military, naval, air, or space service	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Section A - Establishing Veteran Status.
	20		38 CFR 3.1701		Deceased veterans for whom VA may provide burial benefits	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part XI, Subpart iii, Chapter 1, Section B - Burial benefits.
	21		38 CFR 3.12		Character of Discharge	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part X, Subpart iv, Chapter 1, Section A - Character of Discharge and Bars to Benefits.
	22		38 CFR 3.13		Discharge to Change Status	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part X, Subpart iv, Chapter 1, Section A - Character of Discharge and Bars to Benefits.
	23		38 CFR 3.12a		Minimum active-duty service requirement	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part III, Subpart i, Chapter 1, Section B - Service Requirements and Verification of Eligibility and M21-1, Part X, Subpart iv, Chapter 1, Section A - Character of Discharge and Bars to Benefits.
	24		38 CFR 3.1706		Burial allowance for a Vet who died while hospitalized by VA	Yes	High	Medium	See comments under 38 USC 2303 and 2304.	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part XI, Subpart iii, Chapter 1, Section B - Burial benefits.
	25		38 CFR 3.1702		Persons who may receive burial benefits; priority of payments	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part XI, Subpart iii, Chapter 1, Section A - General Information on Burial Benefits and Allowances, and M21-1, Part XI, Subpart iii, Chapter 1, Section B - Burial benefits .
	26		38 CFR 3.1708		Burial of a Veteran whose remains are unclaimed	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part XI, Subpart iii, Chapter 1, Section B - Burial benefits.
	27		38 CFR 3.1707		Plot or interment allowances for burial in a state Veterans Cemetery or other cemetery	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part XI, Subpart iii, Chapter 1, Section A - General Information on Burial Benefits and Allowances, and M21-1, Part XI, Subpart iii, Chapter 1, Section B - Burial benefits.
	28		38 CFR 3.1709		Transportation expenses for burial in a national cemetery	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part XI, Subpart iii, Chapter 1, Section B - Burial benefits.
29		38 CFR 3.1703		Claims for burial benefits	Yes	High	High	NA	Compliance is achieved through procedural guidance established in M21-1, Part XI, Subpart iii, Chapter 1, Section B - Burial benefits.	

Agency	Item #	Applicable laws (Statutes/USC)	VA Regulations (CFRs)	VA Directives	Brief Description	Oversight in place?	Compliance	Consistency	Gap Analysis	Comments
NCA	30	38 USC 2402			Persons eligible for interment in national cemeteries	Yes	High	High		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All NCSO and national cemetery scheduling agents are trained regarding burial eligibility</li> <li>Any request for interment that cannot be granted by scheduling must go to the NCA Eligibility Verification Division for research/eligibility determination</li> <li>All applicants determined ineligible are informed of their appellate rights</li> <li>All requests scheduled for interment at a national cemetery are re-verified to ensure the eligibility determination is properly supported</li> </ul>
	31	38 USC 101			Definitions	Yes	High	High		See cell L50. 38 USC 101 defines terms such as Secretary, Veteran, surviving spouse, child, periods of conflict, and other items as definitions as the apply to VA. These definitions are used as guidance for eligibility determination, trained to all staff processing scheduling/eligibility requests, and reviewed at least twice by separate groups prior to interment.
	32	38 USC 2306			Headstones, markers, and burial receptacles	Yes	High	Medium	Caskets and urns can be reimbursed only for unclaimed Veterans, not to exceed the maximum set forth by statute. NCA currently has authority to pay claims made on VA form 40-10088 requesting reimbursement for a casket or urn for the unclaimed Veteran. Payment could be requested more than once, by the same or different parties in administrations outside of NCA, resulting in duplicate payments of this benefit for the same Veteran.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The process for the ordering of headstones and markers provided as a result of NCA interment in a national cemetery is handled at the cemetery level, and order information is required to be captured as part of interment records.</li> <li>Requests for headstones and markers ordered by grant funded cemeteries are reviewed to ensure Veteran eligibility for the benefit is determined prior to completion of the order/shipment to the cemetery.</li> <li>Burial receptacles are reimbursed only for eligible unclaimed Veterans. Prior to payment, VA Form 40-10088 must be completed by national cemetery staff certifying that the receptacle met all statutory criteria.</li> </ul>
	33	38 U.S. Code 2411			Prohibition against interment of memorialization in the National Cemetery Administration or Arlington National Cemetery of persons committing Federal or State capital crimes	Yes	High	High		Standard intake procedures for interment requests require the scheduling agent to ask the requestor whether the person to be interred has committed a federal or state capital crime, or is considered to be a Tier 3 sex offender. This information is captured in MBMS.
	34	38 USC 5303			Certain bars to benefits	Yes	High	High		These bars to benefits are taught to scheduling agents and eligibility analysts. Any application where circumstances potentially triggering these bars would be sent to the Eligibility Division determination of eligibility determination. Secondary eligibility review is conducted by the cemetery prior to conducting interment.
	35	38 USC 5303A			Minimum active-duty service requirement	Yes	High	High		See cell L50 and L54. These requirements are taught to personnel, and supporting documents are required to establish minimum-active duty requirements were met for each case.
	36		38 CFR 38.620		Persons eligible for burial is a corresponding regulation to 38 USC 2402	Yes	High	High		Corresponds to 38 USC 2402; see cell L50.
	37		38 CFR 38.600(b)			Yes	High	High		This regulation provides definitions for understanding/interpretation of 38 USC 5303 regarding capital/sex crimes. See cell L54.

