

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

-MEETING MINUTES-

August 11, 2021

At 2:00 p.m. August 11, 2021, Chairman Clancy Sivertsen called the meeting for the Montana Veterans' Affairs Board to order. The members all stand to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Chairman Sivertsen then asks Montana Veteran Affairs Division administrator, Kelly Ackerman, to call roll. Board member and agency staff present were:

Clancy Sivertsen- Chairman

Mike Stone- Vice-Chairman

Barb Skelton- Member

Richard Klose- Member

Ryan Luchau- Member

Klayton Carroll- Member

Jennifer Dalrymple- Member

Dean Rehbein- Member

Charlotte Snyder- Member

Duane Cunningham- Member

Thomas Finch- DLI Representative

MG John P. Hronek- Non-voting Member

Joren Underdahl- Non-voting Member

Anson Nygaard- Sen. Tester

Denny Lenoir- Sen. Daines

Kelly Ackerman- MVAD Administrator

Kelly Garber- Budget Analyst

Matthew Manning- Cemetery Bureau Chief

Taryn Phillips- Office Manager

Ryan Keeler- Veterans Service Bureau Chief

After roll call, Administrator Ackerman announces that there is a quorum. Chairman Sivertsen then thanks everyone for being attendance. Since this was the first in-person meeting with the new members, the Chairman asked that everyone go around the table and introduce themselves.

Next, Chairman Sivertsen asks the members if they have reviewed the previous board minutes. Chairmen Sivertsen then announced if there were no questions or comments, he entertained a motion to approve. After assent from the group, Mike Stone moved to approve the minutes. Chairman Sivertsen put the question to the present members, and the motion to approve the minutes for the previous meeting carried by voice vote.

Chairman Sivertsen turns the meeting over to Joren Underdahl to give an update on the 3 Veterans Homes in Montana. The Butte Veterans Home passed their recognition survey from the Federal VA and are approved for 36 beds. Once the other 2 cottages they will go through another recognition survey to authorize those through the VA. Eastern Montana Veterans home in Glendive has 56 beds currently and has availability with no waitlist. One of the clinic

employees tested positive for COVID putting the home into an outbreak status. They are also recruiting for a state liaison. In Columbia Falls, there is a large waitlist to get into the Veteran's home with more than 100 veterans. There is a staffing shortage at the facility with over 25 vacancies, stalling admissions. There are a few staff out with COVID but no residents with COVID currently. All but one resident got vaccinated and staff vaccination rate is 83.4%. The floor was opened for questions.

With no questions Chairman Sivertsen turned the floor back to Mr. Underdahl to talk about the Columbia Falls Cemetery proposition. There have been recent conversations with the MVAD Bureau Chief to create a state cemetery next to the existing Veterans Home Cemetery. With the veteran population being so high in the Flathead, there is a lot of interest with the American Legion for a new cemetery. The cemetery is in its beginning stages, the MVAD cemetery program and Administrator Ackerman are working on more of the logistics. Administrator Ackerman added that they have been in contact with the National Cemetery Association and that they are looking into the criteria that must be met. This project would have to go through legislation before it can be implemented.

After the discussion of the potential Veteran Cemetery in Columbia Falls, Chairman Sivertsen turn the conversation to Duane Cunningham. A handout with COVID statistics was passed around the room. The statistics show that COVID is hitting hard again. Vaccinations have been pushed and the push has been well received. They have 14,756 veterans have received the first dose of the vaccine and 13,200 have both doses. The VA has permission to vaccinate anyone who lives in a home with a veteran and encourages that all household members get vaccinated. There has been no feedback on negative effects of the COVID vaccine. It has been mandated for anyone who works in VA hospitals to be vaccinated. Beginning in August masks are required in the facility. The VA hospital uses whatever vaccine that is shipped to them, they have administered all three. The Johnson and Johnson is the only vaccine they use when they do outreach vaccination clinics. The new Butte facility should be opened later this month.

The final update that Mr. Cunningham gave was on Travel Pay for veterans that must travel across the state to get to a medical appointment and the VEAC program. A veteran that is more than 30% service connected or if the veteran falls under the poverty line, they would be eligible for travel pay. Starting November 2020, the veteran must do all paperwork for travel pay online.

The Chairman then turn the floor to Ryan Keeler to talk a little more about the VEAC program. The Montana VSOs just finished a run through for the event. They currently have 202 appointments with room for approximately 360, 15 VSOs will be available to assist veterans countrywide. The VSO already helped 7 homeless veterans who will still maintain the appointment that they have scheduled for next week, but the homelessness situation was an immediate need.

After Mr. Keeler finished, Chairman Sivertsen turned the floor to Administrator Ackerman to talk about the MVAD Staffing Update. Currently, there are two vacancies. Both positions are in the Cemetery Program. There are no VSO positions vacant and the offices are fully staffed. Administrator Ackerman moves on to talk about Annual Training. The Annual Training will take place in October and will be weeklong. During the training, all the state required training will be completed, however, the VSOs will also receive training from a multitude of veteran organizations. An invitation to the Board members to attend any of the trainings was extended. Finally, Administrator Ackerman speaks about the MVAD statistics. She discusses the relevance of the case load that each Veteran Service Offices processes. For the year, the MVAD offices brought in \$276,000,000 dollars into the state of Montana in claims.

The floor was then turned over to the Budget Analyst, Kelly Garber. Kelly began with explaining what funds that MVAD has and what they are for and that these explanations are on a handout in the Board packet. She then informed the board of the revenue that was brought in for Fiscal Year 2021. The cemetery total revenue was \$604,926.04, the veteran service office brought in \$760,486.02, and the patriot plate brought in \$81,495. She also explained the MCAs that go with each fund for MVAD. Overall, the agency landed in good financial standing for fiscal year end.

Finally, a vote was held for the election of a new Chairman. The sole applicant, Mike Stone, stepped out of the room. After brief consultation, Mike Stone was unanimously voted in as the new Chairman of the board. Mr. Stone was brought back into the room and announced that he is the new Chairman of the Board. Next, a new Vice-Chairman was selected. The room was opened for nominations. With no nominations, Ryan Beston stepped in and volunteered to be Vice-Chair. The Board voted and Mr. Beston was selected as the new Vice-Chair.

The final discussion item was that the next Board meeting will be held on January 12, 2022, at 2:00 p.m. in Fort Harrison, MT. Chairman Sivertsen then adjourned the meeting at 3:20 p.m.

Clancy Sivertsen, Chairman

Kelly Ackerman

Kelly Ackerman, Secretary