

# Montana Board of Veteran Affairs

## Meeting Minutes

### November 2023 Board Meeting

<b>Date</b>	Nov 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2023
<b>Time</b>	11:00 a.m.
<b>Location</b>	1956 Mt Majo St., Conference Room #112, Fort Harrison, MT 59636

### Attendance

Members	Staff
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chairman, Region 1 - Mike Stone</li> <li>Region 2 - Jennifer Dalrymple</li> <li>Region 3 - Roger Hagan</li> <li>Region 4 - Richard Klose</li> <li>Region 5 - Kurt Nelson</li> <li>Tribal Government Rep - Vacant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kelly Ackerman, Administrator</li> <li>Taryn Phillips, Budget Analyst</li> <li>Kristine Wiley, Administrative Assistant</li> <li>Matt Manning, Cemetery Bureau Chief</li> <li>Janine Mahn, Interim Veterans Services Bureau Chief</li> </ul>
Non-Voting Members	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Director, DMA - MG Pete Hronek</li> <li>Director, Indian Affairs - Misty Kuhl</li> <li>VHA Rep - Duane Cunningham</li> <li>DPHHS Rep - Joren Underdahl</li> <li>Daines Rep - Denny Lenoir</li> <li>Rosendale Rep - Dan Griffin</li> <li>Zinke Rep - Scott Hagan</li> <li>Tester Rep - Kate Hahn</li> </ul>	

### Meeting Minutes

Discussion Topic	Speaker	Time
<b>Call to order. Pledge of Allegiance, Roll call/introductions, Welcome</b>	<b>Chairman Mike Stone</b>	<b>11:04</b>
<b>Approval of Minutes</b>	<b>Chairman Stone</b>	<b>11:07</b>
<p>All board members were sent the minutes from June 2023 prior to the meeting for review. Kurt Nelson moved to approve the minutes of the June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 Meeting; the motion was seconded. Motion carried with unanimous consent.</p>		
<b>VHA Updates, COVID cases</b>	<b>Duane Cunningham</b>	<b>11:08</b>
<p>There has been a change in VA directors and in Interim Leaders in VA and Fort Harrison VA. Veterans have made the VA aware of travel pay issues including timelines of travel pay submittal, access to online submittal, backlog of travel pay, and paper copies being an issue for processing. Although there has been an increase in VA staff, they are still classified understaffed, although the verbally stated understaffed numbers have fluctuated. There are three current COVID cases. The Behavioral Health phone number has changed to 406-447-6000. Veteran Orientation Handbook (MT Specific) available for anyone enrolling in healthcare.</p> <p>No other comments or questions.</p>		

<b>DMA Updates</b>	<b>Major General Hronek</b>	<b>11:17</b>
<p>Uptick in deployment cycles – increase for family stress.  Support and accolade of the Board restructuring.  End Strength Decrease, incentive programs (GRIP) as well as increase support for retention programs. Appx 400 PT Guard Jobs available.  Comments/ Questions:  Q: Is GRIP a federal or state program? A: State.  Q: Are you looking for (focusing on) specific careers to enlist into? A: Generally no, some have bonuses, but full benefits are available for any MOS/AFSC.  Q: Flyers/ marketing efforts? A: recruiting, flyers, PA, Link on several state websites, local news exposure.  Q: is there an age limit? A: Air- no, Army – unsure.  Further discussion to clarify State and federal mission, VETERAN definition and benefits available to different statuses, etc.  No other comments or questions</p>		
<b>PACT Act/VBA Updates</b>	<b>Janine Mahn</b>	<b>11:33</b>
<p>Staffing: Ryan Keeler resigned, have six administrative assistant positions, three are filled (Billings/Kalispell/Missoula); one in final selection status (Butte), one unfilled (Belgrade), one with backfill/admin in training (Great Falls). One VSO loss (Missoula), one VSO loss (Kalispell). One VSO retiree (Great Falls).  The Belgrade office moved to the armory.  PACT ACT: Over 60 claims so far in state fiscal year 2024. With the implementation of NPRC automation technology, there is a reduction in backlog goal set with VBA.  On Oct 17th, 19th and Nov 1, 2023, MVAD was asked to support three tribes w/ claims processing. In Sep/Oct, VSO's traveled extensively to support VFW's, and American Legions across the state.  No other comments or questions</p>		
<b>Board Community involvement</b>	<b>Administrator Ackerman</b>	<b>11:46</b>
<p>In the 2023 legislation, HB298 passed which reduced the board from 20 voting and non-voting members down to 14. This allows the board to participate in veteran events and activities more easily. Administrator Ackerman asked all board members to provide ideas for how the board can be involved in the community more. This would include attending VBA town halls in state regional/Board member areas; Tribal activities; and be a guest speaker to increase knowledge base of the collective. The next board meeting, each member will be asked to provide an idea how this board can change.  Q: Business cards for Board members with VSO offices and Cemetery info on back? A: yes, we will draft, print and distribute soon.  No other comments or questions</p>		
<b>Cemetery Updates</b>	<b>Matt Manning</b>	<b>12:00</b>
<p>Matt's current focus is on unmarked graves. Identification and headstone placements- working with local veteran's organizations. Requested any information available on unmarked graves throughout Montana. It doesn't matter what conflict the veteran was in (civil war, American/Indian war, ww1, Cold war, etc.,)  Q: Does the VA cover the cost of placement? A: Usually counties are required to pay/cover the cost of placement, but the VA provides the Headstones at no cost.  Q. Does the Local color guard/ honor guard help fill out paperwork for this? A: No</p>		

