

Submitter: Donnie Hedlind

On Behalf
Of:

Committee: Senate Committee On Veterans, Emergency Management, Federal
and World Affairs

Measure: HB2147

To: Senate Veterans, Emergency Management, Federal and World Affairs
Chair Manning
Co-Chair Thatcher

Re: HB 2147 Veterans Cremains Bill

I write today in support of HB 2147, because it is the “right thing to do.” In 2019 the Veterans Office of Inspector General (VOIG) initiated an inquiry into Veteran’s cremains due to inquiry about 28 Veteran cremains in Douglas County, Oregon. Once she was made next of kin, Mary Newman-Keyes Douglas County VSO, contacted VFW and other Veteran Service Organizations and they planned 3 different funerals for our vets who were sitting in a dark, dusty cold mortuary, instead of interned in an Honorable Sunny Green Veteran Cemetery. She and many other volunteers, did the “ring thing.” They did not know it at the time, but they initiated an VOIG inquiry that opened the eyes of many Veteran Service Organizations across the country who are working to fix this problem once and for all.

Paralyzed Veterans of America is one such organization. Through our ACGRD (Associated Chapter Government Relations Directors) across our 32 Chapters, PVA advocates for passage of many Veteran-centered bills throughout our local and national legislatures. As the GRD from PVA Tri-State (serving Oregon, Idaho and SW Washington) I was made aware of this issue by House Representative James Hieb last year and I immediately started putting the word out on this issue. PVA Tri-State and UVGO (United Veteran Groups of Oregon) support this bill and urge you to pass it. It is time we “do the right thing” and honor our servicemembers sacrifice.

Here are some highlights from the VOIG (Veteran Office of Inspector General) report initiated due to what happened in Douglas County, Oregon. I have linked it for your review. In this report, the VOIG recommends corrections within the Veteran Administration to address this problem, however if a Veteran has never signed up for Veterans Benefits with the VBA, they will not be in the system. I suggest you read this report in its entirety before you vote on this bill. You have the power to fix this issue once and for all, not kick the can down the road hoping someone else or some other organization will fix this problem.

1. The VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) initiated this review in response to a news report about 28 deceased veterans’ unclaimed remains kept in storage for up to 44 years at a funeral home in Roseburg, Oregon.
2. VA estimated the remains of between 11,500 and 52,600 veterans may be unclaimed at funeral homes nationwide.
3. The OIG found three key areas in which VA governance of benefits and services for deceased veterans whose remains are unclaimed was not effective

- VA's insufficient outreach to likely custodians of unclaimed veterans' remains and lack of external collaboration
- VA's financial oversight structure, which does not enable VA to perform either cross-administration or VA-wide accounting and reconciliation of payments made on behalf of deceased veterans whose remains are unclaimed.
- VA's inadequate department-level oversight of benefits and services for deceased veterans whose remains are unclaimed, as well as oversight issues within each of VA's three administrations

Link to OIG Report, I suggest everyone on your Committee should read this before voting. It was initiated from Oregon.

- <https://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-19-09592-262.pdf>

I leave you with these words from Veteran Secretary Denis McDonough in his letter to staff regarding this issue.

Our highest priorities will be our three core responsibilities: providing all of our Veterans timely, world-class healthcare; ensuring that they and their families have access to the benefits they've earned; and honoring our Veterans with a final resting place that's a lasting tribute to their service. Those are our core, non-negotiable duties.

https://www.va.gov/opa/speeches/2021/02_09_2021.asp

Some Gave All, All Gave Some

Thank You
Donnie R Hedlind
PVA Tri-State