

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS - MEETING MINUTES -

December 3, 2014

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs meeting (via teleconference) was called to order by Chairman Bill Willing at 2 p.m., Dec. 3, 2014. Board members in attendance were:

Bill Willing, Chairman
Peter Olson, Vice-Chair
Dan Bernhardt, Member
Ron Milam, Member
Byron Erickson, Member
Shawn Backbone, Member
Casey Jourdan, Member
Dick Juvik, Member
Trena Bonde, Member
Zack Gamble, (Congressman-elect
Zinke)

David Boyd, Member
Rep. Kathy Swanson, Member
Denny Lenoir (Rep. Daines)
Brenda York, Member
Jason Smith, Member
Bruce Knutson (Sen. Tester)
Maj. Gen. Matt Quinn, Member
Joren Underdahl, Member
Joe Foster, Administrator
Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst

Chairman Willing opened and thanked everyone for being present, and roll call was taken. The new Board members introduced were: Ron Milam, Bryon Erickson, Casey Jourdan, Dick Juvik, Brenda York, Joren Underdahl and State Representative Kathy Swanson. He then asked if there were any additions/deletions to last meeting's Minutes. For clarification, David Boyd mentioned that the Minutes to the last meeting stated a "90-day" backlog for medical services at the VA clinic in Glasgow, when it should have said "60 days." The motion to approve with changes was so moved and seconded. The motion carried.

Joe Foster reported that the division has 20 of the 21 veterans service officer positions filled. The announcement for the vacant Fort Harrison VSO I position closed the first of December. We also have two new hires: Kate Hahn is the new Missoula VSO I, and Ryan Keeler is the new VSO II in Kalispell.

Joe then explained the veteran 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' work effort. These reports provided data as of the end of October. The division's financial impact to date is \$51,661,229, and the claims production report showed 884 claim products developed and submitted to the federal VA.

As of November 1, 2014, there were 45 burials at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Missoula), 83 burials at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Fort Harrison), and 16 burials at the Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Miles City).

Joe announced that the VFW has now merged their veterans service program into the Montana Veterans Affairs Division (MVAD), as requested by VFW

leadership. The VFW did a great job getting the word out and there were no problems with the transition.

Joe then informed the Board of a veterans services information sheet that Ron Milam has developed and provided the area veterans service organization posts and chapters. It is a very informative product and its format is available for any Board members who would like to do the same in their respective areas.

Joe updated everyone on the State Administration and Veterans Affairs Interim Committee hearings that have been held; stating they have been working diligently for the past six months on potential ways that veterans can be better served. One of our new Board members, Representative Kathy Swanson, is on this committee. The committee intends to send a letter to the 2015 Legislative Session's Senate Finance and House Appropriations Committees' Chairs recommending that additional FTEs be authorized the division and that a prospective location for a new veterans service office could be in Glasgow.

At this time, Joe is not aware of any veteran-related issue or bills to be brought before the 2015 Legislative Session, but it is early. Joe explained that the Board of Veterans Affairs is an Executive Branch board and the Veterans Affairs Division is an Executive Branch agency. The Governor's budget, which includes the division's budget, is what we can legitimately testify for or be an informational witness about. Joe will be sending Board members a step-by-step approach to access information on your computer about any veteran-related bills, to include hearing dates, etc. During the Session, Joe and the other veterans service organizations' representatives will meet weekly to discuss the upcoming hearings and bills, as well as prospective involvements in the hearings.

Dr. Trena Bonde introduced Todd Dunlop, who gave a briefing on the "Veterans Choice" program. Veterans will, under certain conditions, have the option to receive non-VA health care rather than waiting for a VA appointment or traveling to a VA facility. The new program began November 2014 and will cover non-VA care for eligible Veterans enrolled in the VA healthcare system. To be eligible, typically, you must have been told by a VA doctor that your appointment is 30 days out or that your current residence is more than 40 miles from the closest VA facility. Todd said it is rare that a veteran would have to wait 30 days for a VA appointment. Dr. Bonde said that if your appointment is over 30 days, then you can call HealthNet and get authorization for care in your community. The number to HealthNet is 866-606-8198. Prior authorization for care under the Choice program is mandatory and critical. The veteran will still need to use the VA for their prescriptions. All veterans enrolled in the VA's healthcare system will receive letters detailing the Choice program and HealthNet contact information.

Board member Sorensen asked about usage and upkeep of the Liberty House facility. Dr. Bonde and Mr. Dunlop provided an overview and stated that the facility is well maintained and adequately funded. A recent policy change regarding the facility is that it can now be used by veterans who have medical appointments at Fort Harrison which require overnight stay.

Joe recognized Board member David Boyd for asking questions about the VA's travel policy and the "Veterans Choice" program, which yielded very pertinent and updated information to everyone's benefit. Joe stated that if any Board members ever have any questions to please bring them to Joe's attention so he can add it to the agenda.

Board member Pete Olson asked if there was any new information on the veterans cemetery prospectively to be located on the Fort Peck Reservation. Joe stated that no solid information is known at this time, but expects some soon. At this time, though, Joe does not believe that a VA construction grant has been authorized.

Board member Shawn Backbone asked what the process is to get a veteran transported to Fort Harrison. Todd Dunlop said to call Mary Ellen Thompson at (406) 447-7996, as she is the VA's transport coordinator.

After discussion, the next Board meeting is scheduled for April 15, 2015 at Fort Harrison. The Board meeting will be held at 10 a.m., and then at 1 p.m. the division will host an information seminar for Board members. The seminar will cover division programs, relationships with the federal VA and veterans service organizations, and a tour of the Montana State Veterans Cemetery and the VA portion of Fort Harrison.

Bill Willing, Chairman

Lee Ann Hall, Recorder