

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS - MEETING MINUTES -

May 21, 2015

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs meeting was called to order by Chairman Bill Willing at 10:05 a.m., May 21, 2015 at Fort Harrison (near Helena). Board members in attendance were:

Bill Willing, Chairman
David Boyd, Member
Brenda York, Member
Joren Underdahl, Member
Byron Erickson, Member
Casey Jourdan, Member
Shawn Backbone, Member
Zack Gamble, (Congressman
Zinke)

Denny Lenoir (Sen. Daines)
Clancy Sivertsen, Member
Maj. Gen. Matt Quinn, Member
Joe Foster, Administrator
Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst
Gary Sorensen, Member
Todd Dunlop, (federal VA)

Chairman Willing opened and thanked everyone for being present, and asked all in attendance to introduce themselves. Roll was taken (silently) by Recorder Lee Ann Hall. Chair 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.

Joe Foster talked about the Board member roster, and asked the members to make sure the list's contact information was up-to-date. He specifically discussed the list's "term ends" section, which show four voting Board members whose terms end this August. Joe is in contact with the Governor's Office's Boards and Commissions person regarding this, and all Board members who are requesting reappointment will be assisted through the process.

Per a handout, a new business will be starting up in Billings that will assist veterans interested in starting their own business. This office will service the Small Business Administration's Region VIII states, which includes Montana.

Per handouts, Joe talked about the VA direct home loan program for American Indians living on trust land. He also talked about the VA/Tribal Health/IHS Reimbursement Program. This seems to be progressing well in Montana. Joe did not believe, though, that all the reservations were yet participating in the reimbursement program.

Joe reported that the division is now at full staff with 21 veterans service officer positions. Also, we have two recent hires: Tim Ingraham in the Fort Harrison service office – VSO I, and Marcus Tillis the new VSO I in Belgrade. Dan Arnold, VSO II in Great Falls has been selected as the VFW's department service officer. Kelly Ackerman is the American Legion's department service officer.

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 March 1, 2015. The division's financial impact is \$112,271,976 and the claims production report showed 1728 claim products developed and submitted to the federal VA.

Board member Brenda York asked if we count the out-of-state student veterans claim products the division generates. Joe responded "yes," and explained that when claim products are produced for the non-resident veteran student, the student is advised to access veterans services when they move to another state.

Todd Dunlap asked Joe if he is able to compare the amount of claim work processed through our service officers versus other veterans service organizations. Joe said that the statistics format we use was developed specific to our needs and not used by other service organizations. The only way to generally compare different veterans service organizations' claim production is with a report the Veterans Benefits Administration periodically generates which shows the quantity of claim products the VA's Regional Office (RO) is processing, specific to the different veterans service organizations. The Montana Veterans Affairs Division is responsible for approximately 75% of the Montana-based claim products the RO processes.

Joe explained that the statistics reports are no longer processed every month. Rather, in an effort to reduce the administrative "overhead" for the veterans service offices, the reports are now submitted every four months. However, the same standard of accuracy is maintained.

As of May 1, 2015 (and since July 1, 2014), there were 95 burials at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Missoula), 163 burials at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Fort Harrison), and 32 burials at the Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Miles City).

June 5th is the Missing in America Project's interment ceremony for six unclaimed veteran (cremated) remains at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery at Fort Harrison.

We have a new groundskeeper at the Fort Harrison cemetery. With Nick Newlon's retirement, Shawn Wigert, a Gulf War combat veteran and member of the Montana Army National Guard, was hired.

The city of Bozeman is working to build a veterans cemetery, to be located at Sunset Memorial Gardens – a city cemetery. They have been working on this for about a year. It will take local funding to construct and operate the cemetery, which would be predominately columbaria based. Joe continues to work with the city and Gallatin County veterans service organizations on this project.

Joe was reappointed by VA Secretary McDonald to serve on the National Cemetery Administration's (NCA) Cemetery and Memorials Advisory Committee. This committee is chaired by the Under-Secretary of the NCA, and provides remarkable access into the NCA's initiatives and operational conduct. Joe is the only committee member who lives west of the Mississippi River.

Board member David Boyd told the group that the proposed Fort Peck veterans cemetery was voted down by the Tribal Council, so a construction grant from the federal VA will not be pursued.

Joe briefed the Board members on the 2015 Legislative Session's bills that had an impact on veterans, in general, and the Montana Veterans Affairs Division, specifically. Discussed were:

HB211 - Requires that the POW/MIA flag be routinely displayed at government facilities, along with the American and state flags. This law will take effect May 25, 2015 (Memorial Day).

HB460 - Recognizes the veterans memorial in Great Falls as a Montana state veterans memorial.

SB578 - Recognizes Northeast Montana Veterans Memorial Park as a Montana state veterans memorial. It is located at Fort Peck.

SB196 - Establishes a voluntary veterans hiring preference option for use in the private sector.

SB380 - Increases coal tax trust fund money available for State of Montana-backed veteran home loans from \$30 million to \$40 million.

SJ27 – This bill did not make it through the process before the Legislature adjourned. However, if the bill's intent is initiated during the off-session, an inventory will be taken of all the veteran memorials in the state. Veterans service organizations involvement will be key to this process, if it is initiated.

SR47 - Confirms Governor appointees to the Board of Veterans Affairs.

With the Governor's budget being approved, two additional veterans service officer full-time equivalents (FTE) were authorized the division. The first FTE will be placed in the Billings veterans service office, as soon as possible after July 1. The second FTE will be placed once more budget analysis and veteran demographic considerations have taken place.

Joe discussed the "town hall" meetings VA Secretary McDonald conducted while in Montana; and his participation on Secretary McDonald's panel during the public hearing held on Fort Harrison. Joe provided the Board the formal letter submitted to Secretary McDonald, which stated his recommendations for the Secretary's consideration.

Board member Shawn Backbone announced that the VA awarded a grant in the amount of \$1,234,810 for 100% allowable costs for construction of the Apsaalooke Veterans Cemetery in Crow Agency, Montana. The award letter was provided the Board.

Todd Dunlap, VA enrollment coordinator, updated the attendees about the Veterans Choice program and discussed some of the new policies. Afterwards, Todd fielded questions from Board members.

Board member Byron Erickson talked about future Board meetings having briefings from the Department of Labor regarding veteran employment and resources training; as well as, Congressional briefs on specific veteran-related issues. Joe asked Byron to send him a letter with the specifics, and he would coordinate with the applicable Board members for prospective briefings during the next Board meeting.

Gary White (American Legion) asked if we were getting enough money from the sale of "Veteran" license plates. Joe said "yes," and also explained how we receive our license plate money through the state's revenue system.

Board member David Boyd presented some problematic issues with specific hotels that are utilized when veterans are traveling to attend medical appointments at VA facilities. Todd Dunlap addressed his questions/issues and also provided David key contact information. David also requested that the VA get transportation vans for the reservations that don't currently have them.

The last discussion item was the next scheduled Board meeting and a planned "orientation brief" to be held afterwards, which would include briefings by Joe Foster, key Veterans Affairs Division personnel, key federal VA staff, and tours of the Montana State Veterans Cemetery and the Fort Harrison VA campus. The agreed-to meeting date was August 27 (Thursday) at Fort Harrison, and will begin at 10 a.m., the orientation brief to begin at 1 p.m.

With no further business, the Board meeting was adjourned at 11:30 a.m.

Bill Willing, Chairman

Lee Ann Hall, Recorder