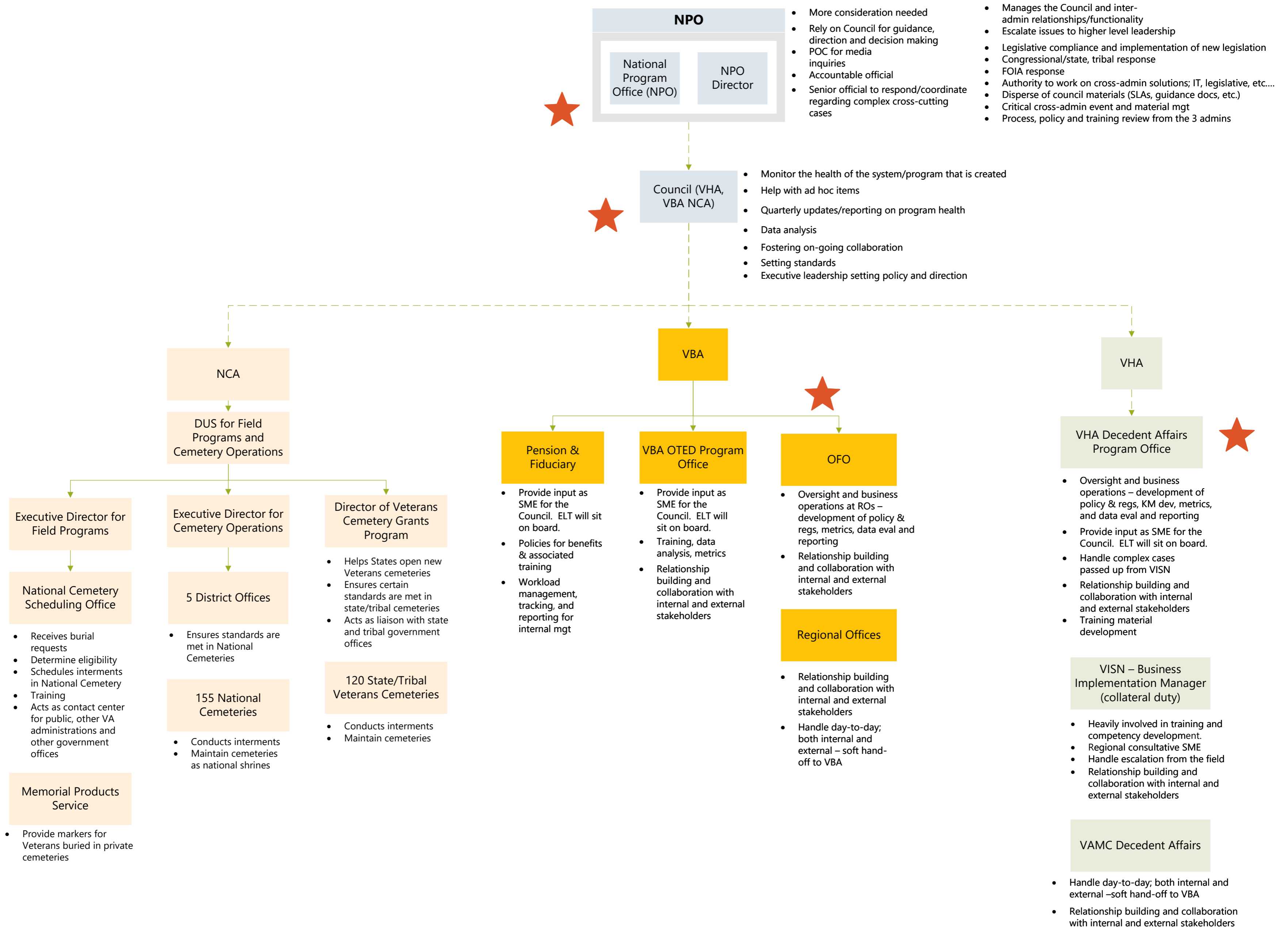
Agency	Item #	Applicable laws (Statutes/USC)	VA Regulations (CFRs)	VA Directives	Brief Description	Oversight in place?	Compliance	Consistency	Gap Analysis	Comments
NCA	38		38 CFR 3.6		Duty periods	Yes	High	High		This regulation outlines items such as periods of active duty for full-time Armed Forces and commissioned officers of PHS and NOAA, and eligibility for benefits of certain occurrences under active duty training, inactive duty training, and travel to/from this training for Reserve and Guard components. NCA personnel responsible for scheduling and determining eligibility for national cemetery interment receive initial and ongoing training regarding these requirements.
	39		38 CFR 3.7		Individuals and groups considered to have performed active military, naval, or air service	Yes	High	High		This regulation identifies specific individuals and groups determined to have performed active military service in addition to those identified by 38 USC 3.6. NCA personnel responsible for scheduling and determining eligibility for national cemetery interment receive initial and ongoing training regarding these requirements.
	40		38 CFR 3.12		Character of Discharge	Yes	High	High		See cell L50. NCA Scheduling and eligibility personnel receive extensive initial and ongoing training regarding character of discharge, and impacts of COD on eligibility. All interment requests indicating an upgraded character of discharge are forwarded to the eligibility division for review/eligibility determination.
	41		38 CFR 3.12a		Minimum active-duty service requirement	Yes	High	High		Foundational to NCA determination of eligibility for and provision of benefits. NCA personnel responsible for scheduling and determining eligibility for national cemetery interment receive initial and ongoing training regarding these requirements.
	42		38 CFR 38.628		Reimbursement for caskets and urns for unclaimed remains of Veterans	Yes	High	Medium	Caskets and urns can be reimbursed only for unclaimed Veterans, not to exceed the maximum set forth by statute. NCA currently has authority to pay claims made on VA form 40-10088 requesting reimbursement for a casket or urn for the unclaimed Veteran. Payment could be requested more than once, by the same or different parties in administrations outside of NCA, resulting in duplicate payments of this benefit for the same Veteran.	See cell L52.
	43		38 CFR 38.617		Prohibition of interment or Memorialization of persons who have been convicted of Federal or State capital crimes or certain sex offenses	Yes	High	High		See cell L53.
	44		38 CFR 38.618		Findings concerning commission of a capital crime where a person has not been convicted due to death or flight to avoid prosecution	Yes	High	High		See cell L53.
	45		38 CFR 38.600		Definitions	Yes	High	High		Provides definitions used primarily in interpretation of bars to benefits tied to capital and sex related crimes. See cell L53.
	46		38 CFR 3.12		Character of Discharge	Yes	High	High		Foundational to NCA determination of eligibility for and provision of benefits. NCA personnel responsible for scheduling and determining eligibility for national cemetery interment receive initial and ongoing training regarding these requirements.

