

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

- MEETING MINUTES -

December 4, 2013

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs meeting (via teleconference) was called to order by Chairwoman Sylvia Beals at 2 p.m., Dec. 4, 2013. Board members and Veterans Affairs Division staff in attendance were:

Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman
Peter Olson, Member
Gary Sorensen, Member
Bill Willing, Vice-Chair
Harry LaFriniere, Member
Shawn Backbone, Member
Sara Price, Member
Clancy Sivertsen, Member
Bryon Erickson, Member

David Boyd, Member
Joe Foster, Administrator
Bruce Knutson, Senator Tester
Michael Hagenlock, Member
Denny Lenoir, Rep. Daines
Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst

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 is now at full strength with 21 veteran service officers. Robin Kinnaman was recently hired in the Great Falls office.

Joe then discussed the veterans services financial impact and claims production reports. Both reports capture statistics on a monthly basis, and show the type claim products submitted to the federal VA; as well as the financial impact of our veterans service officers' work effort. The reports show that as of December 1, 2013, the division's financial impact is \$51,960,969; and 763 claim products have been submitted to the Fort Harrison VA Regional Office for processing.

Regarding the Veteran Cemetery Program, the number of burials – as of November 1, 2013 – are as follows.

Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Fort Harrison, near Helena) – 81
Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Missoula) – 50
Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Miles City) – 12

The \$1.74 million expansion and improvement construction project at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery is officially 40% complete. Joe had anticipated that the project would be further along; however, we ran into a problem with one of the sub-contractors responsible for the concrete work, impacting the foundations of the committal shelter and columbaria. The concrete issues are now resolved, but resulted in significant lost construction time during the favorable weather. Currently, all construction is ceased due to weather factors, and will resume late Winter/early Spring 2014. The project's completion is expected early Summer 2014.

In the mailed packets, Joe provided a letter from the VA which explained that the healthcare provided by the VA's healthcare system meets the standards mandated by the Affordable Healthcare Act. Bill Willing asked Joe if Tricare would now be billed to reimburse the VA. Joe did not know the answer, but encouraged this type of question be asked during the VA healthcare forum scheduled in conjunction with our next Board meeting.

Also provided in the packets is the "draft" poster planned for distribution to the division's veteran service offices, all VA facilities, veteran service organizations, and National Guard facilities. The poster details the availability and process associated with the newly authorized "VETERAN" on a Montana driver's license. The State of Montana's Motor Vehicle Division has committed to the program going "live" on January 2, 2014. The only project left to complete is the secure website that Veterans Affairs Division service officers will access to enter the applicant's name upon verifying his/her "veteran" status. Motor Vehicle Division staff will access this website to verify the applicant's "veteran" status. Key to this program is that only Montana Veterans Affairs Division staff is authorized to verify an applicant's "veteran" status, and only Veterans Affairs Division staff – outside of the Motor Vehicle Division – have access to the protected website.

Joe talked with boardmember/VA-Montana Healthcare System Chief of Staff Dr. Bonde about her and other pertinent VA-Montana staff professionals being present for the question and answer forum planned for the next Board meeting. Dr. Bonde was supportive. Joe is also going to request staff from the Fort Harrison Regional Office to provide the capability of answering questions about veteran benefits (in addition to those about VA medical services). Joe asked the Board members to email him the questions/issues well in advance. With the questions/issues, Joe will provide them to the VA staff so they have time to attain answers/explanations for the Board meeting. This will help ensure as productive and efficient a forum as possible.

Board member Backbone shared with the group that the Crow Code-Talkers were recognized in a Washington, D.C. ceremony for their critical war effort contributions during World War II.

With no additional questions or discussion from Board members or other attendees, the next Board meeting's date and location were discussed and determined. The next meeting will be held at Fort Harrison, April 16, 2014 at 2 p.m. With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 3 p.m.

Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman

Lee Ann Hall, Recorder