

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

- MEETING MINUTES -

August 27, 2015

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs meeting was called to order by Chairman Bill Willing at 10:05 a.m., August 27, 2015 at Fort Harrison (near Helena). Board members/agency staff in attendance were:

Bill Willing, Chairman
David Boyd, Member
Brenda York, Member
Joren Underdahl, Member
Byron Erickson, Member
Casey Jourdan, Member
Shawn Backbone, Member
Judy Rolfe, Congressman
Zinke
Bruce Knutson, Sen. Tester

Dick Juvik, Member
Clancy Sivertsen, Member
Maj. Gen. Matt Quinn, Member
Joe Foster, Administrator
Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst
Gary Sorensen, Member
Todd Dunlop, (rep. Dr. Bonde)
Pete Olson, Vice-Chairman
Dan Bernhardt, Member

Guests in attendance (who signed in) were:

Ken Inabnit, CASA
Josh Clements, American Legion
David Chung, MOPH
Steve Garrison

Charles Gatlin, MOPH
Frank Belgarde, MOC
Dave Kelly, Dept. of Labor

Chairman Willing opened and thanked everyone for being present, and asked all in attendance to introduce themselves. Chairman Willing then asked if there were any additions/deletions to last meeting's Minutes. With no changes to the Minutes, a motion to approve was made and was seconded. The motion carried.

In the packets were updated copies of the division's Veterans Services and Cemetery Program information brochures. Joe Foster pointed out that the State of Montana map in the veterans services brochure was updated with the current number of veterans per county according to the "VET POP 2014" statistics. Joe talked about the Board member roster and asked the members to ensure that the list's contact information was up-to-date. Special mention was made of the Board members recently reappointed by Gov. Bullock – Bill Willing, Gary Sorensen, Dick Juvik, David Boyd and Shawn Backbone.

Joe then explained the veteran services financial impact and claims production reports. The reports capture statistics regarding veterans service office claims production; as well as, the financial impact of our veterans service officers' work effort. These reports provided data as of June 30, 2015 which is the end of fiscal year (FY) 2015. The division's FY15 financial impact was \$167,379,522. The FY15 claims production report showed that 2694 veteran/veteran family member claim products were developed and submitted to the federal VA.

For FY15, there were 121 burials at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Missoula), 218 burials at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Fort Harrison), and 37 burials at the Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Miles City). The 218 burials at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery was the highest annual quantity since it became operational in 1987.

The agency will be submitting two grant applications to the VA Cemetery Grants program. The Montana State Veterans Cemetery grant will be to expand the interment grounds to the West, add paved roadways, and develop a second entrance/exit. The Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery grant will be to fund columbaria and a committal shelter. Attainment of these grants is expected to take many years; but in the meantime, we will request the requisite spending authority through the 2017 State Legislature.

Chairman Willing introduced guest Ken Inabnit, who is the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of the Army (CASA). Mr. Inabnit thanked Chairman Willing, stating it was an honor to be invited to the Board meeting. He gave a brief as to CASA activities, much of which is informing and educating people about the U.S. Army; as well as advising the Army of any issues, concerns and/or perceptions the public might convey to him. Mr. Inabnit was invited to be a regular attendee at the Board meetings.

During the last Legislative Session, we requested two full-time equivalents (FTE) for the division's veterans services program. Lindsay Berge was hired into the Billings service office – filling one of the two FTEs, and the other FTE is to be placed in Kalispell. Joe explained the methodology behind the placement of the two new FTEs, specifically in context to the State Administration and Veterans Affairs (SAVA) Interim Committee's interest in placing one of the positions in Glasgow. Joe conducted a multi-year claims production and veteran demographic analysis, and the most needed location for the additional FTE was determined to be in Kalispell. The analysis was provided to the Board members. Joe reported discussing the analysis and plan to place the FTE in Kalispell with Sen. Dee Brown (SAVA chairperson) and she supported the decision. Discussion followed with David Boyd asking if additional outreach into his area (Poplar) could be supported. Joe said "yes"; and gave the Havre service office's increased outreach to Browning as an example of expanding outreach visits if warranted by demonstrated demand.