Agency	Item #	Applicable laws (Statutes/USC)	VA Regulations (CFRs)	VA Directives	Brief Description	Oversight in place?	Compliance	Consistency	Gap Analysis	Comments
NCA	47		38 CFR 3.12a		Minimum active-duty service requirement	Yes	High	High		Foundational to NCA determination of eligibility for and provision of benefits. NCA personnel responsible for scheduling and determining eligibility for national cemetery interment receive initial and ongoing training regarding these requirements.
	48		38 CFR 3.12a		Minimum active-duty service requirement	Yes	High	High		Foundational to NCA determination of eligibility for and provision of benefits. NCA personnel responsible for scheduling and determining eligibility for national cemetery interment receive initial and ongoing training regarding these requirements.
	49			NCA Directive 3210	Eligibility Authorities and Administration of Burial Benefits in VA National Cemeteries	Yes	High	High		Identifies burial eligibility requirements for national cemetery interment and responsibilities related to the provision of burial benefits. Statutory authorities: 38 USC 2402; 38 USC 2411. Implementing regulation: 38 CFR 38.617; 38.618; 38.319; and 38.620. NCA personnel responsible for scheduling and determining eligibility for national cemetery interment receive initial and ongoing training regarding these requirements. See cell L50.
	50			NCA Directive 3210	Eligibility Authorities and Administration of Burial Benefits in VA National Cemeteries	Yes	High	High		Identifies burial eligibility requirements for national cemetery interment and responsibilities related to the provision of burial benefits. Statutory authorities: 38 USC 2402; 38 USC 2411. Implementing regulation: 38 CFR 38.617; 38.618; 38.319; and 38.620. NCA personnel responsible for scheduling and determining eligibility for national cemetery interment receive initial and ongoing training regarding these requirements. See cell L50.
	51			NCA Directive 3211	Eligibility Authorities and Administration of Memorialization Benefits	Yes	High	High		Identifies memorialization eligibility requirements for benefits administered by NCA. Statutory authorities: 38 USC 101/2306/2402/2411 and 2404. Implementing regulation: 38 CFR 38.600; 38.619; 38.620; 38.628; 38.629; 38.630; 38.631; 38.632; and 38.633.

