

By Rick Maze

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Transportation of remains of service members who die outside the U.S. would become the responsibility of those troops' military commands under legislation pending in Congress that seems almost certain to become law.

The initiative was proposed in reaction to the mishandling of remains by the military mortuary at Dover Air Force Base, Del. Its aim is to have a uniformed service member be accountable for remains from the initial death or recovery of the remains through burial or interment, unless a family requests otherwise. The designated member would be subject to disciplinary action if something goes wrong.

Under the proposal, already approved by the House of Representatives as part of the 2013 defense authorization bill and introduced Monday as an amendment to the Senate version of the bill, the Defense Department would be responsible for ensuring someone is responsible for each step of the care, handling and transportation of remains of any member of the Army, Navy, Air Force or Marine Corps who dies outside the U.S.

Regulations to ensure continuous responsibility would have to be issued within 60 days after the bill becomes law.

One person would not necessarily be responsible for the remains throughout the entire process, but if responsibility shifts, there would have to be a formal chain-of-custody handoff.

News reports last year uncovered a decade of problems with the handling of remains at the Dover mortuary that resulted in some unidentified remains being sent to landfills and other remains mishandled by mortuary workers.

Rep. Mike Coffman, R-Colo., was the chief sponsor of the provision included in the House version of the bill. Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., introduced the amendment filed Monday for consideration when the Senate takes up the measure.

Coffman, a Marine Corps and Army veteran, cited two reasons for assigning command responsibility. First, he believes military members can be trusted to show more respect for remains than civilians. Second, service members can be prosecuted under the Uniform Code of Military Justice if they fail to carry out assignments, while prosecuting civilians is much harder.

Wicker is an Air Force veteran who serves on the Senate armed services and veterans' affairs committees.