

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

- MEETING MINUTES -

April 30, 2019

At 2:00 p.m. April 30, 2019, Vice-Chair Pete Olson called the teleconference meeting of the Montana Veteran Affairs Board to order. The members all stand to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Vice Chair Olson then asks Montana Veteran Affairs Division Administrator, Kelly Ackerman to call roll. Board members and agency staff in attendance were:

Pete Olson, Vice-Chairman
Ron Milam, Member
Gary Sorensen, Member
Casey Jourdan, Member
Dick Juvik, Member
Brenda York, Member

Tova Reddick, Member
Joren Underdahl, Member
Mike Waters, Congressman Gianforte
Kelly Ackerman, Administrator
Casey McInerney, Budget analyst.

After Roll Call, Vice Chair Olson asks if any guests are present. Beverly Stewart from the Vietnam Veterans of America announces herself to be present at the meeting.

Next, Vice Chair Olson asks the assembly if members have reviewed the minutes. After assent from the congregation, Gary Sorenson moved to approve the minutes of the September 2018 meeting. Dick Juvik seconded the motion. With no discussion from members, Vice Chair Olson put the question to the present members, and the motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting carried by voice vote.

Vice Chair Olson then turns the meeting over to Division Administrator Kelly Ackerman to discuss Division Operations Updates. Administrator Ackerman starts the discussion with comments regarding the Montana State Veteran Cemetery program. She announces between all the state cemeteries, the current number of interments for 2018 were down; however, the anticipated numbers for 2019 look to rise.

A current issue with the cemetery program is the backlog of plot allowance checks. The cemeteries are waiting on the January, February, and March plot allowance checks

from the Federal VA. The reason the payments are behind is due to a transition in the Federal VA system. Administrator Ackerman has been working with the Director of the Agency to get the lapse in payment resolved as soon as possible.

Vice Chair Olson discussed the option of bringing the issue to the Secretary of Veteran Affairs, and Administrator Ackerman replied that may be necessary, but she had made direct contact with the Director of the National Cemetery.

Next, Administrator Ackerman announced the vacancy in the Montana State Veteran Cemetery. Tom Hall, the program manager, resigned from the Montana State Veteran Cemetery program. Administrator Ackerman discusses options to restructure the program implementing technological advancements.

From the Veteran Services side, Administrator Ackerman announces that the money brought in from the regional offices in Fiscal Year 2019 is exceeding the money brought in Fiscal Year 2018. The claims production continues to increase across the state regardless of the Lewiston office closing. Administrator Ackerman announces the impressive job Belgrade and Great Falls have done taking over veterans in the Lewiston area.

Vacancies in Veteran Services include Service Officer positions in Missoula and Billings. In the Missoula Office, Steven Hale will be leaving on May 10th, and there were 49 applicants for the open Veteran Service Officer position in Billings. Administrator Ackerman is hoping to have interviews in the second week of May. With that, Administrator Ackerman transitioned the meeting towards the legislative session.

House Bill 172 is carried by Representative Beady to take funding from the State Veteran Service Program and allocate those funds to any county service program. The Final amendment has no money coming out of the agency budget, but it does have the appropriations coming out of a legislative grant to support every county veteran service office. A portion of the grant would be awarded to every county office that meets the criteria. There would be no board or agency oversight. Department of Military Affairs explained the issue of funding for the county program as well as the lack of oversight. The newest amendment also supplies a sunset date on the bill, ensuring the bill is advantageous to Montana Veterans before committing the agency to years of financial support. Finally, each individual county must decide if they will want to implement the program or not.

House Joint Resolution 23 is a Study Bill for the division and the board of Montana Veteran Affairs to look at effectiveness, proposed by Representative Dudick. The intentions are to see if MVAD is funded adequately as well as staffed appropriately. The resolution passed with a strong majority, and the SAVVA committee will receive the Joint Resolution to move forward. This resolution is a tool to move forward and determine which model is best for Montana Veteran Affairs.

Senate Joint Resolution 32 is the final piece of legislation for the Honor and Remember Act. Joe Foster and Senator Sesso created the Honor and Remember Act to honor Montana fallen veterans with a medallion presented to family members.

SJ32 would have the names of the veterans honored written into a bill signed by the Governor and read in committee. The final signed letter would be sent to all the family members that received the medallion. When the bill hit the committee, many legislatures had not heard of the Honor and Remember Act. A few legislatures discussed their own family members eligible for the medallion.

After ending discussion of SJ32, the board moved onto the discussion of MVAD financials. Veteran Affairs Operations are doing well financially. There is still money in all accounts to last through the end of the fiscal year.

The VA cemetery is waiting for more incoming cash from the Federal VA for plot allowance reimbursement. Due to changes made by the federal VA, they are behind on payments, forcing the cemeteries to be extremely frugal with funds.

The Eastern Montana State Cemetery expansion received a federal grant for \$2 million. Land Development Inc (LDI) won the bid for the design project. Changes to the cemetery include a committal shelter, memorial wall with 50 spaces, columbarium walls, underground crypts, and a storage facility for equipment and raw materials. There will be a ribbon cutting ceremony, and Administrator Ackerman encouraged any board members who can attend to do so.

Montana State Veteran Cemetery and Western Montana State Veteran Cemetery will be eligible for grants in the next couple years to add columbarium walls, office space, and electronic grave finder kiosks.

Administrator Ackerman continues to introduce the topic of the Governor's Challenge and MVAD's involvement in it. The Governor's Challenge is an extension of the Mayor's Challenge stated three years ago for suicide prevention and awareness. Nationwide, seven states with the highest suicide rates along with Veteran Affairs and the Department of Defense are starting Governor's Challenges; of which, Montana is one of the pilot states.

The Governor put together a panel of people to have meetings in DC and bring initiatives back to the state. The program offers QPR training and how to identify someone in a crisis and how they can handle it. The Governor's Challenge is also working with DPHHS to train in local hospitals and anyone who deals with veterans to identify crisis.

Next, Administrator Ackerman discusses working with the Governor's Office to identify and fill open Board Member positions and elections. Administrator Ackerman

congratulated those re-elected to the board including Casey Jourdan, Clancy Sivertsen, and Ron Milam.

Administrator Ackerman reminded the board members for those whose term will expire October 2019. There is a vacancy in Region 2 for the counties of Granite, Powell, Deer Lodge, Gallatin, Park, Beaverhead, Madison, Jefferson, Solver Bow, Broadwater, Meagher, Wheatland, and Sweet Grass. Administrator Ackerman will email the contact information for the Governor's office.

Gary Sorensen raised the information that he will be coming up on his eighth year on the board, and the end of his second term.

Administrator Ackerman turned the meeting back over to Vice Chair Olson.

During the Issues / Comments / Concerns regarding the board; Tova Reddick discussed working with the Mission Act. She has conducted training with her staff and providers to educate veterans. She will provide additional information in a presentation at the next meeting.

Ron Milam discussed working with the appeals process of allowing blue water sailors to be included in Agent Orange appeals claims, and David Boyd asked for an application for the Gold Star Medallion.

Vice Chair Olson asked for any public comment at this time. After seeing none, Vice Chair established the date of the next Board meeting to be September 12, 2019, at 1400 hours at Fort Harrison.

Vice Chair Olson adjourned the meeting at 1500 hours.

Bill Willing 7/15/19
Bill Willing, Chairman Date

Casey McInerney 7/15/19
Casey McInerney, Recorder Date