

# **MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

## **- MEETING MINUTES -**

January 25, 2018

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs meeting was called to order by Chairman Bill Willing at 2 p.m., January 25, 2018 via teleconference (TelCon). Board members and agency staff in attendance were:

Bill Willing, Chairman  
Pete Olson, Vice-Chairman  
Gary Sorensen, Member  
David Boyd, Member  
Ron Milam, Member  
Joren Underdahl, Member  
Shawn Backbone, Member  
Mike Waters, Congressman Gianforte

Thomas Finch, Member  
Kelly Ackerman, SVSO-MVAD  
Joe Foster, Administrator  
Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst  
Gary White, American Legion  
Larry Dobb, American Legion  
Richard Klose, American Legion  
Jason Smith, Member

Chairman Willing opened and thanked everyone for being present. He then asked if there were any additions/deletions to last meeting's Minutes. With one misspelled name in the Minutes corrected, a motion to approve was made and seconded. The motion carried.

Joe Foster stated that the division staff is at 100% personnel fill. However, Sue Foster, Lewistown, will be retiring March 1, 2018. We will then close the Lewistown veterans service office, resultant of the mandated budget reduction. Outreach services supporting the Lewistown area will be conducted by the Great Falls, Belgrade and Billings offices. We will go from 10 veteran service offices to 9; and 23 veteran service officers to 22. Joe and Kelly Ackerman are scheduled to meet with the Fort Harrison VA-Montana Deputy Director to work on establishing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between VA-Montana and the MT Veterans Affairs Division which would allow division usage of the VA's telemedicine sites for outreach operations; and further refine the relationship in Miles City where the division's veterans service office is located in the VA's Miles City facility.

Joe then explained the veteran services financial impact and claims production reports, comprised of statistics reporting veterans service office claims production and the financial impact of their work effort. As of November 1, 2017, the financial impact totaled \$63,538,333, and the claims production datasheet lists 909 claim products developed and submitted to the federal VA. The data is consistent with last fiscal year's November's statistics.

As of January 2018, there were 58 burials at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Missoula), 100 burials at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Fort Harrison), and 11 burials at the Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Miles City).

Our cemetery staff is at 100% personnel fill. This summer, we will not be able to fill the part-time cemetery groundskeepers authorized at the Montana and Western Montana State Veterans Cemeteries – due to the budget cuts.

During the previous Board meeting, the earthen “spoils” shelter facility planned at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery in Missoula was discussed – predominately in context to not being able to afford constructing the facility. Joe Foster and Kelly Ackerman met with the MT Air National Guard’s RED HORSE construction unit’s leadership to gauge interest in this project being approved as an Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) project for the military unit. The potential mission was very well received, and planning will continue. The potential 2-3 year project approval and training plan timeframes meld well with the cemetery’s development plans and prospectively more positive budget status.

Joe and Kelly discussed the rollout and implementation of the newly authorized “Veteran” ID card – as offered by the federal VA. As reported, there are significant access issues resultant of the required computer-only process to request the ID card. This penalizes Veterans who, due to age, rural location, and/or computer literacy status cannot access and/or utilize the digital-only format and process. Joe asked board-member David Boyd (who brought the issue forward) to email him (Joe) the specifics. Once attained, Mike Waters (Congressman Gianforte) will pursue the issue at federal level.

Joe discussed with the Board the reduction to the MVAD budget. The division was required to cut 10% of General Fund budget for each of the next two fiscal years – this equates to approx. \$118,000 per year. By March 1, 2018, two full-time equivalents (FTEs) will be unfilled in the division. These include the administrative assistant and the Lewistown veterans service officer positions. The Lewistown veterans service office lease will have been terminated and two leased state of Montana vehicles will have been turned in. We expect to be fully fiscally stable by the end of next fiscal year. Retiring effective Feb. 1 is June Rychalski (admin. asst. – Fort Harrison); retiring effective Mar. 1 is Sue Foster (veterans service officer – Lewistown); retiring effective July 21 is Lee Ann Hall (budget analyst – Fort Harrison); and retiring effective Oct. 13 is Joe Foster (administrator – Fort Harrison).

Joe reported that the division’s budget shortfalls will be accomplished, with no necessitated reduction-in-force action. Significantly, the American Legion, Dept. of Montana, has donated \$5000 to fund the agency’s outreach program, with another \$5000 to be donated in March (\$10,000 total). This unprecedented action generates the budget necessary to retain outreach functions/services. The VFW is requesting funds from its national office to donation to the division – also, specifically for the purpose of funding outreach operations.

Joe Foster and Kelly Ackerman recently spoke at the State Administration and Veterans Affairs (SAVA) Interim Committee hearing. This committee oversees the division in between Legislative sessions and is highly interested in quality claim products and processes. Speaking to the committee in a panel context were Joe Foster, Kelly Ackerman, Koryn Van Eimeren (federal VA), Art Widhalm (past-commander – VFW), and George Blackard (American Legion State Council member). Ron Milam, Board of Veterans Affairs, submitted a letter for the official record. All panel members and public speakers clearly expressed support for and recognition of the division’s veterans service program and its staffmembers.

Discussion then took place as to the next Board meeting. It was determined that the next Board meeting will be held via TelCon, May 24, 2018 at 2 p.m.

With no further business, the Board meeting was adjourned at 2:45 p.m.

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Bill Willing, Chairman

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Lee Ann Hall, Recorder