Columbia Falls Expansion update: Land > 60 acres southeast of railroad tracks - the goal is to have 140 years of sustainment. No federal grant will be issued until Montana Veteran Affairs Division owns the land, which is being reviewed and is currently a DNRC trust land-possible deed of trust transaction. Soil conditions is 20" of topsoil following 1-2" aggregate (rock).

Q: Will there be a separate urn in-ground and urn wall? A: There is not even a design yet-feedback is welcome from all board members once we are at the designing stage.

Fort Harrison Expansion update: 60-65 acres, (\$2 million) is being processed for grant award in state fiscal year 2025. The Fort Harrison cemetery is in the process of hiring a second groundskeeper.

Missoula update: Hired one groundskeeper and forecast one groundskeeper retiring in spring 2024.

No other comments or questions

**Veterans Homes' Updates**

**Joren Underdahl**

**12:12**

DPHHS leadership change due to resignation—affects oversight of VA homes. Harrington Interim Director.

Columbia Falls: 71% occupancy, there is a waitlist. Staffing difficulties in the nursing section—using nursing agencies currently. Received legislative funding for projects. Status of projects are HVAC is awarded and at work, flooring is awarded but not scheduled, courtyard for memory care is open to bid, and roofing replacement is open to bid.

Holiday events- first year back since COVID. Trick or Treat candy donation made. Community Involvement: CF high school students for Veteran's day. 800 sites for Wreaths Across America.

Glendive: 70% Occupancy - Memory care is full. No waitlist currently. Enduro Healthcare manages EMV home currently. Status of projects includes courtyard which is funded by donations, interior remodel should be completed by the end of January 2024, and the exterior facia, roof and patio are in need of repair.

Butte: 90% occupancy, three certified cottages. Fourth and Fifth cottages not yet VA certified, delayed due to construction/needs fire lane for access. Final Cottage w/VA construction grant talks. New donation in October.

Q: Can we get a window in the exercise room in Glendive home? A: We can look into it.

Q: How is the VA liaison hiring going with the Southwest Vets home? A: Liaison working both homes currently does not have that specific update.

No other comments or questions

**Board Activities, Cemetery Expansions**

**Administrator Ackerman**

**12:26**

Fort Harrison: Current work. NCA- Grant staff eager to begin design. FY2024- start work in the spring (\$2 Million). Missoula: FY 2025- (\$2 Million)

Matt: added our national cemetery grant preference rankings (FT Harrison - 5<sup>th</sup>; Missoula - 49<sup>th</sup>; Ft Peck - 35<sup>th</sup> (for comparison).

Vice chair vacancy - no appointment of Vice chair until a tribal rep appointed to board-skip voting for this meeting.

No other comments or questions.

**Budget Overview**

**Taryn Phillips**

**12:32**

FY23 overview: 99% available budget utilized. All bills were paid for FY23.

FY24: 1Q- right on track—two personnel payouts = appx 20k - whole year projected payouts (3) = 50k total. Miles City purchased excavator for \$90k.

FY24 Initiatives:

IT equipment: laptop replacements; printers (industrial)/state lease on printers; I-pads for all VSO offices (1 per office); surface pros for all 3 cemeteries.  
Great Falls office building lease is up JAN 2024- new office ideal;  
Kelly: added that there are unsafe reports of current GF locations  
Roger Hagan: asked for info so he can assist with procuring new location.  
Discussion of space issues and concerns.  
No other comments or questions.

### Issues / Comments / Questions

Roger Hagan: Long Term Care Needs Survey will address mandates put forth in HB 264, passed by the 2023 legislature. The Veterans long term care needs study will be taking place this year. Headed by DPHHS, the Survey will involve co-agency and veterans organizations support, input and dissemination and feedback platforms.  
Planned Study Schedule as follows: Mid oct- Draft 2 w/revision w/ 63 questions. Oct 28 – Draft 3 with revisions, 30 questions with optional additional questions. Nov 9 – Progression brief to legislature. Future: surveys disseminated to every medical office, VA homes, Vet Centers, Veterans Organization—“as penetrative as possible.” Target responses are set at 30k.  
Q: what is the survey medium? A: Lists  
Q: Will there be the ‘why?’ (talking papers/paragraph? A: yes, but the cover letter is not drafted yet- DPHHS is lead on this.  
No other comments or questions.

### Public Comment

None.

### Next Meeting

Wednesday, January 10<sup>th</sup> at 2:00 pm, in person at Fort Harrison MVAD Conference Room 112.

### Adjournment

Chairman Stone Adjourned the meeting at 1:02 pm.