# **Appendix 4**

## **UVR Governance**

# Governance Structure – Future State





# **Appendix 5**

## **VHA Resource Assessment**

## **Appendix 5: VHA Resource Assessment**

### **Background**

VHA lacks a national program office to provide oversight, guidance, and support to field personnel charged with performing activities associated with deaths of Veterans occurring at VA medical facilities or while under VA-authorized care. This lack of oversight leads to decedent affairs and Unclaimed Veteran Remains (UVR) functions being performed inconsistently between different VA medical centers (VAMCs) and Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs), inconsistent support to families of deceased Veterans regarding benefits for which the decedent is eligible, potential regulatory and compliance issues stemming from a lack of clear guidance and oversight, and the potential for fraud, waste, and abuse from items such as payments made in excess of statutory limits or to improper recipients.

### **Recommendation for VHA**

Pursue resources and funding to institute national oversight via a “Decedent Affairs Program Office” (DAPO). The mission of the DAPO will be to provide decedent affairs program oversight; evaluate decedent affairs needs and effectiveness through program evaluation and interaction with Deputy Network Directors (DNDs) and Business Integration Managers (BIMs); oversight of decedent affairs ERM activities, to include risk assessment, internal control evaluation, and testing; direct field interaction in furtherance of the program mission; development and reporting of decedent affairs metrics to assess program health; outreach as necessary to industry organizations and Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) regarding VHA decedent benefits; and interaction with Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) and National Cemetery Administration (NCA) personnel to share best practices to further the mission of providing dignified burials to all families and custodians of Veterans eligible for and requesting burial and memorial benefits.

