

# **MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

## **- MEETING MINUTES -**

October 4, 2012

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs was called to order by Chairwoman Sylvia Beals at 2 p.m., October 4, 2012 in Helena (Fort Harrison). Board members and Montana Veterans Affairs Division staff in attendance were:

Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman	Harry LaFriniere, Member
Keith Heavyrunner, Vice-Chairman	Joe Foster, Administrator
Bernie Jacobs, Member	Bruce Knutson, Senator Tester
Gary Sorensen, Member	Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst
State Sen. Larry Jent, Member	David Boyd, Member
Bill Willing, Member	Johnathon Kenneway, Senator Baucus
Joe Tropila, Member	Sarah Price, Member
Peter Olson, Member	Scott Mitchell (for Byron Erickson)
Col. Jeff Ireland (for BG Matthew Quinn)	Mary Creech, Member
Dr. Trena Bonde, Member	Jocelyn Galt, Congressman Rehberg

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 is once again at 100% veterans service officer staffing. The latest hires are Andrea Montee and Jeff Alberta, both working out of the Fort Harrison veterans service office.

Joe then explained the veterans services financial impact and claims production reports. Both reports are captured on a monthly basis, and show the type claim services we produce; as well as the financial impact of our veterans service officers' (VSO) work effort. The report showed that as of June 30, 2012, the division's VSO's financial impact totaled \$160,453,205. The handout also showed there were 3352 claim products produced through June 30, 2012. Joe also stated that the division's 21 veteran service officers are responsible for 70% of the claim products submitted to the Fort Harrison VA Regional Office; which is also rated – based upon the VA's quality assessments – the top-rated of the VA's 57 Regional Offices.

Joe then related an example of the type service that veterans service officers provide. Roxanne Blanche', veteran service officer in Missoula, was helping out in the Fort Harrison veterans service office when she learned of a terminally ill veteran in the Fort Harrison hospital. This veteran had never filed a claim, even though he was a Viet Nam combat veteran and Purple Heart recipient. With his death expected within days, Roxanne was able to complete a disability claim product and the veteran received – the same day – a 100% disability rating. With this rating and the nature of the veteran's passing, his widow became eligible for Disability and Indemnity Compensation; which ensures her financial and healthcare well-being in the absence of her husband (who ultimately passed

away less than one week later). This is just one example of the type of work our service officers do, and also an example of how the VA's Fort Harrison Regional Office answers the call when this type circumstance exists.

The State Veterans Cemetery Program reports that in FY12 there were a total of 292 interments in the three state veterans cemeteries. Also reported was authorization for a \$506,000 federal VA grant which will construct eight columbaria at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery – adding 920 niches. Construction began October 3 and should be complete by mid-December 2012.

Early October we received notification from the VA cemetery grants program that they intend to fund our \$1.7 million expansion and improvement project at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery. We have been on the program's waiting list for the past seven years. Largely based upon the highly positive relationship the division has with the grant program and the division's ability to immediately act upon a grant opportunity, the VA has committed to fund the grant this federal fiscal year. Among the cemetery improvements are a columbarium complex, committal shelter, public restroom, additional cemetery entrance/exit road, road paving, and enhancement to the Information Center.

Our cemetery program has started publicizing the memorial headstone opportunity. Any qualified veteran/veteran's spouse is eligible for a memorial headstone at any of our three state veteran cemeteries. Joe sent this information out to the Montana Funeral Directors, DAV, VFW and American Legion.

Joe talked about a report that provides a snapshot of pertinent data that portrays the effectiveness of the State of Montana's veterans' service program; specifically as related to rural veterans services. The report, which compares Montana both nationally and regionally, reveals a very efficient and effective rural outreach program.

Tim Peters, Quartermaster for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, briefed the Board on the VFW's recently produced license plate and asked the Board for their support to make the plate disabled veteran capable, just as the division's "Veteran" plates are. After much discussion, the Board voted not to support the request. The predominate reasons being that the VFW license plate was no different than the other 161 specialty license plates in that it was available to non-veterans and that it competes with the division's "Veteran" and "Patriot" license plates, which fund the cemetery and veterans services program (respectively).

