

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 22, 2025

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write today to express concern with the internment of Dr. Robert McCormick Browne at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii, commonly known as “Punchbowl Cemetery,” and the lack of options for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to review and initiate disinterment proceedings for decedents like Dr. Browne.

Dr. Browne, a former educator, Army veteran, and Chief of Psychiatry at St. Francis Hospital, has been credibly accused of sexually abusing dozens of boys over the course of decades in Hawaii. Although he died by suicide in 1991 before charges could be filed, his pattern of abuse has been well documented and corroborated by numerous survivors, investigators, and reporting, including in a highly publicized court case and subsequent \$80 million settlement between Kamehameha Schools and Dr. Browne’s victims¹.

Our offices were recently contacted by a constituent who is both a survivor of Dr. Browne’s abuse and a family member of veterans buried at Punchbowl Cemetery. As a victim and survivor of sexual abuse at the hands of Dr. Browne, he expressed deep pain and outrage that someone accused of such horrific acts could be buried “in a place of honor, along with many other great and well-known people.” He further wrote, “There are many victims, myself included, that do not feel he should be laid to rest among our heroes.” He requested that Dr. Browne disinterred from Punchbowl Cemetery.

We strongly agree. The presence of an alleged serial abuser in a place reserved for those who served with distinction is deeply painful and unacceptable to survivors and the families of those buried alongside him.

There is both the precedent and authority for the VA to do this in certain circumstances. In 2013, Congress enacted the *Alicia Dawn Koehl Respect for National Cemeteries Act* (P.L. 113-65), which establishes grounds for disinterment of individuals who have committed certain serious crimes, including provisions for those who died or fled before they could be prosecuted or convicted. In 2019, the VA implemented regulations prohibiting convicted Tier III sex offenders

¹ Kamehameha Schools, “Kamehameha Schools and Plaintiffs Agree on Settlement of Browne Litigation,” February 16, 2018, <https://www.ksbe.edu/news/newsreleases/kamehameha-schools-and-plaintiffs-agree-on-settlement-of-browne-litigation>.

from being interred or memorialized in national cemeteries.² Congress followed up by codifying these regulations in the *National Cemeteries Preservation and Protection Act of 2022* (P.L. 117-355). Specifically, under 38 USC § 2411, a person who is determined to have committed a Tier III sex offense—but who was never convicted due to death or flight to avoid prosecution—may still be subject to disinterment or exclusion from burial and memorialization in national cemeteries.

Although Dr. Browne was never convicted due to his suicide prior to trial, credible and documented findings of his extensive sexual abuse of minors warrant a full review by the VA as authorized under 38 USC § 2411(c). Unfortunately, current law only provides these authorities to VA for decedents interred from December 2013 onward, leaving his victims with little recourse.

On behalf of survivors and families who have expressed deep distress over Dr. Browne's continued memorialization at Punchbowl Cemetery, we respectfully request your support for legislation that would allow VA to review Dr. Browne's case and, in accordance with any findings and the law, remove him from this place of national reverence. Doing so would maintain the integrity of our cemeteries and affirm VA's commitment to honoring the memory of those interred with the respect they deserve.

Thank you for your leadership and attention to this deeply important matter. We intend to move forward with legislative solutions to ensure that our national cemeteries reflect the values we cherish and the justice owed to survivors, and would appreciate the Department's support in such an effort.

Sincerely,



JM Tokuda

Member of Congress



Mazie K. Hirono

United States Senator



Ed Case

Member of Congress

² Department of Veterans Affairs, Final Rule, "Prohibition of Interment or Memorialization of Persons Who Have Been Convicted of Federal or State Capital Crimes or Certain Sex Offenses," *Federal Register* 84, no. 37 (February 25, 2019): 5852, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/02/25/2019-03078/prohibition-of-interment-or-memorialization-of-persons-who-have-been-convicted-of-federal-or-state>.