Review the feasibility of aligning a DAPO within VHA Patient Care Services (PCS), Care Management and Social Work Services (CM/SW) or other appropriate VHA office. To inform this review, VHA is convening a sequester of process stakeholders to strategize the desired-state of decedent affairs support that benefits the organization and the Veteran/family experience. Further exploration is also needed to allow for the eventual owning office to identify the necessary roles (clinical and administrative) and responsibilities (person in grade) and appropriate allocation of personnel resources.

Suggested allocation could include 11 FTEEs, and is subject to change based on changes in scope, workload, and VHA alignment. FTEE could be clinical and administrative and range in grade from GS-12 to GS-14.

Through implementation of the structure above, the experience for Veteran’s, their families and survivors will be positively enhanced by ensuring that they are provided compassionate, timely, and accurate counsel regarding end-of-life benefits, that unclaimed Veterans receive timely and dignified burial, and that decedent affairs services are provided consistently and effectively by trained staff across the VHA network.

## **Stakeholder Considerations**

Approximately 24,000 Veterans die annually in VHA facilities or under VHA-authorized care. Of this number, roughly 400 have no next-of-kin or acquaintances that claim their remains for burial.

For Veterans whose remains are claimed, burial and memorial benefits are available and payable through VBA. VHA typically is not responsible for benefits or other expenses associated for deaths that occur in VHA or VHA-authorized facilities. However, VHA has a responsibility to the families of these Veterans to ensure that they are made aware of all benefits for which they are potentially eligible, the steps required to obtain these benefits, and information regarding how best to begin the necessary steps of obtaining benefits through VBA.

Respondents to two specific survey questions administered by the Palliative and Hospice Care Program Office between Q4 FY20 and Q3 FY21 indicated the interaction with VHA staff by families after the passing of a Veteran was inadequate. The first question, "Would it have been helpful if the VA had provided more information about benefits for surviving spouses and dependents" received an answer of "Yes" from 56% of respondents. The second question, "Would it have been helpful if the VA had provided more information about burial and memorial benefits?" received an answer of "Yes" from 48% of respondents. Specific narrative from respondents regarding guidance provided by VHA after a loved one's death included the following:

- "We were also at a loss with dads' burial and memorial benefits no one provided any assistant (sic) so we were on our own to figure it out.
- "We never received any help to find funeral and cremation services in the area since we were from out of state."
- "Afterwards it was really hard to get in touch with someone regarding benefits. I literally had to fly down there and sit in an office."

The comments above were not isolated and confirm potential gaps in information provided by VHA staff regarding burial and memorial benefits provided to Veterans and their families. The DAPO will have responsibility for ensuring consistent information is offered to families for decedents across all VHA facilities regarding available benefits, and the process for obtaining those benefits. Additionally, for Veterans whose remains are claimed, DAPO staff will have oversight of and perform work with facility staff to develop consistent processes for administrative work associated with these deaths, to include such items as coordinating release of Veteran remains to mortuaries, processing death certificates, and ensuring all required actions are fully documented, tracked and auditable.

For Veterans whose remains are unclaimed, VHA has the responsibility of arranging and ensuring all benefits are coordinated and / or paid to ensure dignified burial of the Veteran. This substantially increases the amount of work required by facility staff as well as increasing the chance of non-compliance with statutory requirements. Currently, there is no

single standard across VHA for the execution and review of duties in arranging benefits for unclaimed Veteran deaths occurring under VHA or VHA-authorized care. The DAPO will ensure that standards are created and monitored for compliance, and subsequent review by the DAPO performed, to provide reasonable assurance that VHA's decedent affairs program, regardless of whether Veteran remains are claimed, is compliant with regulation and meets stated program objectives.

### **External Considerations**

**Media Reports:** Issues regarding decedent affairs are often covered in local and national media. The genesis of the OIG report referenced was in response to a media report regarding the cremains of 28 Veterans stored in the attic of a funeral home, some for as long as 44 years, before discovery and burial. VHA is not insulated from potential media issues and needs to ensure consistent processes to ensure both Veterans and their families are treated equitably, receive timely information, and that dignified interment occurs.

