

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

- MEETING MINUTES -

June 5, 2013

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs was called to order by Chairwoman Sylvia Beals at 2 p.m., June 5, 2013 via teleconference. Board members, visitors and Montana Veterans Affairs Division staff in attendance were:

Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman	Harry LaFriniere, Member
Keith Heavyrunner, Vice-Chairman	Joe Foster, Administrator
Maj. Gen. Matthew Quinn	Bruce Knutson, Senator Tester
Gary Sorensen, Member	Denny Lenoir, Representative Daines
Byron Erickson, Member	Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst
Bill Willing, Member	Sarah Price, Member
Peter Olson, Member	Tim Peters, VFW
Carol Bergstad for (Dr. Trena Bonde)	Ed Croucher, VFW

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 have been announced and we expect to hire them both in July 2013. Our newest employee is Carolyn Collins, who is located in the Kalispell veterans service office. Carolyn came from the Kalispell VA clinic.

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 May 1, 2013, the division's VSO's financial impact is \$141,173,543. Last year's fiscal year-end was \$160,453,205, and we anticipate exceeding that level by year end. The handout also showed there were 2402 claim products produced. We anticipate fewer claim products generated this fiscal year due to two full-time service officers being vacant for a six-month period. Last year's total claim production was 3352.

Current number of interments at the state veterans cemeteries are:

Fort Harrison (Helena) – 156	Total last year – 154
Western Montana (Missoula) – 116	Total last year – 115
Eastern Montana (Miles City) – 42	Total last year – 29

These interment levels reflect a marked increase over FY 2012 levels, particularly in the Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery.

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.

Our \$1.74 million expansion and improvement construction project at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery at Fort Harrison has formally gone to bid, this process is estimated to take approximately three weeks. The winning company will be selected and construction should begin in August or September 2013.

Next on the agenda is the 2013 Legislative overview. Provided in the information packet is a list of bills impacting the Dept. of Military Affairs. Joe provided an explanation of the most pertinent, passed bills impacting veterans interests or services.

HB 351 – Creates a State of Montana veterans memorial recognizing Iraq/Afghanistan war veterans and fatalities. Also noted by Joe is an interest by Great Falls political leadership that its Veterans Memorial become recognized as a State of Montana memorial. State of Montana veterans memorials can only be accomplished through legislative action and the Governor's support.

HB 447 – Provides a \$1000 scholarship for Montana Purple Heart recipients attending classes at any member of the State University System. The Department of Military affairs was allocated \$50,000 for this program, which will be dispersed by the Veterans Affairs Division. Key criteria are the student has to have a year of previous enrollment at a university/college, however, it does not have to be the previous year. The student must have at least a 2.0 grade point average, and is enrolled in the upcoming semester. Student status can be either part or full-time.

HJ 30 – Mandates an interim study on state benefits/services for veterans. The intent is to better identify veteran needs, which should ultimately result in more pertinent and coordinated bills of veteran interest and benefit. This study will be conducted by Legislative staff.

SB 136 – Revises the veteran home loan program by increasing the amount of money available that the Montana Board of Housing sets aside to support veteran (first time) home loans – which are set at 1% over the very lowest possible rate. Originally there was \$15 million available for this program; this has been increased to \$30 million.

SB 242 – Established a Medal of Valor for Montana service men/women who have been killed in the conduct of war-time duty. It is retroactive to 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.

SB 275 – This act authorizes “Veteran” to be noted on a Montana driver's license. Joe has met with the Motor Vehicle Division to discuss how this can be accomplished; the key is that we make sure that veteran status is authenticated.

To this extent, the division's service officers are the key element. Ensuring a smooth process for both the veteran and involved state personnel is critical.

HB 556 – Creates a new Gold Star “Next of Kin” Family license plate, which authorizes specified family members this plate if a family member has passed away under any circumstance during military service. Currently, the Gold Star plate is available only for family members whose family member passed away during hostile action in recognized conflicts. Joe is working with the Motor Vehicle Division to design the plate and determine the administrative process.

Discussed was the legislated allocation of \$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 beginning in July 2013. Both allocations are “One Time Only,” meaning that any additional funding must be authorized in subsequent Legislative Sessions.

Ed Croucher, from the VFW, had questions about the existing disabled veteran license plate. Chairwoman Beals and Joe Foster provided information, based upon existing statutory qualification criteria.

Chairwoman Beals then recognized the outstanding service of outgoing Board member and current Vice-Chair Keith Heavyrunner. Many Board members spoke about Keith's positive impacts on Native veteran issues. Keith's term ends August 1, 2013.

With no additional questions or discussion from Board members or the public, the next Board meeting's date and location was discussed and determined. The next meeting will be held in Butte on August 28, 2013 at 2 p.m. With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 3:30 p.m.

Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman

Lee Ann Hall, Recorder