

# **MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

## **- MEETING MINUTES -**

August 28, 2013

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs was called to order by Chairwoman Sylvia Beals at 2 p.m., August 28, 2013 in Butte, Montana. Board members and Montana Veterans Affairs Division staff in attendance were:

Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman	David Boyd, Member
Peter Olson, Member	Joe Foster, Administrator
Gary Sorensen, Member	Bruce Knutson, Senator Tester
Bill Willing, Member	Jason Smith, Member
Mary Creech, Member	Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst
Shawn Backbone, Member	Larry Jent, Member
Dave Williamson, Regional Veterans Service Officer	
Brig. Gen. Brad Livingston (for Maj. Gen Matthew Quinn)	
Scott Mitchell (for Byron Erickson)	

Chairwoman Beals opened and thanked everyone for being present, and 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 so moved and seconded. The motion carried.

Joe Foster reported that the division has hired two new veteran service officers; Betty Franklin for the Helena (Ft. Harrison) office and Sean Malcolm for the Missoula office. We currently have a veteran service officer position open in Great Falls and we expect to fill it in October. The position is open as Rich Gaskins, Regional Veterans Service Office, resigned. Judy Loendorf from the Havre office was selected as the new Regional Veterans Service Officer; her region includes the Havre, Great Falls and Lewistown service offices.

Joe then explained the veterans services financial impact and claims production reports. Both reports capture statistics on a monthly basis, and show the type claim services produced; as well as the financial impact of our veterans service officers' work effort. The report showed that as of August 1, 2013 (the first month of fiscal year 2014), the division's financial impact is \$14,154,372. Last fiscal year's (FY13) financial impact totaled \$166,833,099. The "production" handout showed 205 claim products filed, as of August 1, 2013. FY13's claims production total was 2833. All claims are submitted to either the federal VA's Regional Office at Fort Harrison or its Pension Management Center in St. Paul, MN.

Three Veterans Affairs Division employees were selected for the Governor's Award for Performance Excellence. Kelly Ackerman – Veterans Services Program Manager, Tom Hall – Veterans Cemetery Program Manager, and Lee Ann Hall – Budget Analyst were selected as a "team." This is the third year in a row that Veterans Affairs Division employees have been selected for this prestigious recognition. There are seven state divisions within the Department of Military Affairs.

Regarding the veteran cemetery program, the number of burials for fiscal year 2013 (which ends June 30, 2013) is as follows, and is compared to fiscal year 2012 totals:

<u>FY13</u>	
Fort Harrison (Helena) – 178	Total in FY12 – 154
Western Montana (Missoula) – 135	Total in FY12 – 115
Eastern Montana (Miles City) – 45	Total in FY12 – 29

These interment levels reflect a significant increase over the previous fiscal year.

The \$506,000 construction project at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery in Missoula is now complete. This project added 960 niches to the columbaria complex.

The \$1.74 million expansion and improvement construction project at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery at Fort Harrison has begun. The project will include new entrance walls, a committal shelter, an 800-niche columbaria complex and plaza, a paved/fenced equipment compound, and road work. Wadsworth Construction, headquartered in Great Falls, is the general contractor. The project is scheduled, per contract, for completion within 150 days.

Next on the agenda was the 2013 Legislative overview. Per the legislative bills listing provided, Joe explained the most significant, passed bills which impact veteran interests or services. Joe also thanked State Senator Larry Jent for his active support and proponentcy for veterans specifically, and the Department of Military Affairs, generally.

Montana Purple Heart recipients can receive a \$1000 grant if enrolled at any of the state's University System units. The Veterans Affairs Division was allocated \$50,000 specifically for this program, and it will be disbursed based upon billing received from the colleges/universities. There are key criteria which must be met to qualify for the scholarship grant. The University System verifies eligibility status, and the grants are made on a "first come / first serve" basis. Students can be enrolled either part or full-time.

A Medal of Valor for a family member of a Montana service man/woman killed during war-time duty was authorized, and is retroactive through World War II. The medal will be funded through donations, as no money was appropriated. It will be managed by the Department of Military Affairs.

Joe has met repeatedly with Motor Vehicle Division personnel to coordinate the "Next of Kin" Gold Star Family license plate and "Veteran" on a state driver's license initiatives authorized by the Legislature. Significantly, the division's veterans service offices will be solely responsible for authenticating qualified veteran status for applicants. The "Next of Kin" license plate should be available in the Fall, and "Veteran" identification on a driver's license is expected by January 1, 2014. The "Next of Kin" license plate is available for family members

of military personnel who have died while in military service, regardless of circumstance or location.

The legislature allocated \$200,000 to the Disabled American Veterans to purchase vehicles for its veteran transportation program and \$160,000 to the Veterans of Foreign Wars for its veterans services program. These funds were included in the division's budget and will be dispersed, as requested by the respective organizations, effective July 2013. Both allocations are "One Time Only," meaning that any additional funding – beyond this biennium – must be re-authorized by subsequent Legislative Sessions.

Elections were held for Board Chair and Vice-Chair. Incumbent Sylvia Beals was re-elected to serve as Chair, and Bill Willing was elected as Vice-Chairman. Each term has duration of two years, with a maximum of two terms served.

Significant discussion took place regarding federal VA healthcare issues and policies; to include potential complications when TriCare is involved. After much discussion, it was decided that Joe Foster would request a briefing/question and answer forum with VA officials to take place during a Board meeting (no VA representative was present during this Board meeting). This will be scheduled as soon as practical.

With no additional questions or discussion from Board members or the attending public, the next Board meeting's date and location were discussed and determined. The next meeting will be a teleconference – to take place December 4, 2013 at 2 p.m. With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 3:15 p.m.

---

Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman

---

Lee Ann Hall, Recorder