**Congressional Scrutiny:** Through media coverage, internal or external audits, or direct interaction from surviving family members, VHA is at risk of Congressional scrutiny due to its perceived treatment in the handling and disposition of Veterans who pass under VHA or VHA-authorized care. These issues cannot be entirely eliminated. However, implementation of standardized processes, requisite controls, and ongoing evaluation and monitoring of program objective achievement will provide reasonable assurance that will largely mitigate this risk.

**Improper or erroneous payment:** The current decedent affairs process across VHA presents the potential for improper payments to be made. Examples of improper payments are amounts paid in excess of allowable statutory amounts, or amounts paid that are not documented in a way to support payment. Erroneous payments could occur when VHA pays for a service that is not allowed by statute, or a payment is made by VHA or another administration more than once for the same service. VHA currently has no pre- or post-payment review to reduce the possibility of incorrect or erroneous payments from occurring.

### **Resource Assessment Criteria**

The specific criteria serving as the basis for this recommendation:

- Requirements cited in OIG Report 19-09592-262 "Improvements Needed to Ensure Final Disposition of Unclaimed Veterans' Remains" dated December 15, 2021 requiring OEI and VHA analysis of the most appropriate location for the Program Office
- Social workers assist Veterans and Caregivers by assessing and providing support and assistance in various areas of care coordination. They connect them with resources, services and programs to meet their current needs and address issues related to access to care, psychological status, economics, functional status, housing and social support.

## **Enterprise Considerations**

VHA's implementation of its DAPO will affect all VA administrations (VHA, VBA, and NCA).

VHA impact will include all VISNs/medical facilities, contracting and procurement, finance offices, and ongoing collaborations with OGC and the Office of Regulations, Appeals and Policy. Most impact will be felt by the VISNs and medical facilities. The DAPO is encouraged to actively partner with DNDs, BIMs, and facility staff to research and understand facility concerns and best practices to support policy revisions and process level guidance.

The DAPO will follow the model already in place within VHA to actively collaborate with VBA, NCA, and OEI in the assessment, analysis, and correction of enterprise-wide issues identified by the IPT through the course of its program evaluation. For example, VHA actively aided NCA with analysis of unclaimed persons databases in an attempt to discover potential Veterans for which benefits are due and is currently in discussion with VBA regarding the impact of NCA provision of casket and urns to mortuaries rather than treating these items as a reimbursable expense. VHA actively collaborates with NCA regarding benefits available to the families of claimed Veterans who pass under VHA or VHA authorized care and are currently actively involved in discussions with both NCA and VBA regarding ways that payments made for burial and memorial services can be analyzed for potential duplicate payments.

In all instances, the strength and productivity of current relationships VHA has developed with VBA, NCA, and OEI will be built upon by VHA's DAPO and will allow for the most expedient and efficient standardization of decedent affairs and UVR functions across VA.

## **Recommendation Pros and Cons**

Pros: Establishing a VHA DAPO may bring about the following benefits:

- Development and implementation of standardized decedent affairs processes and program oversight across VHA
- Development and implementation of standardized initial and ongoing training for decedent affairs facility personnel
- Implementation of quantifiable standards for disposition of claimed and unclaimed Veteran remains for Veterans passing under VHA and VHA-authorized care
- Development of program level internal controls, testing, monitoring, and reporting of metrics providing reasonable assurance that program goals are met
- Confirmation regarding provision of dignified end-of-life benefits for unclaimed Veterans who pass under VHA-authorized care

- Consistent guidance to the families of Veteran decedents to facilitate claims for all burial and memorial benefits earned and available
- Program Office subject matter expertise and guidance regarding field level decedent affairs issues
- Standardized processes for decedent affairs payments reducing potential instances of fraud, waste, and abuse
- Coordination with NCA and VBA to ensure the VA implements an enterprise approach in the proper, timely, and dignified provision of decedent affairs benefits for eligible Veterans
- Addressing recommendations found by OIG regarding issues with execution of decedent affairs activities by VHA with respect to unclaimed Veteran remains, and the lack of a centralized VHA program office to provide oversight to facilities regarding these matters
- Minimizing potential ongoing Congressional, media, and public scrutiny regarding VHA's treatment of Veterans under its care, and VA's provision of end-of-life benefits to eligible Veterans

