

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS - MEETING MINUTES -

July 22, 2010

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs was called to order by Chairman Don Kettner at 1 p.m., July 22, 2010 at the National Guard Readiness Center near Belgrade. Board members and Montana Veterans Affairs Division staff in attendance were:

Don Kettner, Chairman

Sylvia Beals, Member

Byron Erickson, Member

Keith Heavyrunner, Member

Charlie Crookshanks, Member

Bob Pavlovich, Member

Joe Tropilia, Member

Lesla Evers, Member

Jim English, Member

Mary Creech, Member

Larry Anderson, Rep. Rehberg

Lindsay Bell, Senator Baucus

Joe Foster, Administrator

Lee Ann Hall, Administrative Spec.

Teresa Bell, Member

Janine Mahn, Veteran Service Officer

Kelly Ackerman, Veteran Service Officer

Chairman Kettner opened the meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance and thanked everyone for being present. He 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 last meeting's Minutes was so moved and seconded. The motion carried.

For the division's operational update, Joe Foster first briefed the veterans services financial report. The handout shows that as of June 30, 2010, the division's veteran service officers' work effort brought in \$147,175,835 federal VA disbursements for veterans and family members. Also, to date, there have been 4635 claim products generated and submitted to the VA Regional Office at Fort Harrison by division veterans service officers. Of that quantity, 3052 were disability compensation claims - which is a 22% increase over last year. Both the financial and claims production reports represent the ending totals for Fiscal Year 2010.

Joe Foster discussed the 30-second public service announcement (PSA) informing the public of the division's available services. This PSA was sent out to 50 radio station managers throughout the state who operate approximately 120 radio stations. The PSA has seemingly been well received and is known to be currently airing in Helena, Bozeman, Kalispell and Great Falls. There was and is no charge for this advertisement and service.

The division's Biennial Report has been provided the Governor's Office and Legislative Services, making it available to incoming legislators and the general public. Joe Foster provided an overview of the report to the board.

Joe Foster addressed the Wolf Point veterans service office closure, which was effective June 30, 2010 and resultant of mandated budget reductions. The closure will save the division approximately \$17,000 and comply with Governor Schweitzer's initiative to reduce the quantity of leased state office space and leased state vehicles. The full-time position in Wolf Point has been transferred to the Miles City veterans service office and is planned to be filled at a half-time employment level. Of significant consideration in determining whether or not to close the Wolf Point service office was any negative impacts on veterans services in the northeastern area of the state. Detailed analysis of past and present Wolf Point and Miles City service offices' veterans services claim production, and comparisons with the Havre veterans service office – which has similar veteran demographics – revealed that closure of the Wolf Point office is not only cost effective, but also will undoubtedly result in improved veterans services to the area. This will be monitored very closely by the administrator and the veterans services program's supervisory leadership.

The only update for the cemetery program is that we will be requesting a federal grant of \$800,000 to construct new columbaria for the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery in Missoula. The existing columbarium is filling up much faster than projected. There are no other construction plans for the other two state veterans cemeteries.

The Gold Star Family vehicle license plate program is up and running. As of today, we have had 14 requests for the plate. These requests are processed solely by the administrator.

After learning about a potentially fraudulent scheme involving senior-aged veterans in Billings and Kalispell, Joe Foster contacted the Department of Justice with the findings. Reportedly, an insurance or financial products company representative will go into a senior citizens facility and market financial products to veterans – the “hook” being “qualifying” clients for VA pension and aid/attendance financial benefits. The danger to the veterans is that they must legally transfer their financial assets out of their ownership – essentially becoming extremely poor – to prospectively qualify for VA pension. VA pension is a minimal monthly benefit and requires very specific military experience and low income/asset levels. Aid and attendance, itself, is extremely difficult to qualify for; yet, the representatives are marketing it like it is relatively easy to attain. Significantly, however, before a person would apply for the benefit, he/she would have already transferred all assets. The Attorney General's Office, the Insurance and Securities Commissioner's Office, the Department of Public Health and Human Services and the Montana Veterans Affairs Division have joined forces to expose what is essentially considered a “scam.” Formal investigations of specific financial services/insurance companies and participating senior-citizen facilities have begun. It is believed that this issue has been caught pretty early in Montana.

Board member Pavlovich talked about the Southwest Montana Veterans Home's site selection committee. He asked for boardmember support in testifying before the Legislature to attain appropriated state funds to construct the facility in Butte. Joe advised the Board that the Board is an Executive Branch entity; and as such, should not testify for the veterans home since it is not in Governor Schweitzer's executive budget. However, board members can testify and work to solicit supporting testimony from veterans service organizations and others as private citizens.

Keith Heavyrunner talked about his trip to Washington, D.C. to perform at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. His Warrior Society represented the Blackfeet Nation and State of Montana. Keith had a video that will be viewed at the next Board meeting.

Teresa Bell announced that this will be her last Board meeting; Robin Korogi will represent the federal VA in the future. Teresa handed out a VA Montana Health Care System Fact Sheet and briefed the Board on the new Community Based Outreach Clinics, new VA construction projects, Veteran Homeless program, Rural Access initiatives – to include the new Telehealth Outreach clinics in Plentywood and Hamilton, and two newly proposed Vet Centers in Kalispell and Great Falls.

Board officer elections were held as Chairman Kettner's term is up. Vice-Chairman Bob Pavlovich was elected as the new Chairman; and Sylvia Beals was elected as the new Vice-Chairman.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 3 p.m. The next Board meeting is scheduled for November 18, 2010 at 1:00 p.m. in Helena.

Don Kettner, Chairman

Lee Ann Hall, Recorder