

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

- MEETING MINUTES -

October 27, 2011

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs was called to order by Chairwoman Sylvia Beals at 2 p.m., October 27, 2011 in Great Falls, Montana. Board members and Montana Veterans Affairs Division staff in attendance were:

Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman	Harry LaFriniere, Member
Keith Heavyrunner, Vice-Chair	Joe Foster, Administrator
Bernie Jacobs, Member	Bruce Knutson, Senator Tester
Gary Sorensen, Member	Travis Monroe, Senator Baucus
State Sen. Larry Jent, Member	Evan Wilson, Representative Rehberg
Bill Willing, Member	Anita Old Bull Big Man, Member
Joe Tropila, Member	David Boyd, Member
Sarah Price, Member	Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst

Montana Veterans Affairs Division personnel also in attendance were: Rich Gaskins, Dan Arnold and Kari Brunken of the Great Falls veterans service office.

Chairwoman Beals opened the meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance and thanked everyone for being present. 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.

Chairwoman Beals stated that we have six new voting Board members present. They are: Gary Sorensen, Bill Willing, Joe Tropila, Sarah Price, Anita Old Bull Big Man and David Boyd. All introduced themselves and provided personal background information regarding their military and/or veteran experience.

For the operations report and for the benefit of the new Board members, Joe Foster explained one of the handouts; that being a map of Montana over-laid over a portion of the Eastern United States to show how big the Montana outreach area is for our veteran service officers. We have ten veteran service offices located throughout the state and they are responsible for outreach to at least 40 additional communities. The outreach schedule is evaluated often to insure proper coverage and service

Joe then explained the veterans services financial and claims production reports. Both reports are captured on a monthly basis, and show the type claim services we produce and the financial impact of our veterans service officers' (VSO) work effort. Last fiscal year, our operating budget was approximately \$1.4 million. This handout shows that as of June 30, 2011, the division's VSO's work effort brought in \$155,311,221 federal dollars for veterans/family members. Of note, our division is responsible for 70%+ of the claim products submitted to the VA for processing. Also, as of June 30, 2011, 3897 claim products were generated and submitted to the VA Regional Office at Fort Harrison by division veterans service officers. Of that quantity, 2820 were disability compensation claims.

Staffing the division's ten offices are 21 veteran service officers; all are filled, with the most recent being our office in Miles City.

The State Veterans Cemetery Program is actively working for a federal VA grant to construct new columbaria at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery in Missoula. While the federal VA has – in writing – committed the grant, we are in the final process of attaining the State of Montana's authority to begin the bidding process.

Joe reported serious staff personal security issues; we are currently looking into security options to enhance our service officers' safety and well-being.

Joe presented an informational article that he wrote concerning the deceitful, financially destructive, and very aggressive effort being marketed in many Montana retirement and assisted-living homes which promise elderly veteran clients VA pension and aid/attendance benefits. Anna Whiting-Sorrell and Bernie Jacobs are working on a poster and Public Service Announcements to get the word out. The state's Department of Public Health and Human Services has been extremely active with the division in combating this deplorable practice.

The next handout detailed the "Montana Veterans' Home Loan Mortgage Program." This program is designed to serve veterans or unmarried spouses of deceased veterans who are residents of Montana in the purchase of a first residence. There are no income limits for the borrower, however, there is a loan limit. Among the criteria is that the homebuyer must complete a homeowner education class, and must provide a minimum of \$2500 of personal funds towards the down payment or closing costs. The property must be located in Montana, must be for residential use, and must be the primary residence.

Board member Sorensen asked if it were true that 25% all Montana veterans are homeless. Joe stated that the number is closer to 12-16%, based upon previous homeless surveys conducted in the state. An expansive discussion regarding the challenges serving homeless veterans then took place.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 3:30 p.m. The next Board meeting is scheduled for April 19, 2012 at 2:00 p.m. and will be via teleconference. This type Board meeting format ensures compliance with the Governor's energy and budget conservation programs.

Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman

Lee Ann Hall, Recorder