

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 18, 2024

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Ronald E. Walters
Under Secretary of Memorial Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough and Under Secretary Walters,

I write to make you aware of two directives regarding Veteran Cemeteries in the report accompanying the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies (MILCON-VA) Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2025.

First, the legislation directs the VA to work with the Department of Defense (DOD) to coordinate access to veteran cemeteries on military installations for veterans and their families.¹ Of the 156 national cemeteries, four would be directly affected by this change, including the Fort Richardson National Cemetery on Joint Base Elmendorf–Richardson (JBER) in Anchorage, Alaska.

Accessing the Fort Richardson National Cemetery is overly cumbersome, especially for family members that lack military identification, and I have received complaints from many of my constituents who are unable to enter the military base to honor their friends and family interred at JBER. My intention for the provision on page 55 of the Senate Report is to ensure that the families and friends of fallen veterans have direct, and same day access to cemeteries. While some base Commanders have worked to ensure there are clear and appropriate ways to enter the base and visit the cemetery, those policies change with the Commanders, leading to inconsistency and frequent changes in policy. National Cemeteries are very important monuments, providing a peaceful final resting place for the brave men and women of the United States Armed Forces. Ensuring that veterans and families have access to these sites to mourn the fallen is of the utmost importance, and I implore the VA to work with DOD and provide grieving families the access they deserve while maintaining base security, especially on national holidays such as Memorial Day and Veterans Day.

¹ Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriation Bill, 2025, S. Rept. 118-191, p.55.

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The second key provision of the legislation, on page 64 of the Senate Report, directs the VA to give “appropriate consideration to States without a Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) grant before expanding existing cemeteries.”² The current formula requires the VA to prioritize grants that expand cemeteries before awarding grants to build new cemeteries. This policy is appropriate for general grant decisions, but not for the four states without a state-granted cemetery. There are only three states in the country that do not have a state-granted cemetery, including Alaska, and Alaska is one of two states with an application submitted for VCGP funding.

I understand that the goal of this grant formula is to provide cemeteries to the largest amount of veterans possible, and therefore, expanding cemeteries is more cost effective. However, Alaska is home to an incredibly service-minded population, and has the most veterans per-capita of any state in the country, representing ten percent of our adult populations.³ This is in large part thanks to the many veterans who choose to stay in Alaska after serving at one of our many military installations, as well as our large population of Alaska Natives who serve in the military at a higher rates than any other group. The current formula has prevented Alaska from being awarded a VCGP grant for several years, and under the current formula it is highly unlikely that Alaska will ever be awarded a grant. To leave Alaska without a single state-granted cemetery in favor of expanding existing cemeteries is not only unfair, but disrespects the service of thousands of Alaskan veterans by denying them the right to burial in the place they call home. I respectfully request that the VA prioritize states without a VCGP grant when those states apply for a cemetery grant. I understand this requires the current formula to change, but this change is necessary to ensure equity for rural and underserved states without a VCGP grant.

Both of you committed to support solutions for Alaskan veterans on these issues. On February 28, 2024, I discussed both of these priorities with Secretary McDonough, and he committed to helping find solutions to address these shortfalls of the VA. On May 1, 2024, I spoke to Under Secretary Walters, who also committed to working towards solutions. However, despite these commitments, rural states without a VCGP are still unlikely to receive an award and there is still not direct access to the veteran’s cemetery at JBER.

Thank you for your time and attention on this matter of great importance to the veterans of Alaska. I appreciate all that you do to support American veterans across the country, and I look forward to working with you to implement these changes to honor Alaska’s veterans.

Sincerely,



Dan Sullivan
United States Senator

² Ibid. p. 64

³ U.S. Census, State Profile: Alaska.