

# MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS - MEETING MINUTES -

April 19, 2012

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs was called to order by Chairwoman Sylvia Beals at 2 p.m., April 19, 2012 via telephone conferencing. Board members and Montana Veterans Affairs Division staff in attendance were:

Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman  
Sarah Price, Member  
Bernie Jacobs, Member  
Gary Sorensen, Member  
State Sen. Larry Jent, Member  
Bill Willing, Member  
Joe Tropila, Member  
Lisa Evers, Member  
Brig. Gen. Matthew Quinn, Member

Harry LaFriniere, Member  
Joe Foster, Administrator  
Bruce Knutson, Senator Tester  
Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst  
David Boyd, Member  
Travis Monroe, Senator Baucus  
Don Kettner, Member  
Byron Erickson, Member

Chairwoman Beals opened and thanked everyone for being present, whereupon a roll call was taken. She then asked if there were any additions or deletions to last meeting's Minutes; and if none, that a motion be made to approve the Minutes, as written. With no changes discussed or made, the motion to approve was made by Don Kettner, with Harry LaFriniere seconding. The motion carried.

The new Adjutant General, Brig. Gen. Matthew Quinn – who replaced Brig. Gen. John Walsh – was introduced. Brig. Gen. Quinn is long-time Montana Army National Guardsman, and was activated and deployed during Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom.

Joe Foster reported that for the first time in almost two years, we are 100% filled in our veterans service officer positions. The latest hire is retired Army Master Sergeant Rob Graham, in Kalispell. Also, since our last Board meeting, our new hires are Army National Guardsman and Iraqi Freedom combat veteran Ben Barille – working out of the Fort Harrison office, and Air Force veteran Keith Olson – working out of our Miles City office.

Joe then explained the veterans services financial and claims production reports. Both reports are captured on a monthly basis, and show the type claim services we produce; as well as the financial impact of our veterans service officers' (VSO) work effort. The report showed that as of March 1, 2012, the division's VSO's financial impact totaled \$106,311,762. The handout also showed the quantity of claim products produced through March 1, 2012. Of the 2219 claims quantity, 1613 were for disability compensation. Brig. Gen. Quinn asked if we expect to exceed the 2011 financial impact total of \$150,168,741. Joe stated that he expects it to be close. However, with such a large veterans service officer turnover the past year – approx. 50% – it may not. Also, in regards to the claims production report; in all probability we will not reach the 2011 level; again, due to the position vacancies.

The State Veterans Cemetery Program reports that as of March 1, 2012, a total of 190 interments in our three cemeteries. One major construction project is underway, and it is completing the design stage. The Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery in Missoula will have a large columbaria expansion, adding approximately 950 niches to the current 196 niches in the existing columbarium. The project's construction is expected to be finished by the end of August 2012.

Joe reported on the homeless veteran housing project at Fort Harrison, per the provided news release and letter of support to the Montana Board of Housing (from Joe). However, in the past week, the Board of Housing did not rate the project high enough for funding support, thus suspending the project for a year.

Joe Foster and Brig. Gen. Walsh jointly signed a letter to VA Secretary Eric Shinseki supporting a Helena Vet Center (letter provided the Board). Joe reported recently receiving a response stating that the existing Vet Center outreach to Helena, which originates from Missoula, is underutilized; so a Vet Center in Helena is not supported, at this time, by Sec. Shinseki.

The ongoing scam involving elderly veterans living in retirement homes and assisted living facilities was thoroughly reported. Board members discussed a letter jointly signed by Attorney General Steve Bullock, Director of the Dept. of Public Health and Human Services Anna Whiting-Sorrell and Brig. Gen. John Walsh, which was sent to all licensed facilities in the state, along with a poster. Joe will be presenting this issue at the upcoming Governor's Conference on Aging in early May. The issue generated much discussion and suggestions.

Board member Willing gave a briefing on the Southwest Montana State Veteran's Home (SMSVH) project, based upon a VA report he received. Presently, the SMSVH is in Priority Group 1 (PG1), but is ranked 60 out of the 61 listed projects. Therefore, it is doubtful that there will be enough VA funding available to construct the facility in 2012; however, having PG1 status is positive. The federal grant for this project will be 65% of the construction cost, with the State of Montana responsible for the remaining 35%.

Chairwoman Beals brought up an issue that the Veterans Administration is now mandating approximately 20% of their appointments being conducted over the phone. If a person doesn't want his/her appointment conducted in this manner, the VA must be notified – as the veteran still has a choice in the matter.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 3 p.m. The next Board meeting is scheduled for October 4, 2012 at 2 p.m. in Helena.