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STATE OF HAWAII
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

TESTIMONY ON SENATE BILL
RELATING TO VETERANS CEMETERIES

BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS

BY

JOHN P. ALAMODIN
DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF VETERANS SERVICES

FEBRUARY 27, 2025

Aloha Chair Dela Cruz, Vice-Chair Moriwaki, and members of the committee:

I am John P. Alamodin, Director, Office of Veterans Services, State of Hawaii,
Department of Defense

The Office of Veterans Services (OVS) provides written testimony in **SUPPORT** of SB
1377, SD1.

This measure amends the Hawai'i Revised Statutes (HRS), Chapter 363 and adds a new section to establish the Hawaii State Veterans Cemeteries Board comprised of representatives from state and county departments and agencies. The purpose of the Board is to provide veterans cemeteries in the State with oversight, guidance, technical assistance, education, and other resource support to ensure compliance with standards established by the National Cemetery Administration of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

The enduring mission is to honor eligible Veterans, active-duty Service Members and eligible family members with final resting places in national shrines and with lasting tributes that commemorate their service and sacrifice to our Nation. A vision to be the model of excellence for burial and memorials for our Nation's Veterans and their families. Our Veterans Cemeteries statewide provide burial space for Veterans and their eligible family members, and we are charged to maintain them as national shrines,

sacred to the honor and memory of those interred or memorialized there. Every Veterans' gravesite or urnsite is provided a Government-furnished headstone, marker or medallion and to provide Presidential Memorial Certificates in recognition of their service to a grateful nation. The National Cemetery Administration awards and administers grants for establishing or expanding state and tribal government veterans cemeteries.

The Office of Veterans Services (OVS) is responsible for all veterans cemeteries statewide; however, the OVS Director does not have authority for the establishment and maintenance of those cemeteries. Per Chapter 363-5, County Councils are responsible for the burial of service members, veterans, and their eligible family members. The councils of the counties of Hawaii, Kauai, and Maui shall each provide for the establishment of the veterans cemeteries to be located within their respective counties and shall make provisions for the maintenance and upkeep of the cemeteries. The scope of work and responsibilities also include grading, filling, leveling, platting, paving of roadways and walkways, installation of curbs, building of fences, planting of grass, trees, shrubs, erection of memorial buildings and monuments, and building of other necessary or convenient structures.

In 2015 and 2016, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) conducted a compliance assessment of all eight Hawaii State Veterans Cemeteries where critical issues were identified. In June 2021, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted a follow-up inspection and veterans cemeteries on Maui and East Hawaii on the Big Island identifying the same critical issues. These cemeteries were incorporated into a NCA Compliance Review Program to meet compliance targets set in a correction plan.

In response to these findings the Department of Veterans Affairs, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Matthew T. Quinn, strongly recommended that maintenance of the veterans cemeteries be at the State level rather than delegation to the counties. On October 5, 2021, then Governor Ige corresponded with the Undersecretary and indicated consideration of the State oversight recommendation.

On August 1, 2023, in correspondence with Governor Green, Under Secretary Quinn reiterated the same recommendation for State oversight stating that "it is critical that the State, which assumed responsibility when it received the initial grants for the establishment of these cemeteries, takes the lead to address these deficiencies." As outlined in the NCA Compliance Review Program, veterans cemeteries that do not complete the necessary actions to address deficiencies risk future loss of federal funds as the NCA may consider not awarding any new grants until cemeteries meet compliance goals.

On August 21, 2024, the Director of the Office of Veterans Services, met in-person with the Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs and Cemetery Operations, National Cemetery Administration, Glenn Powers to discuss various forms of State oversight of veterans cemeteries including but not limited to cemetery land acquisition, transfer of responsibilities to State departments or agencies, and direct funding to counties. After examining various State oversight models nationwide, Under Secretary Powers agreed with proposing a State Veterans Cemeteries Board or Commission as a Hawaii State oversight model for veterans cemeteries. The State Veterans Cemeteries Board will provide the leadership and opportunities to access training, best practices expertise, NCA guidance, potential funding, and other support activities.

From August 2024 to November 2024, I had the opportunity to host remote video conferences with respective leadership teams of County Departments responsible for the care and maintenance of Veterans Cemeteries including the Hawaii County Department of Parks and Recreation; Maui County Department of Transportation; and Kauai County Department of Parks and Recreation. We discussed progress by each County department in their efforts to maintain respective cemeteries in accordance with the National Cemetery Administration Compliance Program. The range of challenges included lack of staffing, specialized equipment, and training opportunities. Despite those issues, each county department reiterated their desire and commitment to care for the Veterans Cemeteries and keep the responsibilities with the Counties with support.

The establishment of a State Veterans Cemeteries Board, intent, and purpose were thoroughly discussed with each county department, and there was collective agreement that communication with all the county departments, training opportunities, education, funding, and other resource support was needed. There was strong agreement that a State Veterans Cemeteries Board could be the operational oversight to support each county to maintain veterans cemeteries to standard.

If passed, the bill will authorize establishment of the Hawaii State Veterans Cemeteries Board that will include representatives from state and county departments and agencies with no use of State funds.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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