

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

- MEETING MINUTES -

May 24, 2018

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs meeting was called to order by Chairman Bill Willing at 2 p.m., May 24, 2018 via teleconference (TelCon). Board members and agency staff in attendance were:

Bill Willing, Chairman
Pete Olson, Vice-Chairman
Dick Juvik, Member
David Boyd, Member
Clancy Sivertsen, Member
Joren Underdahl, Member
Thomas Finch, Member
Mike Waters, Congressman Gianforte

Casey Jourdan, Member
Kelly Ackerman, SVSO-MVAD
Joe Foster, Administrator
Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst
Gary White, American Legion
Denny Lenoir, Sen Daines
Bruce Knutson, Sen. Tester

Chairman Willing opened and thanked everyone for being present. He then asked if there were any additions/deletions to last meeting's Minutes. A motion to approve was made and seconded. The motion carried.

For the division update, Joe explained the new outreach schedule with the closing of the Lewistown office due to the budget cuts. Belgrade, Great Falls and Billings will be covering the Lewistown outreach areas.

We are moving our Miles City veterans benefits office from the federal VA's clinic to the Montana National Guard's Readiness Center, which is located about a mile outside town. The move should be completed by June 1, 2018. Regarding our Billings veterans service office, which shares occupancy with the VA's Billings Vet Center, the facility is undergoing construction and we will be provided new office space.

Currently two positions are announced for fill – Veterans Service Officer (VSO) in Missoula; and Budget Analyst position, vice Lee Ann Hall, in the division's administrative office on Fort Harrison. Once the Missoula VSO is hired, we will be at the division's realistic 100% VSO strength – the Lewistown position will not be filled in the foreseeable future. Chairman Willing thanked Ms. Hall for her 29 years of service to the division and our veterans.

Kelly Ackerman and Joe met with VA-MT's Deputy Director to initiate a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between VA-Montana and the Division. The MOU would allow division usage of the VA's statewide network of clinic (or specific ones) space and telecommunication capabilities for outreach operations.

Joe 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 March 1, 2018, the financial impact totaled \$134,280,419; along with 2011 benefit claim products

submitted to the federal VA for processing. Both totals are consistent with this time last fiscal year.

As of May 2018, there were 87 burials at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Missoula), 148 burials at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Fort Harrison), and 20 burials at the Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Miles City).

Last Board meeting we discussed a coordination meeting with the Montana Air National Guard's Red Horse construction unit. Joe Foster and Kelly Ackerman met with the unit's commander to determine if an Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) project supporting the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery is feasible. This is still being pursued, with the prospective addition of the Montana Army National Guard's construction company located in Miles City. Of interest is building a "spoils" shelter facility. If we buy the materials, the approval for this type project resides at state of Montana level (Office of The Adjutant General).

Our cemetery staff is at 100% personnel fill. We will hire two short-term (90 day) groundskeepers for the cemeteries in Helena and Missoula. They will be temporary state employees but are not eligible for any benefits – except for workman's compensation coverage.

We were notified that the VA's National Cemetery Administration will be inspecting the Montana State Veterans Cemetery at Fort Harrison Cemetery in June 2018. Missoula's and Miles City's cemeteries will be inspected in 2019.

For the division budget update, Joe explained to the Board that currently our budget reduction plan is working as envisioned. To do so, we left two full-time equivalents (FTE) vacant, closed one office, turned in two leased vehicles and delayed hiring the Missoula VSO position (vacant since February). We also replaced one in-person Board meeting per year with a TelCon (now two per year). With these cuts, Joe believes we will be able to continue our current level of superior service. Joe recognized the American Legion for providing our agency \$10,000 to support our veterans services outreach program. Specifically, we were able to maintain leases on five field offices' state of Montana vehicles – which are used for outreach.

Joe briefed the Board on the planned Southwestern Montana State Veterans Home project in Butte. This project was #56 on the VA's latest priority 1 listing, with only the top 10 or so projects typically being (annually) funded. Congress passed authorization for \$700 million into the VA's state home grant program – thus including the Butte project. Joren Underdahl reported that the Dept. of Public Health and Human Services is working with the architect to get the design plans up to 90% completion. The title transfer for the land is in process. The request-for-proposal to construct the facility should be initiated in January 2019, with construction expected to start by March that same year.

Joe updated the Board on the "Veteran ID card" issue. He thanked David Boyd for his continued work on the issue. To date, there is no resolution to the two primary problems – no "hard-copy" capability to submit the request (strictly done

by computer), and the questionable methodology the VA is using in determining veteran status – which includes accessing personal finance records in one of the three national credit organizations. Senator Tester wrote a letter to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs stating the process was a challenge for rural veterans who lack ready access to or knowledge of computer technology. Bruce Knutson said they received a reply from the VA, but it didn't answer any of their question or address the concerns. June 13, 2018, the Senate committee staff will meet with VA officials and press for answers and resolutions.

Chairman Willing discussed the Board member vacancies arising in August. He requested that anyone who wants reappointment to coordinate with Chairman Willing, Vice-Chair Olson, or Joe Foster. During 2018 and 2019, nine voting Board members (of 11) will be up for reappointment or will be termed out.

Board member David Boyd brought up the issue of cutting back of pain medications though the VA, and his concern that those affected could turn to alcohol, drugs or suicide. He suggested that this kind of data (re: correlation between opioid reduction, substance abuse and suicide) should be attained. Joe answered that this type of data is not available at this time, and ultimately relies upon county-level death certificate processes – which do not generate this depth of data. Chairman Willing talked about opioid addiction, and of the VA's rolling-back of pain medication prescriptions. Bruce Knutson added that pain management clinics are being established which will hopefully deal with the issue more effectively than is the current case.

Joren Underdahl said the local American Legion and Vietnam Veterans of America posts are funding a new flag pole at the Montana State Veterans Home (Columbia Falls) cemetery. It is expected to be up in time for Memorial Day.

Bruce Knutson talked about Senator Tester's Landmark VA Reform Bill to scrap the Choice Program, Streamline Community Care and Improve VA Health Care.

Joe said that as of June 30, 2018, the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH) will no longer have Veteran Service Offices, nation-wide – based upon written notice from the national MOPH headquarters. Kelly Ackerman stated that our VSOs are prepared to serve any veterans "displaced" by this change – including appeals representation.

Discussion took place as to the next Board meeting. It was determined that the next Board meeting will be held at Fort Harrison (near Helena), September 13, 2018 at 2 p.m.

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