Dan Bernhardt with the Department of Labor explained that his department funds the state job service positions that provide employment and training services specifically to veterans. There are job service facilities throughout the state, but funding exists for only seven FTE who specifically assist veterans with job placement. However, Dan noted that all job placement FTEs receive training specific to veteran employment services. Dan went on to discuss the "veteran services providers" meetings his office supports and the challenges associated with employment services in rural Montana and the Tribal Nations. Brenda York stated that she has observed many of the same type challenges (e.g., awareness of benefits/resources available) in veteran higher education issues at Montana State University (Ms. York manages the university's Veteran Center). General

Quinn stated that on October 20th, the Department of Military is hosting a Tribal Nation gathering in Helena to highlight the services/resources available to them through the department. He plans to coordinate with Joe to schedule more briefing time on veteran services and resources.

A question was raised about the federal VA's and National Guard's processes as related to educating (e.g., veterans benefits/services) service members transitioning out of active duty. Todd Dunlop explained the comprehensive process and coordination the federal VA has with the Montana National Guard in informing troops and their families of their benefits – both before activation and afterwards, upon return. Board member Erickson brought up a concern that injured military members being treated at medical facilities are not receiving resultant VA medical services and authorized disability compensation when out-processed. Both Todd Dunlap and Joe Foster explained the standard process utilized by the Department of Defense and federal VA to ensure that not only are personnel who are being treated in military medical facilities are processed into the VA's health and benefits system, but also, all out-processing military members. Joe also stated when the division receives the DD Form 214s for Montana "home of record" veterans, a welcome letter and veterans services brochure are sent to the veteran to notify him/her of the state and federal veteran service resources, along with contact information.

Byron Erickson and Bruce Knutson discussed the Congressional initiatives regarding veteran employment issues. It was stated that Montana, being the nation's most rural state, does not benefit by the federal formula that allocates funds dedicated to hiring veteran employment specialists. Bruce said they have tried to change the formula, but are yet unsuccessful.

Todd Dunlap, VA enrollment coordinator, updated the attendees about the Veterans Choice program and discussed some of the new policies; the most significant being a change in policy regarding the "40-mile" rule. The non-VA healthcare issue was discussed. Notably, there is now a third-party administrator who manages a network of providers across the state of Montana. A significant issue/barrier to veteran healthcare continues to be that the veteran's health provider may not be listed as part of the Network. Todd described the process a veteran must follow to attain VA authorization for emergency care at non-VA and non-Network health service providers.

Next on the agenda was a briefing from Charles Gatlin on the Neural Injury Center (NIC) at the University of Montana. This is a new program which focuses on traumatic brain injury and other neural injuries' access, services and its potential application to the veteran population. Reaching the veteran community is especially important for the NIC because veterans comprise a significant portion of college students who have suffered unique brain injuries. Future briefings on the NIC will be provided as the program continues its development and application to the veteran community.

Chairman Willing reported on his attendance at the Disabled American Veterans state conference held in Anaconda. He stated that there were three primary areas of interest/concern:

- * The VA's Choice Act and how it was working.
- * The state veterans home proposed to be located in Butte.
- * Agent Orange and the need to start registering decedents of veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange. Joe Foster stated that division's veterans service program is preparing to conduct a statewide series of briefings – followed by benefit claims production – designed to account for the effects of Agent Orange on the genetic offspring of veterans exposed to the defoliant. The training for this program will take place in October.

Shawn Backbone invited the Board to attend the opening of the Crow Nation's veterans housing complex in September. With this housing project and the Nation's veterans cemetery soon to be constructed, the Crow Tribe is making great strides in its veteran services program.

Mr. Steve Garrison brought up two primary points to the Board for its information. One was in regards to the Helena-area's organization he co-chairs which sponsors various veteran support activities, to include job fairs and stand downs. He encouraged the division and federal VA to participate in these functions. The second point was in regards the availability of gravesite services at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery (MSVC). Joe Foster told Mr. Garrison that gravesite services were always (and are) authorized at the MSVC, contrary to Mr. Garrison's opening statement. Joe also stated that Chairman Willing was kept fully apprised of the issue – which was resolved in June. Mr. Garrison stated that he had two people's names who were told that they would not be allowed gravesite services; Chairman Willing asked Mr. Garrison to provide him the names and he would personally investigate.

Chairman Willing announced that the Orientation Brief regarding the Montana Veterans Affairs Division would begin at 1:30 p.m. in the same location as the Board meeting. Discussion then took place as to the next Board meeting's date and time, as it will be held teleconference. The next Board meeting will be held Jan. 21, 2016 at 2 p.m.

With no further business, the Board meeting was adjourned at 12:30 p.m.

Bill Willing, Chairman

Lee Ann Hall, Recorder