

**MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
- MEETING MINUTES -**

September 13, 2018

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs meeting was called to order by Chairman Bill Willing at 2 p.m., September 13, 2018 at Fort Harrison, MT. All members and guests recited the Pledge of Allegiance, and Chair Willing proceeded with Roll Call. Board members and agency staff in attendance were:

Bill Willing, Chairman
Pete Olson, Vice-Chairman
Dick Juvik, Member
Ronald Milam, Member
Gary Sorensen, Member
David Boyd, Member
Clancy Sivertsen, Member
Joren Underdahl, Member
Bruce Knutson, Sen. Tester

Casey Jourdan, Member
Kelly Ackerman, Vet Svc Program Mgr
Byron Erickson, Member
Tova Reddick, Member
Joe Foster, Administrator
Casey McInerney, Budget Analyst
Mike Waters, Congressman Gianforte
Denny Lenoir, Sen Daines

Chairman Willing asked if there were any amendments or revisions to be made to last meeting's Minutes. With no amendments or revisions reported, Vice-Chair Olson moved to approve the Minutes. The motion was seconded, and the vote carried.

Chair Willing then recognized Boardmember Byron Erickson, as this is his last meeting; and recognized Ms. Tova Reddick, the federal VA's newly appointed member to the Board.

Mr. Joe Foster gave the division operations update. Regarding the Veteran Services Program, Joe announced the current vacancy in the Miles City office, which may potentially be filled from within the division, as interest has been expressed by Earl Edmonds, Veterans Service Officer (VSO) – Belgrade office. Currently, the Billings veterans service office is providing support to Miles City-area veterans – both externally (in Billings via answering forwarded Miles City office phone calls) and with consistent, though limited, on-site staff support. Also reported was the recent hire of Ms. Jackie Lamb as a veterans service officer in the Missoula office.

Boardmember Underdahl asked how often the Billings veterans service officers will be able to support the Miles City office while the position is vacant. Joe Foster stated that the Billings staff will do as good a job as possible supporting the Miles City area; but realistically, there will be curtailed services until the position is filled.

Joe then discussed the projected VSO vacancies at the Fort Harrison and Belgrade veterans service offices. These are due to **Kelly Ackerman's** hiring as the division's

Administrator, and the subsequent internal hires and personnel movements, per the listed. All position occupancies will be effective October 13, 2018.

Cheryl Heald – Billings – Senior Veterans Service Officer (vice Ackerman); vacates Regional Veterans Service Officer position.

Janine Mahn – Belgrade – Regional Veterans Service Officer (vice Heald)

Tim Ingraham – Fort Harrison – Operations Special Duty (vice Heald)

Tim Ingraham – Fort Harrison – American Legion Dept. Service Officer Special Duty (vice Ackerman)

Continuing with the division report, Joe discussed the Fiscal Year 2018 (FY18) financial impact and claims production data sheets. During FY18, the division's financial impact/benefit to Montana veterans and their family members exceeded \$200 million. This is the first time the division has ever exceeded the \$200 million mark. Regarding claims production, 3234 were submitted by division staff into the federal VA system – bettering FY17's total of 2808 by over 15%.

Joe then reported on the division's Veterans Cemetery Program. Last year the Montana State Veterans Cemetery (MSVC) conducted 198 interments. The Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery (WMSVC) in Missoula interred 118; and the Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery (EMSVC) in Miles City interred 30. The MSVC was inspected, June 2018, by the National Cemetery Administration to ensure it meets all veterans cemetery operational and appearance standards. The MSVC "passed" with a superior score – the next inspection at this cemetery is expected in five years. During the summer of 2019, the EMSVC and WMSVC are tentatively scheduled for the same type inspection.

The next item on the agenda is Discussion Topics. Joe gave an update regarding the 10% budget reduction the division is managing. He stated that the agency has successfully managed the cuts, to date; albeit with the loss of the Lewistown veterans service office. The Billings, Belgrade and Great Falls service offices have absorbed the Lewistown-area into their own outreach programs. Of note was the American Legion, Dept. of Montana's \$10,000 grant during FY18 – which preserved the division's veterans services outreach program. The Veterans of Foreign Wars has also assisted the division's outreach program with a \$10,000 grant, effective in FY19. Chair Willing thanked the American Legion and VFW for their generosity and timely assistance.

