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## Ohio Department of Veterans Services Backs “Missing in America” Bill

COLUMBUS – Ohio Department of Veterans Services Director Tom Moe testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Thursday that Ohio is leading the way in providing dignified burials for unclaimed veterans remains. However, federal action is needed to help identify many whose remains are left behind in funeral homes across the nation.

His remarks came during testimony to the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee in support of the Veterans Missing in America Act of 2011, formally known as H.R. 2051, sponsored by U.S. Representatives Pat Tiberi and Steve Stivers. The bill is also co-sponsored by Ohio U.S. Representatives Steve Austria, Steve Chabot, Bob Gibbs, Bill Johnson, Bob Latta, Jim Renacci, Jean Schmidt, and Mike Turner.

“As a former member of the military who was Missing in Action in Vietnam, this bill reminds me of my own family’s challenge of having to deal with the uncertainty of my whereabouts and fate. Once I was identified as a Prisoner of War, my country made every effort to return me and my fellow comrades to our families,” said Director Moe, a retired Air Force fighter pilot who was held captive for over five years during the Vietnam War.

“Just as our Nation is committed to finding and rescuing our troops who go Missing in Action, I hope that you will join me and Representatives Tiberi and Stivers to find and honor those who are still missing—but in our own homeland, America,” he said.

The bill is rooted in the work of the Missing in America Project. The project was initiated by a small number of volunteers in various states in response to reports of an unknown number of veterans’ ashes and remains lying abandoned and unclaimed at funeral homes or other entities across the U.S. Without a next of kin identified, these remains could stay at a funeral home indefinitely and not be laid to rest. The project aims to identify these veterans and provide a funeral and burial for them, Director Moe told the committee.

H.R. 2051 recognizes the work of the Missing in America Project and removes obstacles to it by directing the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to work with veterans service organizations to assist funeral homes and other entities in identifying veterans

who are eligible for burial in a national cemetery. The Secretary would then cover the cost of burial if the remains are those of an eligible veteran, and if there is no next of kin and no resources available to cover burial and funeral expenses.

Finally, the bill directs the Secretary to establish a publicly accessible database of the names of any veteran or other individual who is identified through this process.

Director Moe said he was “pleased and honored” to represent Ohio, which has already enacted a bill similar to H.R. 2051 in 2010. This bill was introduced by State Senators Jim Hughes and Kevin Bacon. The issue of unclaimed veterans’ remains was first brought to the attention of legislators by Steve Ebersole of the American Legion.

The Ohio law provides an exception to the next-of-kin law so that the U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs is granted the authority to examine unidentified ashes in funeral homes and hospitals across Ohio and, if the deceased is identified as those of a veteran, then to take disposition of the remains. The first burial of such veterans in Ohio by the Missing in America Project will take place this May at the National Cemetery in Dayton. He expressed the hope that other states would pass their own legislation to address issues that are outside Federal jurisdiction.

“I am proud to say that the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs has recently expressed support of the Missing in America Project and has urged our Nation’s leaders to take action,” Director Moe said. “Additionally, H.R. 2051 has the support of the National Funeral Directors Association and the American Legion.”

A companion bill was introduced Wednesday in the U.S. Senate by Ohio Sen. Rob Portman.

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