Rick Norine, Bureau Chief with DPHHS Senior and Long Term Care Division, gave an update on the Southwest Montana State Veterans Home construction project. This past summer, DPHHS submitted a letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs requesting that the project be considered for the 2013 construction funding period. Mr. Norine also talked about the home being designed with the new cottage concept. Board member Dr. Trena Bonde asked Mr. Norine to ensure that VA Montana is involved in the process to ensure that a pharmacy is incorporated into the facility.

Chairwoman Beals asked Mr. Norine if his department is ready for the expected legislative activity which may privatize the Montana State Veterans Home in Columbia Falls. He assured her that the department was ready and spoke of the audit recently published regarding the issue.

Joe provided the Board information regarding the National Veterans Burial Ground to be located in Laurel, replacing the current Yellowstone County Veterans Cemetery. Bruce Knutson provided additional information regarding the expected timeframe when the transformation will take place. The process, which will transfer approximately seven acres of cemetery property to the federal VA, is expected in the next few months.

Next on the agenda is the 2013 Legislative Session. Joe talked about the American Legion's intent for legislation which would authorize "Veteran" to be placed on a Montana driver's license. Sen. Jent stated interest in sponsoring such a Bill, and recommended that the concept be presented to the State Administration and Veterans Affairs Interim Committee for possible committee sponsorship (e.g., a "committee bill"). Joe and Gary White (American Legion) responded to Sen. Jent that they would provide him the information.

Joe gave the Board a heads up that there may be legislation regarding the Gold Star Family license plate; specifically that a Gallatin County resident has stated that she will attempt to have the plate's criteria changed to allow non-combat related deaths be eligible for the plate. Joe provided background information as to the plate's eligibility criteria and asked the Board for guidance as to his testimony if the Bill is generated. After much discussion, a motion was made and passed to oppose the Bill.

Mike Clouse, Legislative Chair for the DAV, talked about the DAV Volunteer Transportation Network's (VTN) intent to request funding from the Legislature for \$200,000. This biennial authorization would be used for the purchase of veterans' transport vehicles and volunteer driver training. After discussion, a motion was made and passed to support this initiative.

Joe asked Tim Peters (VFW) if the organization still intended to request \$80,000 from the State Legislature to help fund its veterans services program. Tim answered "yes." Joe informed the Board that if this Bill does emerge, his intent is to testify that the division has the capability to serve VFW veterans who need claim services. The VFW in Montana has been informed that its national grant which funds its veterans service program is to be discontinued in mid-2013.

Joe provided the Board an update on the "pension poaching" scam, focusing on the division's involvement with the U.S. Senate's Special Committee on Aging, which specifically addressed this issue in June 2012. The result of the hearing is legislation which is expected to create criminal penalties for scammers, and require the federal VA to more actively deal with the issue. The division played a major role in providing the key witness who testified about her father being scammed, and Joe Foster provided – as requested by the Committee – a Statement of Record (in lieu of personal testimony).

Col. Jeff Ireland and Keith Heavyrunner gave an update on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which is a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It is charged with improving the quality and availability of prevention, treatment, and rehabilitative services in order to reduce illness, death, disability, and cost to society resulting from substance abuse and mental illnesses. Partnership with state and federal is key, to include the National Guard. The State of Montana is working to establish a system which will efficiently provide accurate and comprehensive information to its veteran, military and family members regarding services which impact their lives, e.g., healthcare, behavior counseling, employment and education.

Joe provided information and stated concerns regarding the federal VA's Benefit Administration's transformation which negatively impacts veteran claim processing, as well as the continuing problem with the centralized system whereby the VA processes pension claim products. Dr. Bonde stated that she understood that the transformation effort had been suspended. (Note: subsequent inquiry found that the transformation process is ongoing, though the VA suspended in its expansion into other VA Regional Offices (RO) – the Fort Harrison RO is part of the pilot program.)

Joe then informed the Board of an "all-terrain" wheelchair that is offered for veterans who have lost the use of their legs. A demonstration (at a later date) of this wheelchair will take place, based upon stated interest by the veterans service organizations.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 4:30 p.m. The next Board meeting is scheduled for February 20, 2013 at noon in Helena (Fort Harrison).

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Sylvia Beals, Chairwoman

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Lee Ann Hall, Recorder