

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
- MEETING MINUTES -
January 21, 2016

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs teleconference meeting was called to order by Joe Foster, on behalf of Chairman Bill Willing, at 2 p.m., January 21, 2016. Board members/agency staff/guests in attendance were:

Bill Willing, Chairman
Dick Juvik, Member
Brenda York, Member
Joren Underdahl, Member
Byron Erickson, Member
Casey Jourdan, Member
Dan Bernhardt, Member
Zach Gambill, Rep. Zinke
Jim Korth, Sen. Daines

Ron Milam, Member
Peter Olson, Vice-Chair
Dr. Trina Bonde, Member
Joe Foster, Administrator
Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst
Gary Sorensen, Member
Bruce Knutson, Sen. Tester
Rep. Kathy Swanson, Member

Guests in Attendance

Josh Clements, American Legion
Gary White, American Legion
Bob Schwegel, VFW
David Chung, MOPH

Administrator Foster opened and thanked everyone for being present; roll call was taken. He then asked if there were any additions/deletions to last meeting's Minutes. With no changes to the Minutes, a motion to approve was made and was seconded. The motion carried.

Specific to the Minutes, an open item was discussed. During the last Board meeting, an issue was raised regarding gravesite services – or allegedly, lack thereof – at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery. Mr. Steve Garrison stated that he had the names of two people who were told that they could not receive gravesite services. Chairman Willing, at that time, committed to investigate this issue. Chairman Willing reported that he asked Mr. Garrison to provide the names immediately after the Board meeting was concluded, but Mr. Garrison did not provide any names. Chairman Willing subsequently made personal inquiry with cemetery program staff, as well as meeting and discussing the issue with two former MT National Guard adjutants general, who had been referenced by Mr. Garrison in regards to the gravesite services issue. Administrator Foster also verified with cemetery program staff as to if anyone had been told that he/she would not have gravesite services; and Mr. Foster also attended the adjutants general meeting with Chairman Willing. Chairman Willing reported that resultant of his investigation, he verified that no names were provided/attained, no one had been told that they could not have a gravesite burial, and that he considers the issue groundless and closed. For the record, gravesite services are – and have been – allowed at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery.

Joe Foster then covered the division's operational status, beginning with the veterans services program's financial impact and claims production reports. The reports capture statistics regarding veterans service office claims production; as well as, the financial impact of agency veterans service officers' work effort. The reports' effective date was "as of" November 1, 2015. The division's financial impact as of Nov. 1, 2015 was \$57,277,376. Last fiscal year, at the same timeframe, the financial impact was \$51,661,229. The claims production report showed that 1092 benefit claims products were submitted to the federal VA. This marks a 16.5% increase over last year, at the same timeframe. Joe discussed the increase being due, in large part, to the two additional veterans service officer fulltime equivalents authorized during the last Legislative Session. One position was assigned to the Billings service office, which has a 41% increase in production; and the other was assigned to Kalispell, which has a 17% increase.

Joe then recognized Board member Brenda York for Montana State University's veterans services program. An article in the December issue of "Military Advancement of Education and Transition" specifically recognized Brenda and her program, stating that it has "earned a top school designation in an annual guide measuring best practices in military and veteran education." In fact, this was the second year in a row that Brenda's program was recognized in this manner.

Regarding the veterans cemetery program, as of January 1, 2016 there were 86 burials at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Missoula), 91 burials at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Fort Harrison), and 29 burials at the Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Miles City). At this time, there are no new construction projects taking place; however, the cemetery sextons are currently identifying prospective projects to be accomplished this summer and fall. For example, the Montana State Veterans Cemetery is considering constructing an changing/clothes storage room for the Honor Guard details that support the cemetery and veteran family members.

Joe reported that he has submitted a request for authorizing one fulltime equivalent (FTE) to be split between the Montana State Veterans Cemetery and Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery. Each position would work for one-half a year (seasonally) at each cemetery (totaling one FTE). The expected work timeframe would be from April 1 through September 30 of each year.

Joe then recognized Board member Dick and his wife, Linda, Juvick, and the POW-MIA Association of Montana for their work on the Wreaths-Across-America Program. They built and erected 14 wooden tripods holding approximately 160 donated wreaths at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery. They were very well received at the cemetery and we expect them to be a continual presence during future Christmas Seasons.

Joe talked about the new homeless veterans housing complex and VA-funded Tribal Veterans Cemetery located on the Crow Nation. Our next Board meeting will be held at the Little Bighorn Battlefield to facilitate visiting both of these sites.

Joe announced that Kelly Ackerman, our agency's Senior Veteran Service Officer, was appointed Vice-Chair for the American Legion's national "Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation" Committee. This is an extremely impressive recognition of Ms. Ackerman's professionalism and stature in veterans services.

Dan Arnold, agency Veterans Service Officer II in Great Falls, has been appointed the VFW's Department Service Officer; and with that appointment, we have now completed the process whereby our agency has fully integrated the VFW's veterans services program into our operational base. The Montana Veterans Affairs Division now holds power-of-attorney authority for the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, and the Montana Veterans Affairs Division, itself, which is recognized by Congress as a veterans service organization.

The agency's veterans services program is now participating, as a pilot, in the federal VA's Digit to Digit (D2D) program. The first claim was submitted via the D2D portal in mid-January. The division is taking it very cautiously as to submitting claims through the D2D portal, and only two service officers are currently authorized to submit this manner of claim work. The rest of the service officers continue to submit claim products per standard procedures. Joe wants to ensure that the system is working perfectly before access is expanded, and to ensure that no veteran client interests are harmed in any way. Also, there are only certain claims that are submitted through this process. As an example, pension claims are not submitted through this process.

Board member Bryan Erickson mentioned that in the Bozeman area it is taking veterans with PTSD symptoms up to two months to see a mental health care provider. Board member Dr. Bonde replied that it shouldn't take that long. She stated that the Bozeman area does not currently have a VA mental health care provider on staff, but the veteran can always reach someone through the telehealth option. Though not face to face, at least the veteran could get immediate services. Board member Brenda York (who lives in the same area) stated that she had not heard of this type problem; rather, that mental health care services were readily available. Joe suggested to all Board members that if issues of this nature arise, it would probably be beneficial to visit with other Board members to get a fuller assessment of reported issues/problems before bringing them up to the entire Board.

The mental health issue prompted Joe to talk about two issues that are planned to be presented during the next Board meeting. One – which was brought up by Board member David Boyd – is a briefing by the VA regarding resources and procedures related to the veteran suicide and veteran mental healthcare issues. The other is in regards to the DAV's veteran transport system, whereby the organization's volunteer drivers are now being evaluated per federal Dept. of Transportation standards, which is causing significant problems with the volunteer staff – resulting in a loss of drivers and vehicles supporting some Montana communities. Joe stated that he will work with the VA and the DAV to schedule these presentations.

There was an article written in the *Missoulian* about Board member Ron Milam, who was in combat rescue operations during the Vietnam War. Ron spoke about the article and how it was produced.

Joe asked if there were any public comments or questions; with none, that portion of the meeting was completed.

After discussion, it was collectively agreed that the next Board meeting will be hosted by Board member Shawn Backbone (of the Crow Nation) and held at the Little Bighorn Battlefield. Unless a scheduling conflict with the battlefield's conference room requires a different timeframe, the next Board meeting is scheduled for May 19, 2016 at 2 p.m.

With no further business, the Board meeting was adjourned at 3:20 p.m.


Bill Willing, Chairman


Lee Ann Hall, Recorder