

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

- MEETING MINUTES -

May 19, 2016

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs meeting was called to order by Chairman Bill Willing at 2 p.m., May 19, 2016 at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, Montana. Board members/agency staff in attendance were:

Bill Willing, Chairman
Pete Olson, Vice-Chairman
Shawn Backbone, Member
Gary Sorenson, Member
Byron Erickson, Member
Ron Milam, Member

Jim Korth, Sen Daines
Joe Foster, Administrator
Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst
Dan Bernhardt, Member
Bruce Knutson, Sen. Tester

Guests in attendance (who signed in) were:

Ben Clark
Clay Ward
Amanda Peterman
Rachel Court
Bryan Gray, Billings Vet Center

Buck Richardson
Peter Vicare
Dean House, VFW
Juliana Hallows, VA-MT

Chairman Willing opened and thanked everyone for being present, and asked all in attendance to introduce themselves. Chairman Willing 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.

Joe recognized and thanked Denice Swanke-Superintendent of the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and Alvina Morning-Lead Administrative Specialist for the National Monument.

Joe explained that in the packets, along with the agenda, was additional information regarding the Montana National Guard and Department of Military Affairs, the Choice Program, an updated Board of Veterans Affairs address list, and an updated Veterans Affairs Division contact list.

Effective April 1, 2016, the division lost three veteran service officers (VSO) – in Billings, Helena and Missoula – due to employment transfers and a termination. Since then we have hired all three positions. The Missoula VSO started in April, and the other two for Billings and Helena will start in late May and early June.

Joe then explained the veteran services financial impact and claims production reports. The reports capture statistics regarding veterans service office claims production; as well as, the financial impact of our veterans service officers' work effort. These reports provided data as of March 1, 2016 with the total being \$121,178,096. This total exceeds last year's total at this time by approximately \$10 million. The claims production report showed that 2089 veteran/veteran

family member claim products were developed and submitted to the federal VA, exceeding last year's production by approximately 200 claim products.

As of May 1, 2016, there were 126 burials at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Missoula), 131 burials at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Fort Harrison), and 41 burials at the Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Miles City). The to-date totals for the Missoula and Miles City cemeteries already exceed last year's annual totals. We have hired two seasonal groundskeepers, each located in the Helena and Missoula cemeteries.

Chairman Willing asked everyone to refer to the article in their packets from the Washington Post about Chief Joe Medicine Crow, who was the first burial at the newly constructed Apsaalooke Veterans Cemetery. Shawn Backbone briefed everyone about the cemetery and the Crow Nation's veterans housing complex, which opened in September. With the Nation's veterans housing project and veterans cemetery, the Crow Tribe is making great strides in its veteran services program.

Juliana Hallows, VA-Montana Suicide Prevention Program Coordinator, gave an extensive talk on the VA's suicide prevention program. Bryan Gray Billings Vet Center team leader, then briefed the Board about the Billings Vet Center and its services. They then answered questions and led a discussion regarding the veteran suicide and crisis intervention issues.

Upon the Board meeting's adjournment, Shawn Backbone will take the members for a tour of the new Apsaalooke Veterans Cemetery and veterans housing complex. Discussion then took place as to the next Board meeting's date and time. It was determined that the next Board meeting will be September 22, 2016 in Great Falls, Montana at 2 p.m.

With no further business, the Board meeting was adjourned at 3:30 p.m.


Bill Willing, Chairman


Lee Ann Hall, Recorder