



State Senator Sheila Harsdorf

Date: January 21, 2016
To: Senate Committee on Transportation and Veterans Affairs
Fr: Senator Sheila Harsdorf
Re: Senate Bill 518 – Veterans Remains

Chairman Petrowski and Committee Members,

Thank you for holding a public hearing on Senate Bill 518 (SB 518). Honorably disposing of unclaimed remains of veterans is a matter that was brought to my attention by a constituent who serves as Vice-Commander of the Department of Wisconsin of The American Legion. Rep. Skowronski and I have introduced this legislation at the request of the American Legion to ensure that our veterans receive proper burial honors.

Under current law, the Department of Veterans Affairs has a non-statutory program – No Next of Kin – for the burial of unclaimed remains of veterans. Given the current policy, the American Legion of Wisconsin has taken an active role to ensure that veterans, who are honorably discharged, get the recognition they deserve and receive proper burial honors. Under current law cemeteries, funeral homes, and crematoria are the custodians of unclaimed remains and that means they are liable for aiding in the disposition of unclaimed veteran remains.

Senate Bill 518 (SB 518) would allow that if after 90 days the remains have not been claimed and are still in the custody of a funeral home or crematoria, notification would be directed to a Local Veteran Service Organization or the Department of Veteran Affairs for appropriate burial. This legislation would protect cemeteries, funeral homes, and crematoria against potential liability in the burial of unclaimed remains.

SB 518 as originally drafted called for the “County Veteran Service Officer” to be the point of contact for verifying remains as that of a veteran and taking proper steps for burial. The Department of Veteran Affairs requested we make a technical change to afford all “Local Veteran Service Organizations” to be the point of contact which I have introduced. This technical change would allow the American Legion to care for veteran remains as they currently are. I urge your support of this amendment and the bill in order to ensure that honorably discharged veterans receive proper burial honors which they so deserve.

Thank you again for holding a public hearing and for your consideration of Senate Bill 518.



KEN SKOWRONSKI

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Dear Chairman Petrowski and members of the Senate Veterans and Transportation Committee,

I would like to thank you for allowing me to speak today. The proposal put forth by Senator Harsdorf and I, Assembly Bill 693, gives us legislators a great opportunity to ensure that our state's veterans are given the honor and respect they deserve after they pass on.

The American Legion in Wisconsin has been on the forefront of dealing with unclaimed veterans remains here in Wisconsin, and this legislation is something that is long overdue. Terrence Sund, a Menomonee Falls native, drowned in a Viet Cong tunnel on December 6th, 1967 serving his country and was not given proper burial honors until this past July. This legislation will ensure that veterans that are honorably discharged get the recognition they deserve and receive the proper burial honors.

Too often that cemeteries, funeral homes, and crematoria find themselves in custody of unclaimed remains. Without this legislation they could be held liable for aiding in the disposition of the unclaimed remains of veterans.

Currently the Department of Veterans Affairs has a non-statutory program--- No Next of Kin--- for the burial of the unclaimed remains of veterans and their dependents. This legislation would clarify the program in statute by creating a 90 day period after cremation where those in custody of the remains will keep custody in the hopes that they will be claimed by a family member. If the remains are still unclaimed after the 90 day period those in custody of the remains can contact the Country Veteran Service Officers or Department of Veterans Affairs to determine if the deceased were veterans and then move forward with the process of a proper disposition.

The remains of veterans deserve to be taken care of with the utmost respect, and this bill gives us the chance to show our gratitude for those who served our country by ensuring they receive an honorable burial.

Thank you for your time today,

State Representative

Ken Skowronski

82nd Assembly District

Scott Walker, Governor

John A. Scocos, Secretary



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January 21, 2016

Senate Committee on Transportation and Veterans Affairs

Chairman Petrowski, Senator Carpenter and Members of the Committee,

I write in support of Senate Bill 518. SB 518 is the direct result of collaboration between the Wisconsin Department of the American Legion, the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA), Representative Skowronski and State Senator Harsdorf's office to address the issue of unclaimed veteran cremains.

The WDVA and the American Legion are involved in an initiative that seeks to remedy a situation where a veteran may pass away without a next-of-kin and the unclaimed remains are held at a funeral home. WDVA sent a letter to over 500 WI funeral service providers in August 2015 to identify the unclaimed remains of deceased veterans who may be potentially eligible for a military burial at one of our State Veterans Cemeteries.

The results of this initiative are as follows (Aug 7, 2015 - January 11, 2016):

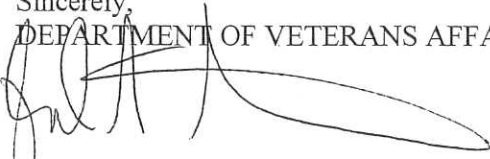
- 30 – Total number of unclaimed remains referred to WDVA by 6 funeral homes
- 13 – Pending further action from family / funeral homes
- 08 – Pending eligibility determination by WDVA/Eligibility Unit
- 07 – No records available at WDVA to determine eligibility
- 02 – Funeral Home retaining cremains

SB 518 will address this issue and allow for action on future unclaimed veterans cremains to be properly laid to rest at a Wisconsin Veterans Cemetery in a timely and dignified manner.

I respectfully request your support of SB 518.

Sincerely,

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS


JOHN A. SCOCOS
Secretary

MAKING IT RIGHT

My name is Steve Conto, I'm from Menasha Wisconsin and I am the founder of "The Final Bridge." This project I started 14 years ago to locate records and tend to the gravesites of those who were killed in action in the Vietnam War from the state of Wisconsin. A total of 1249 burial sites I have located and I have visited 1000 sites so far. My list of locations is used by the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs as an official reference of their burial locations.

Terrence Sund, from Menomonee Falls was one of the guys killed in action in Vietnam. For over 40 years his remains were kept in a back room at the Wisconsin Memorial Park Cemetery in Brookfield. This room is not open to the public. There was no flag, no marker, and no Memorial Day remembrance afforded to Terrence. Luckily I was able to contact Terrence's sister and receive her approval for his remains and that of his mother and father to be interred. In August of last year Terrence was given a full military honors funeral and laid to rest beside his mother Magdalene. In September his father Byron was laid to rest with full military honors at the Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery near Union Grove.

This bill will afford other veterans of similar fate to have a formal military funeral and be placed in a niche of honor. This is the least we can do. For I consider these unclaimed remains, Missing in Action in our state. This bill will provide means to finally bring them completely home. It'll provide closure for their families, comrades and friends that for some are long overdue.

Our state American Legion will support this bill through The Terrence Sund Memorial Interment Fund. This fund would pay for any additional burial costs not covered.

They gave up all of their tomorrows for all our todays. They gave the ultimate sacrifice to ensure this wonderful place we call "God's Country" remains so. You can make it right by making it possible to give them a proper military burial service and a proper final place of rest.

I thank you for your consideration in forwarding this bill for a vote.

Sincerely,



Steve Conto
The Final Bridge



