

Montana Board of Veteran Affairs

Meeting Minutes

June 2023 Board Meeting

Date	June 7, 2023
Time	2:00 p.m.
Location	1956 Mt Majo St., Conference Room #112, Fort Harrison, MT 59636

Attendance

Members	Staff
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chairman Mike Stone Vice-Chairman Ryan Beston Barb Skelton Richard Klose Klayton Carroll Jennifer Dalrymple Dean Rehbein Charlotte Snyder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kelly Ackerman, Administrator Taryn Phillips, Budget Analyst Karen Grindstaff, Administrative Assistant Matt Manning, Cemetery Bureau Chief Ryan Keeler, Veterans Services Bureau Chief
Non-Voting Members	Guest
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thomas Finch Duane Cunningham MG John Hronek Joren Underdahl Denny Lenoir 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dan Griffin Gary White Peter Matt Kate Hahn
	Absent
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marvin Weatherwax Ryan Luchau

Meeting Minutes

Discussion Topic	Speaker	Time
Pledge of Allegiance, roll call, introductions, and welcome	Chairman Stone	13:54
Approval of Minutes	Chairman Stone	13:59
All board members were sent the minutes from January 2023 prior to the meeting for review. Richard Klose moved to approve the minutes of the January 11, 2023, meeting; the motion was seconded. Motion carried by unanimous consent.		
DMA Updates	Major General Hronek	14:00
Major General Hronek provided an update on Department of Military Affairs including the 2023 legislative session. No other questions or comments.		
VHA Updates, PACT Act	Duane Cunningham	14:14
Travel pay potential issue-effective June 9 th , pre-covid policy. Vets will have only 30 days to submit travel pay. No more mask mandate at the VA hospital. There were no other questions or comments.		
PACT Act/VBA Updates	Ryan Keeler	14:19

VBA- A/O June 1st, written 1200 more claims than last year overall, avg 90 a month. 103.5 days claim timeline. Denial of claims are prevalent. 180 days is more accurate timeline for claim processing/denial/deferrals. VSO appeals are up due to denials/deferrals on claims.

Kelly: asked about what Ryans staff is doing about it.

Ryan- Our VBA at FT HAR are agreeing with the information presented, and presents unfavorable to the VA process of easy denial. It causes delays and veteran frustrations. Kelly mentioned they are still hiring/possibly understaffed.

Ryan replied with the process of new training and staff for VSR's.

Mike commented: the last two speakers (asked the congressional reps to star the last two subjects) He has heard about this, even though he is not even in the state. Recommends to 'star' those notes, because the Speakers will continue to hear about this issue and the travel pay timeline issues.

Denny Lenoir commented: Unless we have a whistleblower come forward, we only have the 103 day number, and he believes that that's how the VA is keeping congressional off their back. Would be great to have a reason (real data) to open an investigation for the congressional to formally investigate.

Mike replied: Understood, but previously, claims from another state by personal experience were processed more quickly and efficiently, so they will keep getting calls at the congressional offices about this issue.

Denny: Whistleblowers tend to not have great careers at the VA. Creates Problem. Comment on Travel pay issue. We get calls from folks that left that office, and that manager has so many complaints against him, and leadership will not get rid of him.

Kelly commented for Ryan to take the congressional comments back to his leadership.

Dan Griffin commented: Made a congressional inquiry about 9 months ago about the travel pay, which was returned, saying they had 6 current FTEs but only had 4, looking for 2. And had requested additional 3 FTE. And then was told later that they only had 2, and are hiring and requesting additional 4. This info from the previously mentioned manager with complaints against him and high overturn of staff. The problem is digital conversions, and a lot of our veterans don't have computers, and is easier with paper, and there is a huge gap. Mentioned bringing back the kiosks.

Kelly commented that those comments should be brought to the director's meeting.

Discussion of onboarding timelines, training timelines, and the cumbersome process of hiring.

Kate: question for Ryan K. How is the appeals process looking?

Ryan: Higher level reviews are going more quickly., supplemental claims are taking 4-5 month. Appeals are moving a little faster, smart phone call in with VBA judge, it takes about 18 months

Denny asked if Ryan knows the stats of initial denials.

Ryan: can look up stats and send over.

No other Comments or Questions.

Legislative Board Restructure

Administrator Ackerman

14:35

Briefed process. Due to HB 298, the Board will consist of 14 Members, updated from 20 previously. 6 voting members, 8 non-voting, 13 appointed members, (TAG is automatic.) Allows for 1 individual to represent each region (5 regions) + Tribal Gov rep; Discussed regions, rep coverages, vacancies and restructured board positions. Positions that are permanently ending will be personally contacted by Kelly.