As of August 1, there were four Board members whose first term ended effective Aug. 1 – Ms. Casey Jourdan, Mr. Ron Milam, Ms. Brenda York, and Mr. Byron Erickson. Ms. Jourdan and Mr. Milam have formally requested a second term, and Mr. Erickson will be leaving the Board. Ms. York's intent regarding further Board membership is unknown.

Ms. Tova Reddick then provided an overview and update to the recently introduced (federal) VA "Mission Act." Among other objectives, the Mission Act addresses expanding care-givers support; aligning and restructuring patient care; and retaining

and recruiting healthcare providers. Chair Willing raised the question of information sharing between medical providers, and Mr. Erickson questioned the standard-of-care expected under the Mission Act. Tova addressed both questions and assured the group there are segments of the Mission Act which address both issues. Future briefings will be provided as Mission Act initiatives actually materialize.

Joe briefed the Board on the FY18 Board of Veterans Affairs Biennial Report. The Biennial Report is required by state statute and is routinely distributed to the Governor's Office, legislators, veterans service organizations, and other entities.

Joe then introduced the Administrator-Select, Ms. Kelly Ackerman. Kelly is a Livingston native, Air Force veteran, and Montana Air National Guard retiree. She began employment with the Veterans Affairs Division in 2004, as a VA work study in the Belgrade office. Kelly has progressed through the Veterans Service Program skill and management levels to her current position as the Veterans Services Program Manager (Senior Veterans Service Officer). Kelly addressed the Board and visitors, and provided an overview of her background and professional expectations – she anticipates an active and productive relationship with the Board. She also recognized Boardmember Byron Erickson for his long-time friendship and mentorship.

Ms. Casey Jourdan briefed the Board regarding her long-time and recently recognized (two statewide newspaper articles) leadership in regional Military Order of the Purple Heart programs; as well as the issues incumbent to pain management – from both her professional and personal perspectives and efforts. David Boyd discussed his personal experience with chronic pain, and Ms. Ackerman discussed how veterans may now, under certain conditions, file a disability compensation claim based upon “chronic pain.” Casey stated that Purple Heart awareness activities are increasingly visible and active in Billings. Chair Willing thanked Ms. Jourdan for her outstanding efforts; she well-represents the Board.

Chair Willing recognized Boardmember Byron Erickson. Mr. Erickson thanked the Board members for their support through the years, and that he was honored to serve on the Board. He stated that the Board of Veterans Affairs “makes a difference,” and challenged the Board members to continue to be effective advocates for Montana's veterans and their family members. Mr. Erickson was thanked by Chair Willing and the Board as having served with distinction, and that his contributions will be missed.

Boardmember Gary Sorensen presented a briefing regarding the “Doughboy” statue, located in Missoula. The statue attained a grant towards the repair and maintenance of the memorial, which is 91 years old and in need of refurbishment. The goal is for all work to be completed by Veterans Day. Mr. Gary White – American Legion – made the Board aware of other “Doughboy” statues that exist in Hamilton, Fort Benton, Butte, and Dillon.

General Quinn discussed the Montana National Guard Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and the department's Veterans Assistance Program (VAP). These programs provide cost-free counseling for Montana National Guard members and family

members; as well as veterans and former Reserve Component (non-veteran) personnel.

Mr. Bruce Knutson announced that the Helena Vet Center has expanded to include a female counselor.

David Boyd discussed veteran suicide issues.

Chair Willing asked the group if there were any additional comments; there were none.

The next Board meeting date and time were discussed; February 28, 2019, 2 p.m. will be the next meeting – via TelCon – per motion, seconding, and unanimous vote.

Chair Willing and Vice-Chair Olson then recognized Joe Foster for his service as Administrator. Chair Willing spoke to the group about Joe's willingness to take on "difficult tasks," his professional priorities and vision of veterans services, and how Joe has been the longest serving administrator in agency history – 16 years (2002-2018). Chair Willing and Vice-Chair Olson presented Joe with a unique carved bison, a buffalo bone letter opener, and a plaque.

With no further business, the Board meeting was adjourned at 3:15 p.m.

 7/15/19
Bill Willing, Chairman

 7/15/19
Casey McInerney, Recorder