



Highlights of GAO-12-105, a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Arlington National Cemetery (Arlington) contains the remains of more than 330,000 military service members, family members, and others. In June 2010, the Army Inspector General identified problems at the cemetery, including deficiencies in management, burial errors, and a failure to notify next of kin of errors. In response, the Secretary of the Army assigned new leadership for the cemetery and issued guidance to address deficiencies. The Executive Director, Army National Cemeteries Program (ANCP), is responsible for overseeing operations at Arlington. In response to Public Law 111-339, GAO assessed (1) the Army's efforts to address identified management deficiencies, (2) the Army's process for providing information and assistance to families regarding efforts to detect and correct burial errors, and (3) factors affecting the feasibility and advisability of transferring jurisdiction for the Army's national cemeteries to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). GAO analyzed Army guidance, records, plans, and other documentation and interviewed knowledgeable Army and VA officials, among other steps.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Arlington implement actions relating to information-technology planning, workforce planning, assessments of operations, and coordination; develop a strategic plan; and develop written guidance for assisting families. Additionally, GAO recommends that the Army and VA institutionalize a mechanism for collaboration. In written comments on a draft of this report, DOD and VA generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View GAO-12-105. For more information, contact Brian J. Lepore at (202) 512-4523 or leporeb@gao.gov.

ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

Management Improvements Made, but a Strategy Is Needed to Address Remaining Challenges

What GAO Found

The Army has taken positive steps to address management deficiencies at Arlington and has implemented improvements across a range of areas. However, GAO identified opportunities to build upon these improvements. Specifically, GAO found that ANCP: (1) has invested in information-technology improvements and has begun projects to further enhance capabilities, but is not yet basing its investments on an enterprise architecture, or modernization blueprint, that could help ensure the planned investments will meet the organization's needs; (2) has taken steps to improve its workforce planning, but its plans were based on an incomplete understanding of ANCP's requirements and outdated business processes that have since been revised, with the result that ANCP lacks an updated and validated workforce structure; (3) is in the initial stages of developing a program for assessing and improving cemetery operations, but until ANCP completes this program, it may be limited in its ability to evaluate and improve aspects of cemetery performance; and (4) has improved its coordination with other Army organizations, but is experiencing challenges coordinating with some operational partners due in part to a lack of written agreements. Finally, because ANCP officials have focused on addressing the immediate crisis at Arlington, they have not yet developed a strategic plan aimed at prioritizing and achieving long-term goals. Without a strategic plan, ANCP's actions may not be well coordinated and its resources may be used ineffectively.

ANCP has a process to verify burial locations when requested to do so by a family. GAO collected records for 1,194 cases that ANCP concluded did not have burial discrepancies and drew a generalizable sample of 60 cases to evaluate ANCP's implementation of its burial verification process. GAO's review found that ANCP implemented this process, and did not find documentation discrepancies pertaining to burial locations. GAO found documentation discrepancies for two cases pertaining to decedents' personal information and could not determine from the records how these discrepancies were addressed. In cases where a burial error occurred, ANCP's Executive Director or Chief of Staff contacted the affected families. ANCP's Executive Director—in consultation with cemetery officials and affected families—made decisions on a case-by-case basis about the assistance provided to each family. Confirmed errors were fixed by the cemetery based on the next-of-kin's wishes. ANCP has not developed written guidance that identifies the factors ANCP's Executive Director considers when assisting families in these instances. Written guidance can improve families' and policymakers' visibility into ANCP's decision making in these circumstances.

A transfer of jurisdiction for the Army's two national cemeteries to VA is feasible, but GAO identified several factors that may affect the advisability of making this change, such as potential costs and benefits, transition challenges, and the effect on Arlington's unique characteristics. In addition, given the improvements the Army has made and continues to make at Arlington, it may be premature to transfer jurisdiction for these cemeteries to VA if other changes can achieve similar results or improve operations. For example, GAO identified opportunities where enhanced collaboration between the Army and VA may improve operations with less disruption. However, the Army and VA have not established a formal mechanism for collaborating and therefore could miss opportunities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of cemetery operations.