New process: website>(DMA.MT.gov)>MVAD>BOARD>APPLY NOW = Complete application form, notate Veterans Affairs; attach requested Bio's (if have one.) All will have to go through the new process. Please submit by July 1.

No other questions or comments.

Cemetery Updates

Matt Manning

14:46

Memorial Day ceremonies went very well. HB 81 passed the Columbia Falls cemetery approval. Preregistration is open at the Missoula office. Those pre-registrations will be kept separate records for now to be moved to new cemetery when open.

DNRC talks - trying to acquire 16 acres to the east of the Missoula Cemetery; trying to plan for long term. DNRC to verify if they are trust lands or not. Process is moving with DNRC.

Undersecretary Quinn visited cemeteries in May- (Missoula, Fort Harrison, and Miles city) NCA guidelines state no Black lithochromes on upright headstones in new sections.
 Numbers are similar to last year – busy season.
 Corporal Bennett-Veteran resident from Glendive and Baton Death March veteran- Internment to be in Miles City. Email to follow when service will be.
 Kelly Commented: Governor's office was notified by News in Glendive. Veterans remains are in Hawaii, family is in Florida. The family is raising funds to retrieve remains in Hawaii.
 Matt: Casualty Affairs will help 3 family members to Hawaii.
 Discussion of logistics followed.
 No other questions or comments.

Cemetery Expansions

Administrator Ackerman

14:52

Two Expansion grants that are due in Federal FY 24 (01 Oct 2023) as we are running out of plots.
 Both Helena and Missoula have \$2m expansion grants for simultaneous expansion efforts.
 HB 81 for new cemetery in Columbia Falls passed, New funding through Tax appropriation.
 Columbia Falls land is owned by DNRC in Trust- options of easement, lease, or other means need to be verified for application information.
 No other questions or comments

2023 Legislative Session Update

Administrator Ackerman

14:57

Veteran's Hall of Fame is now being managed by Veteran's Affairs Board–will work with Governor's office as to procedures and processes and roles.
 Honor and Remember Act Medallion – eligible family members.
 This session, an Honor and Remember Commemorative Coin program was authorized.
 Budget request was successful in getting 9 new staff members. 6 admin assistants for Regional VSO offices. 2 groundskeepers, and 1 accountant in HQ/Administrative office. Hired as 'modifieds' (non-permanent until next session)
 No other questions or comments.

Budget Overview

Taryn Phillips

15:03

FY end looking good. General Fund is completely expended. 2 more pay periods, so all personnel funds will be expended by 30 June. Cemetery Operating funds (70k) but only 15k cash (will pay for payroll).
 Won't have additional operation funds.
 Special revenue- expected to be completely expended with regular utilities.
 Expecting a little surplus, which was spent on IT equipment for New Admin Assistants.
 End year with a could thousand d authority and no cash.
 No other questions or comments.

Veterans Home Update

Joren Underdahl

15:05

Columbia Falls- more money to complete projects in session. Already working with roofing replacement – past life expectancy. The courtyard is getting remodeled due to hazard. New flooring through facility and updating HVAC system. Some ARPA(?) money was used for these projects.
 59% occupancy due to Covid and some staffing reasons.
 3 on active waiting list
 Others on inactive waiting list.
 36 open positions currently- Admissions, nursing and care and support staff.
 AARP Wish of a Lifetime program – 2 local veterans went to DC to Vietnam Vets memorial trip.
Butte-still construction on cottage 5- VA wont do the recognition survey until construction complete. Still maintaining staffing. 3 empty beds. Wait list of about 32, inactive. Still looking for 1 state employee (oversight liaison), onsite.
 Funding for completion of the connection of walkways is still in process.

Glendive-New contractor to operate home-same contractor as Butte home-A/O March 1, 2023.

Lot of travel staff.

67% occupancy, unsure of wait list, if any.

Roofing projects, cabinetry upgrade, flooring, painting.

Question: C. Falls FTE authorization?

Answer: 143 FTE authorized

Lockdowns lifted; mask mandate dropped. Visitation allowed.

No other questions or comments.

Issues / Comments / Questions

Klose: National American Legion Vice commander will be on a tour to billings and Glendive/ Eastern Montana, hosted by Klose, Cunningham and the Eastern American Legion Rep.

Jennifer: Issued thanks and encouragement support to the board.

No other comments or questions.

Public Comment

None.

Next Meeting

September 6, 2023, at 2:00 pm, in person at the Fort Harrison DMA Conference Room 112. Fort Harrison, MT.

Adjournment

Chairman Stone adjourned the meeting at 15:20.

Taryn Phillips, Recorder

Mike Stone, Chairman