



National Cemetery
Administration (NCA)
**Intermediate
Labor
Management
Forum
(ILMF)
Newsletter**

Issue 3

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2015

In an effort to better recognize, publicize, and promote NCA successes consistent with the NCA ILMF charter, ILMF presents Issue 3



In October 2015, Intermediate Labor Relations Forum members visited Calverton National Cemetery on suburban Long Island. The group toured Calverton and received briefings from managers and staff members on a wide variety of best practices and improvements developed at Calverton. With an excess of 1,000 acres, Calverton is the largest National Cemetery in the NCA system. It also maintains the largest staff of WG and GS employees (94 authorized FTEE) who perform the full range of functions, including interments, upright headstone and flat marker maintenance, grounds maintenance, irrigation, facility and equipment maintenance, among other duties.

Calverton, opened in 1978, serves as the nearest burial option for veterans throughout the greater New York City metro area. With over 220,000 veterans and spouses interred, Calverton is among the busiest cemeteries in the country. The staff has developed numerous best practices and improvements and shared them with forum members. Shop and Facilities staff showcased a custom casket carrier fabricated from a standard Kubota utility vehicle. Headstone and Marker staff shared an electric headstone puller utilized for large scale raise and realign projects.



Employee is utilizing the stone handcart to safely transport headstones.

Staff responsible for maintaining committal shelters highlighted solar-powered speakers to play taps. Towards the end of the day, the group observed an interment and the care and precision which the staff showed during the process. Overall, Director Mike Picerno showcased nineteen separate best practices or improvements. These were made possible only through the cooperation of labor and management and an active partnership. Forum members witnessed firsthand the concrete, tangible benefits derived from a work environment where labor and management work cooperatively towards fulfilling NCA's mission.

A working lunch was held with union representatives of AFGE Local 3692. Among the topics

discussed was improving NCA's safety culture, and the evolving labor-management partnership at Calverton. Union reps recovered a less than satisfactory relationship with management prior to the establishment of their current partnership. The current union leadership has developed a successful working partnership with Calverton management. A transparent and open relationship is in place and allows both labor and management to proactively address issues of minor concern. This improved relationship has resulted in numerous tangible improvements including cost savings, safety initiatives, new equipment, and modifications to existing equipment and policies.

AFGE and Calverton will be requesting Joint Labor Relations Training to be conducted in early 2016 to further enhance their working relationship.

Among the Improvements/Initiatives:

- ❖ Staff directed Employee of the Month Program
- ❖ Improved safety gear for Wage Grade Employees
- ❖ Equipment purchases designed for use in the Pre-Placed Crypt Sections

Union President Bill Ortiz and Director Mike Picerno both agreed that a motivated and engaged workforce is one that is productive and provides better & more efficient service. It also gives beneficial feedback to management in terms of suggestions, improvements, and

best practices. The beautiful state of their grounds, efficiency of operations & employee engagement are concrete results of the ongoing partnership between Labor and Management.

Forum members participated in a number of presentations made by a variety of subject matter experts on topics such as safety, human resources, and the Secretary's ongoing MV VA and My VA Career initiatives.

NCA Safety Specialist Edward Hymes shared information on current and future safety goals. Current safety goals include:

- A decrease in overall injuries
- Decrease in lost time injuries
- Timely completion of OWCP claims
- Returning employees to productive employment
- Safety goals for 2016 and onward are currently under review. Over the past year, 24 NCA employees attended a variety of safety-related training courses.



Grounds employees operated a mower-trimmer combination which string trims headstones at the same time as grass is cut.

Safety training is also a part of the curriculum for NCA Supervisors, Caretakers and Cemetery Director Interns. A lengthy discussion ensued regarding the best means available to enhance a safety environment at each cemetery.



Outside lowering crew conducting final verification of decedent before interring.

Annual Workplace Evaluations currently provided by local VHA facilities may be continued by VHA staff, or other means may be developed to provide meaningful feedback to Directors and employees. A safety perception survey was recently completed and results will be provided to District leadership and Cemetery Directors. There is an expectation that Directors and NCA Leadership will take the lead in digesting this information and developing appropriate training to further enhance safety efforts currently underway at individual sites. A review is currently underway to assess the proper means to recognize and reward, if appropriate specific

accomplishments related to safety.

Kristy Townsend made a presentation on MyCareer@VA. MyCareer is an interactive, web-based program where NCA employees can access career advice, upward mobility programs, and a variety of other career information designed to allow employees to develop their own career plan, based on their specific abilities, desires and strengths. The plan is to give employees better options to match specific jobs with individual talents. Employees are encouraged to visit the website myvacareeratva.va.gov for more information on this program.

Mary Elder, NCA's Director of Training and Workforce Development, reviewed ongoing efforts to broaden and enhance NCA's internal Cemetery Director Intern Program. For the current class, over 200 applications were reviewed and accepted. Of those, 14 were selected, and are in training at NCA's national training center in St. Louis, Missouri. Interns were hired at the GS-7 and GS-9 grade level and 2/3 of those selected are current NCA employees. NCA is in the process of significantly revising its existing leadership development program for Cemetery Directors. Among the changes planned are a "fast track" program, allowing experienced Foreman, Work Leaders and Office Managers to gain experience necessary to compete for Cemetery Director positions, and enhanced training

for existing Cemetery Directors to allow those employees a career path through successively more responsible positions including entry into the Senior Executive Service.



Employees measuring and setting headstones.

Forum members heard from Stacy Vasquez, Director of the My VA Performance Improvement

Office. MyVA is the Secretary's plan to enhance veterans' experience with all aspects of VA, and includes the understanding that VA employees are customers of VA services as well as the general public. The MyVA Communities model is an attempt to leverage community groups, VSO's and VA providers into a unified public forum to improve communication, planning and services to veterans in a specific geographic location. NCA Directors and staff are already engaged in several existing community arrangements. Calverton is actively partnering with the Manhattan VA Medical Center and Regional Office to fully implement its NYC Community Engagement Board. For VA employees, MyVA 2.0 includes improving the employee experience, improving VA culture, and enhancing career paths and employee development.

Veronica Wales from NCA's Human Capital Office provided an overview of VA's performance recognition system and the variety of means to recognize and reward high performing employees. These include special contribution awards, on the spot awards and time off awards.

Charles Arrington, National Safety Officer and President of NAGE Local at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery, presented his thoughts on enhancing union/management collaboration, particularly in the area of safety. A discussion ensued regarding the value of

providing partnership training for newly hired Director Interns while stationed at the St. Louis training center. Specific mention was made of safety training sponsored by AFGE on a national level. All agreed this would be a valuable experience for those with responsibility for safety at their specific cemeteries.



DID YOU KNOW?

NCA has over 74% Veteran Employees. NCA also leads all federal agencies with the number of Veterans employed.

