

Veterans Cemetery Grants Program partners with states and tribes to honor Veterans



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VA's Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) wrapped up another year partnering with states and tribes to bring burial benefits to deserving Veterans, spouses and family members. VA awarded 15 grants totaling more than \$47 million to establish, expand and improve state and tribal Veterans cemeteries in fiscal year (FY) 2015.



New construction recently completed on tribal lands for the Yurok Veterans Cemetery in California.

“FY 2015 was a robust year and I look forward to the challenges ahead as we care for our Veterans and their eligible family members,” said VCGP Director George Eisenbach.

As part of VA's National Cemetery Administration (NCA), the grants program funds the establishment of Veterans' cemeteries and then transfers them to the states and tribes to administer. VCGP's mission also includes funding the expansion, improvement and maintenance of state and tribal cemeteries using a priority system to determine the greatest need.

VCGP funded the establishment of five new Veterans cemeteries this year, including two state cemeteries: Fort Stanton Veterans Cemetery in New Mexico and the North Mississippi Veterans Memorial Cemetery. VA funded three tribal cemeteries, including the White Eagle Cemetery for the Ponca Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma; the Apsaalooke Veterans Cemetery for the Crow Tribe

of Indians in Montana and the Big Sandy Rancheria Veterans Cemetery for the Big Sandy Rancheria Band of Western Mono Indians in California.

This year, Eisenbach noted increased interest in tribal Veterans' cemetery grants, attributing the growing awareness to word of mouth and VA's own outreach efforts. "Every chance I get to talk to tribal councils, tribal governments, tribal members—you name it—I speak with them about the program. I find that a lot of folks really don't know that the program is there for them," he said.



The committal shelter at the Georgia Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Glennville.

In addition to establishing new cemeteries, VCGP provided grants for expansion projects at nine state facilities. Cemeteries eventually reach capacity, which can lead to Veterans in the cemetery service area losing access to their burial benefit. To prevent this, VA extends the service life of cemeteries by developing previously undeveloped land or by adding columbaria.

VCGP funded expansion projects at the Maui Veterans Cemetery in Hawaii; the Connecticut State Veterans Cemetery; the Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Spanish Fort; the Northern Maine Veterans' Cemetery; the Southern Maine Veterans Cemetery; the Vermont Veterans' Memorial Cemetery; the West Tennessee State Veterans Cemetery; the Crownsville Veterans Cemetery in Maryland and the Massachusetts Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Agawam.

Eisenbach said that, in the future, he believes expansion projects will be the focal point of the program. "I think there will come a time when we won't be establishing as many new cemeteries because most areas in the country will be covered," he said. "Expansions are already our number one priority."

Additionally, VCGP funded one operations and maintenance (O&M) project at the Georgia Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Glennville. O&M grants pay for raising, realigning and cleaning headstones and markers; leveling gravesites; and refurbishing turf. These projects help state and tribal Veterans' cemeteries reach the same shrine standards of appearance as the national cemeteries.

From the program's inception in 1978 through 2015, NCA has awarded more than \$617 million through VCGS to establish, expand or improve 95 Veterans cemeteries in 47 states or territories. State and tribal Veterans cemeteries continue to be true partners with NCA, conducting more than 32,000 interments in FY 2014.