

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

- MEETING MINUTES -

November 18, 2010

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs was called to order by Chairman Bob Pavlovich at 1 p.m., November 18, 2010 at the Regional Training Institute in Helena (Fort Harrison) with the following individuals present:

Bob Pavlovich, Chair	Harry LaFriniere, Member
Sylvia Beals, Vice-Chair	Bernard Jacobs, Member
Byron Erickson, Member	Lindsay Bell, Senator Baucus
Mary Creech, Member	Lloyd Jackson, Member
Charlie Crookshanks, Member	Bruce Knudson, Senator Tester
Jim Heffernan, Member	Maren Olsen, Representative Rehberg
Joe Tropila, Member	Joe Foster, Administrator
Lesla Evers, Member	Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst
Jim English, Member	

Chairman Pavlovich 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, a motion was made to approve and was seconded. The motion carried.

For the division's operational update, Joe Foster first briefed the veterans services financial impact report. The handout shows that as of October 31, 2010, the division's veteran service officers' work effort brought in \$43,833,078 federal VA disbursements for veterans and family members. Also, to date, there have been 1456 claim products generated and submitted to the VA Regional Office at Fort Harrison by division veterans service officers. Of that quantity, 1034 were disability compensation claims.

We have three Veteran Service Officers retiring December 31, 2010. Dorothy Jarosz, Sherry Stewart and Jane Gerald gave their notice last month. A stated concern of the employees is the reported proposed changes in the State Pension System. Dorothy works in the Billings veterans service office; both Sherry and Jane work in the Kalispell office – all are very good veterans service officers and will be significant losses to the division.

Joe announced that he has filled the Regional Veteran Service Officer position in Great Falls vacated by Valerie Martin, who retired Sept. 30, 2010. The new hire is Pat Kelly who has recently retired after 35 years with the federal VA, the last 18 of which was managing Veteran Service Centers. Pat's extensive management and veteran benefits claim experience will be invaluable to the division. His employment will begin January 18, 2011. Also, Michael (Andy) Haegele was hired in September to fill the Veterans Service Officer I position located in the division's Fort Harrison service office.

The division's Senior Veterans Service Officer, Lori Perkió, was selected to attend the National Veterans Law Internship Program at the American Legion Appeals and Special Claims Unit in Washington, D.C. This is a month-long program and is being funded by the American Legion. Her selection to this internship is unprecedented to the division, and reflects Lori's recognized superior level of competence and professionalism at both state and national levels. She will return to work at her Fort Harrison service office on Dec. 6.

Andrea Montee, Veterans Service Officer I in our Missoula office will be recognized during the Bobcat-Grizzly football game in Missoula. Andrea will be recognized for her outstanding military/veterans service as the "Volunteer of the Game." This recognition is sponsored by the Governor's Office.

So far this fiscal year, we have buried 129 veterans/spouses at the three veteran cemeteries. Broken down: 73 at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery at Fort Harrison, 38 at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery in Missoula, and 18 at the Eastern Montana State Veteran's Cemetery near Miles City.

There are no cemetery construction projects to report on at this time. Our request a federal grant to construct the interment addition at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery received a Priority Group 4 rating – which is very low – by the federal VA, and that project is on hold for the foreseeable future. We have submitted a grant proposal for building additional columbaria at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery in Missoula, but there is no word on how that request has fared, to date.

Joe Foster then discussed two Department of Veterans Affairs news items and the status of proposed legislation (national level) which the Board supported with letters to the Congressional delegation:

The Department of Veterans Affairs and Indian Health Service have signed a Memorandum of Understanding which is intended to benefit American Indian and Alaska Native veteran health services.

The VA-Montana Fort Harrison medical center has received significantly higher than average favorable customer satisfaction ratings by its consumers. The handout provided the VA-Montana and VISN 19 rating graphs.

The Veterans Traumatic Brain Injury Care Improvement Act of 2010 (Senate Bill 3035) requests a funded study to determine a recommended location for this type treatment facility in the Dakotas or Eastern Montana. If approved and ultimately constructed, this treatment center would be immensely beneficial to Montana's veteran population suffering from traumatic brain injury.

Joe Foster then discussed the AARP article (handout) which addressed Montana's efforts to warn veteran senior citizens about the financial product scam issue facing many senior Montana veterans residing in retirement/nursing/

assisted living homes. The article was distributed nationwide via the AARP's internet news service. This scam issue was covered in depth during the July 2010 Board meeting.

Available for review were handouts from the American Institute of Philanthropy and Charitywatch.org. This nonprofit charity watchdog and information resource evaluates and "grades" prominent veterans and military service/support organizations as to whether or not they do a good job in ensuring the donation goes to the marketed cause.

Board member Joe Tropila will be leaving the Legislature due to term limits, but will be remaining on the Board until a replacement is appointed. Provided to the Board was a copy of an article from "The Interim" (which is produced by the State of Montana Legislative Services Division), its October issue recognized Senator Tropila's outstanding service for Montana veterans.

Chairman Pavlovich briefed the Board on the proposed Southwest Montana State Veterans Home. He solicited Board member support – as individuals – to testify in support of attaining state funds to build the veterans home during the upcoming Legislative Session. Joe Foster reminded Board members that as members of an Executive Branch Board, they can only – as a Board member – testify in accordance with the Governor's budget or policy stances.

Board member Byron Erickson solicited Board member input regarding whether or not grant monies provided to veteran stand downs are being spent on homeless veterans – as opposed to non-veterans and/or veterans who are not homeless. Discussion revealed that stand downs significantly vary in their intent and/or operational control as to whether or not grant monies provided specifically for homeless veterans are utilized solely for homeless veterans. Byron stated that the Department of Labor, which provides the most prominent and generous homeless veteran grants in the state, is studying this issue.

Board member Bruce Knudson briefed the Board on the Veterans Opportunity Workshop Senator Jon Tester hosted in Great Falls. Approximately 150 people attended to hear and ask questions of various panel presentations which focused on programs and services benefiting veterans. The workshop was considered a success, and more will be planned in the future.

Board member Charlie Crookshanks briefed the Board on the Veterans Day ceremony in Missoula which commemorated the Korean War's 60th anniversary.

The next Board meeting was discussed, and it will be held May 19, 2011 at 1 p.m. via a teleconference format. With no further business, the meeting was adjourned by Chairman Pavlovich at 3 p.m.

Bob Pavlovich, Chairman

Lee Ann Hall, Recorder