Cons: Potential detriments to establishing a VHA DAPO include:

- Requirement for increased funding for FY23 and outyears
- Increased performance, monitoring, and oversight requirements for VHA facilities
- Potential VHA facility level increase in staffing or decedent affairs manhours to meet legal and VHA Directive requirements
- Change management efforts in communicating and implementing program requirements and enhancements not currently in place at the VISN and VAMC level

### **Alternate Recommendation**

An alternate option was assessed but not selected. The alternate choice was:

- Do not pursue funding and FTEE to establish a DAPO within VHA

### **Alternate Recommendation Pros and Cons**

Pros: Not establishing a DAPO within VHA will bring about the following benefits:

- VHA remains at status quo; no additional funding required for FY23 and outyears
- VHA facilities will see no impact to current processes for decedent affairs



Cons: Potential detriments to not establishing a DAPO within VHA include:

- Continued Congressional, media, and/or public scrutiny regarding VHA decedent affairs and UVR activities
- Continued ad hoc support from VHA support offices without appropriate staffing, expertise, or authority to oversee facility implementation and performance of decedent affairs and UVR requirements
- Impact to other Veteran-focused missions from unfunded, out-of-hide support vice dedicated, funded decedent affairs personnel
- Lack of standardized decedent affairs processes across VHA, increasing the likelihood that Veterans who die under VHA authorized care will receive delayed and/or less than dignified receipt of end-of-life benefits
- Lack of reasonable assurance that VHA complies with its statutory responsibility to provide end-of-life benefits to eligible Veterans who pass under VHA-authorized care
- Increased potential instances of fraud, waste, and abuse regarding procurement of decedent affairs services and overall lack of stewardship of taxpayer funds for Veterans who pass under VHA-authorized care
- Inability to successfully implement Recommendation 9 set forth by OIG's report calling on VHA to "...take appropriate action..."

### **Recommendation Rationale**

This IPT makes its recommendation for the following reasons:

- Provides reasonable assurance of attainment and monitoring of program objectives.
- Conforms with requirements for enterprise risk management and implementation / performance of internal control activities.
- Provides appropriate response to OIG's direction for establishment of a program office appropriately placed within VHA.
- Support's the SECVA's fundamental principle of "Access" included in his FY22-28 Strategic Plan, which states "...the VA will provide timely access to VA resources: world-class health care, earned benefits, and a final resting place as a lasting tribute to their service." Establishment of the program office not only aligns with VA strategic goals, but aids in ensuring that end-of-life benefits earned by Veterans under VHA care are received, that they are received in a dignified manner befitting the Veteran's service to our Country, and that they are provided in a manner consistent with the proper oversight and use of taxpayer funding for which VHA has stewardship.

### **Program Office Considerations**

During the course of this IPT's program evaluation efforts, the following field measurements were identified for VHA's consideration:

- Percentage of claimed Veteran remains provided to next-of-kin's chosen funeral home within 5 days
- Average number of days from death to interment for Unclaimed Veterans
- Percentage of claimed Veteran remains with proper documentation of next-of-kin's funeral home selection
- Percentage of unclaimed Veterans with proper documentation showing the VAMC's determination of status
- Percentage of unclaimed Veteran funeral services procured at or under the statutory dollar threshold
- Average number of days to schedule Unclaimed Veteran interments after death
- Average number of days for a VAMC to determine Veteran remains as unclaimed

VHA DAPO measurements for consideration:

- Percentage field analysis/reporting engagements completed within target timeline
- Average number of days to close decedent affairs corrective actions
- Current count of open corrective actions
- Count of field inquires
- Average number of days to address field inquiries
- Percentage of analysis / reporting engagements with VBA and NCA completed within target timeline
- Detail or measures for VBA/NCA support
- Detail to report VISN / VAMC detail