

# **MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

## **- MEETING MINUTES -**

February 20, 2013

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs was called to order by Chairwoman Sylvia Beals at 12-noon, February 20, 2013 in Helena (Fort Harrison). Board members and Montana Veterans Affairs Division staff in attendance were:

Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman	Harry LaFriniere, Member
Keith Heavyrunner, Vice-Chairman	Joe Foster, Administrator
Bernie Jacobs, Member	Bruce Knutson, Senator Tester
Gary Sorensen, Member	Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst
Byron Erickson, Member	David Boyd, Member
Bill Willing, Member	Johnathon Kenneway, Senator Baucus
Joe Tropila, Member	Sarah Price, Member
Peter Olson, Member	Jason Smith, Member
Col. Jeff Ireland (for Maj. Gen. Matthew Quinn)	
Dr. Trena Bonde, 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 so moved and seconded. The motion carried.

Joe Foster reported that the division has two vacant veterans service officer positions. These positions will remain vacant until we can recoup the cost of their retirement "payouts."

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' (VSO) work effort. The report showed that as of February 1, 2013, the division's VSO's financial impact is \$98,526,930. The handout also showed there were 1706 claim products produced as of February 1, 2013. Joe stated that the division's veteran service officers are responsible for over 70% of the claim products submitted to the Fort Harrison VA Regional Office.

Our three state veteran cemeteries had their triennial inspection by the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) last summer. All three passed, however, Miles City did have some groundskeeping deficiencies noted; all have now been resolved. The other two cemeteries would have qualified for NCA's award in appearance and operations, but since we were not on the BOSS cemetery computer system at the time of the inspections, we were considered ineligible. Joe stated that his expectation is that our cemeteries will qualify for this particular award next inspection cycle.

The \$506,000 construction project at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery in Missoula will be complete this spring, with only landscaping to be completed and niche covers installed. This project added a 960 niche columbaria complex.

Our \$1.7 million expansion and improvement construction project at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery at Fort Harrison is now in the design process. Among the cemetery improvements are a columbaria complex, committal shelter, public restroom, road paving, enhancement to the Information Center, and new main entrance features. An originally planned second cemetery entrance has been deleted due to the land the entrance road would traverse not belonging to the State of Montana. The federal state veterans cemetery grant cannot fund projects that are not on state land.

In the packets was a press release from the Billings Gazette announcing the new director of the VA Montana Health Care System. Christine Gregory will begin her duties March 4, 2013. Regarding appointments, Joe then informed the Board that he has been appointed to the National Cemetery Administration's advisory council.

Joe then referred to the 2012 Board of Veterans Affairs Biennial Report, which is statutorily required and provided each Board member. Distribution of this report is typically to the Governor's Office, Legislators and interested citizenry.

Dr. Bonde provided insight regarding a recently accomplished formal agreement between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the federal Indian Health Service. A key component being reimbursement processes for direct health care services. The Billings Indian Health Care has been selected to oversee this agreement in Montana, which will be initiated with a pilot program on the Blackfoot Tribal Nation.

Next discussed was the VA State Veterans Home Construction Grants FY 2013 Priority list. The Southwest Montana State Veterans Home in Butte is ranked 73rd on this list. Ms. Kelly Williams, Department of Public Health and Human Services, has been working this issue and does not think there will be funding available in 2013 – due to the priority list ranking. However, she anticipates that the grant may be attained in Fiscal Year 2014.

Deb Matteucci, of the State of Montana's Department of Public Health and Human Services, briefed the Board about the State of Montana's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) program; providing specifics regarding this program's mission to increase access to services for veterans, service members and their families. The Board took formal action to adopt this program under its statutory guidelines. Four Board members have been designated to its Special Committee, which will oversee and monitor the administration and operational conduct of the SAMHSA policy academy and task force. The Board members selected are Dr. Trena Bonde, Vice-Chair Keith Heavyrunner, Maj. Gen. Matthew Quinn, and Joe Foster – as the Board's Executive Council Secretary.

Joe gave a brief overview of the division's special revenue accounts history and status – as pertaining to both the cemetery and veterans services accounts. Our cemeteries operate solely from special revenue, and the veterans services program is approximately 40% special revenue funded. The statutory basis and history of the special revenue funding was discussed and Joe stated that the Legislature is considering enhancing the division's special revenue, as shown on the provided handout. With additional revenue, the veterans services program would work towards attaining three additional veterans service officer positions; prospectively placed in Belgrade, Kalispell and Miles City.

The 2013 Legislative Session was discussed, specifically in regards to bills relating to veteran issues. The Board was asked to monitor SB 275, which is the bill that will allow veterans to have the word "Veteran" printed on their driver's license.

Other bills that Joe briefed the Board were:

HB 49 – Exempt military pensions from state income tax.

HB 263 – Revise cigarette tax funding laws related to state veterans' homes.

SB 185 – Revise veterans public employment laws

SB 242 – Establish a Montana military service award for Montanans killed in line of duty.

Other legislative items of interest were discussion regarding the VFW's request for \$160,000 to support its veterans services program, and the DAV's request for \$200,000 – which would be used to purchase veteran transport vans.

After discussion, the next Board meeting will be conducted via teleconference and is scheduled for June 5, 2013 at 2 pm. With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 1:30 p.m.

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Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman

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Lee Ann Hall, Recorder