

# **MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

## **- MEETING MINUTES -**

September 22, 2016

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs meeting was called to order by Vice-Chair Peter Olson at 2 p.m., September 22, 2016 at the VFW Post in Great Falls, Montana. Board members and agency staff in attendance were:

Pete Olson, Vice-Chairman  
Gary Sorenson, Member  
Bryon Erickson, Member  
Ron Milam, Member  
Casey Jourdan, Member  
Clancy Sivertsen, Member  
Brenda York, Member

MG Matthew Quinn, Member  
Joe Foster, Administrator  
Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst  
Dick Juvik, Member  
Bruce Knutson, Sen. Tester  
Denny Lenoir, Sen Daines  
Joren Underdahl, Member

Guests in attendance (who signed in) were:

Al Rice-Veteran of Foreign Wars  
Jack Hawley-Veteran of Foreign Wars  
Gary White-American Legion  
Dan Arnold- Montana Veterans Affairs Division  
Todd Dunlap – VA-MT Healthcare System

Vice-Chair Olson opened and thanked everyone for being present, and asked all in attendance to introduce themselves. He then asked if there were any additions/deletions to last meeting's Minutes. With no changes to the Minutes, a motion to approve was made and was seconded. The motion carried. Vice-Chair Olson also thanked State Commander Jack Hawley and the VFW for hosting the Board meeting.

Recognition was given to Peter Olson, Denny Lenoir, Zach Gambill and Bruce Knutson for their recent reappointment to the Board.

Joe Foster stated that the division staff is now 100% filled with the addition of three new Veteran Service Officer hiring's in Billings, Missoula and Butte.

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 our veterans service officers' work effort. These reports provided data as of July 1, 2016. The financial impact totaled \$177,153,396 for the fiscal year. This total exceeded last year's total by approximately \$10 million. The claims production report showed that 3022 veteran/veteran family member claim products were developed and submitted to the federal VA, exceeding last year's production by 209 claim products. Joe also introduced Dan Arnold, who is the lead veteran service officer in the Great Falls office and also the department service officer for the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

As of June 30, 2016, there were 155 burials at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Missoula), 165 burials at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Fort Harrison), and 49 burials at the Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Miles City). New projects at the cemeteries include:

- Landscape project at the Memorial Plaza in Miles City.
- Construction of a shelter facility to cover the screened dirt and spoils in Missoula.
- Replacement of the stone on the Memorial Circle Wall at Fort Harrison, which will then match the recently constructed new structures at the cemetery.
- Re-painting the maintenance building Fort Harrison.

In the packets is a copy of the MVAD 2016 Biennial Report which is required every two years and provided to the Governor's Office, Legislators and the general public.

The VA has proposed amending its accreditation regulations to accommodate Tribal Nations' veterans service programs. While policies and procedures are being developed to accredit Tribal Nation veteran service agencies, there is no financial assistance or other resources that accompany the initiative.

The VA will be moving from the facility that currently houses its clinic and nursing home in Miles City. Joe Foster has stressed to Fort Harrison VA leadership that our Miles City veterans service office continue to be located with the medical facility, wherever it is ultimately located. The Division currently has offices in three federal VA facilities – Miles City, Billings (Vet Center) and Fort Harrison (Regional Office). The Division is also interested in teaming with the VA as it plans its upcoming medical clinic move in Great Falls. Based upon input from VA-Montana leadership, the Veterans Affairs Division is a welcome facility tenet and will be considered in all prospective facility moves. The Division's ten veterans service offices – along with the three located in VA facilities – are located in three Montana National Guard facilities (Belgrade, Butte, Kalispell), three leased office spaces (Great Falls, Havre, Lewistown) and one co-located with the Division's Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery operations building (Missoula).

Todd Dunlap talked about the new *MyVA Access* program which strives to assist veterans in having more control over their health care services. As envisioned by the federal VA, the key measure of success for *MyVA Access* is to achieve same day, clinically appropriate primary care medical services for veterans. Full implementation of this program in Montana is expected by the end of 2016.

Next on the Board's agenda was a briefing by state veterans service organizations regarding issues or initiatives of Legislative interest – both the Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion testified. Among the interests were: VFW – a bill proposing changes to existing law which tax veterans service organization facilities; AL – a bill which will provide an income tax incentive for military retirees to locate in Montana, and a request that the Montana Veterans Affairs Division be authorized three additional veterans service officers. Joe informed the Board of two bills that the Division would be monitoring – one which

creates the Honor and Remember Medallion, and the other is in regards to a legislator's stated intent to divert revenue from the veterans cemetery program to fund a veterans suicide program – this prospective effort would be opposed. By late November, a "Legislation-Watch" committee will be regularly convened whereby the service organizations and the Division will monitor and discuss legislation that is expected or actually generated.

Board member Brenda York, the director of the MSU Veterans Center and Veterans Services program provided a briefing regarding the program's operations. Joe provided a U.S. News magazine article which recognized Montana State University's veterans services program as one of the nation's very best. Brenda's office also assists veterans with GI Bill processing, and other issues such as housing and employment.

Next on the agenda was the Chair/Vice Chair elections. Peter Olson was unanimously "moved and seconded" to a second tour as the Board's Vice-Chair (no-one ran against him), and Chairman Bill Willing was elected to a second tour as the Board's Chairman – Board member David Boyd also had filed for this position. A ballot vote was conducted.

Discussion then took place as to the next Board meeting's date and time. It was determined that the next Board meeting will be via TELECOM and held on Thursday, March 2, 2017 at 2 p.m.

With no further business, the Board meeting was adjourned at 3:30 p.m.

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Bill Willing, Chairman

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Lee Ann Hall, Recorder