

November 11, 2003

The Honorable Anthony J. Principi
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Principi:

I am writing to express my serious concerns regarding the current VA policy that reimburses families of veterans for costs associated with the veteran's burial. Because reimbursement rates are so low, the current practice leaves many families of deceased veterans with unpaid funeral bills as high as \$6,000 in New York.

While the price of a dignified funeral averages \$6,700 in New York State, the VA Department currently pays families between \$600 and \$2000 for costs associated with a veteran's burial. When men and women risk the ultimate sacrifice to serve our country and protect our liberties, we make a promise in return: that we will take care of them and their families. That means providing health care for them when they're sick, and allowing them to die with dignity with a funeral that recognizes their distinguished service.

As you know, if a veteran chooses not to be buried in a VA cemetery, he or she may receive a \$300 plot allotment benefit. Any veteran with an honorable discharge who dies in a VA facility or receives pension or compensation is eligible for an additional \$300 in burial and funeral expenses. Any veteran with an honorable discharge who dies of a service related condition is eligible for \$2,000 in burial benefits. Several veterans' families have reported that when their loved ones chose to leave a VA hospital while sick, to die with dignity at home and save the facility money, they were not eligible for any reimbursement at all.

Because funeral costs far exceed these reimbursement amounts, I urge you to consider increasing the amount that the VA Department provides families for this purpose. Today on Veterans' Day we remember the bravery and service of the generations of men and women who have been willing to don the uniform and risk their lives in the name of our country. I know you agree that as they are laid to rest, we owe it to them, their families, and our nation to honor them with a ceremony that befits their heroism.

I thank you for your attention to this extremely important matter, and look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senate