

# **MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

## **- MEETING MINUTES -**

September 21, 2017

The Montana Board of Veterans Affairs meeting was called to order by Chairman Bill Willing at 2 p.m., September 21, 2017 in Bozeman , Montana. Board members and agency staff in attendance were:

Bill Willing, Chairman  
Pete Olson, Vice-Chairman  
Gary Sorenson, Member  
David Boyd, Member  
Ron Milam, Member  
Joren Underdahl, Member  
Clancy Sivertsen, Member  
Mike Waters, Congressman Gianforte

Casey Jourdan, Member  
MG Matthew Quinn, Member  
Joe Foster, Administrator  
Lee Ann Hall, Budget Analyst  
Brenda York, Member  
Bruce Knutson, Sen. Tester  
Denny Lenoir, Sen Daines

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

Joe began the meeting explaining that Board member Dr. Bill Campbell, Chief of Staff for the VA Montana medical services was not able to attend the meeting as he was involved with out briefs and evaluations of the VA medical services. Sitting in for Dr. Campbell is Megan Bradbury, Acting Chief, VA Health Administrative Services.

Joe Foster stated that the division staff is at 100% personnel fill. He then explained the veteran services financial impact and claims production reports, comprised of statistics reporting veterans service office claims production and the financial impact of our veterans service officers' work effort. As of June 30, 2017, the financial impact totaled \$187,862,740, and claims production shows 2641 claim products were developed and submitted to the federal VA.

As of June 30, 2017, there were 162 burials at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Missoula), 214 burials at the Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Fort Harrison), and 42 burials at the Eastern Montana State Veterans Cemetery (Miles City).

Our current construction planning for a 24'x14' structure which will be used by the Honor Guard and cemetery equipment storage (separate areas) has been put on hold along with the project that would construct an earthen "spoils" facility at the Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery in Missoula. This project would house and protect from the elements screened dirt, which is utilized for burial operations. The bid for this project was over budget. Going forward we will be purchasing giant water guns so we can activate our 2 inactive wells in

order to keep our water rights and wet the soil. The cost of the water guns should be \$10,000 or less.

Joe Schumacher, Director of Veteran Services at Montana State University briefed the Board on the MSU Veterans Center and Services. Services include: Transition from Military to civilian life.

Assist students in accessing their educational services-GI Bill

Certify benefits.

Advocate for the Veteran.

Veteran support center.

Tutoring and Mentoring program.

In-house mental health counselor.

Mitch Overton with the Bozeman Parks and Recreation Department/Veterans Cemetery project briefed everyone on the new Southwest Montana Veterans Cemetery. Approximately two years ago they were approached by the Veterans Alliance of Montana stating that the veterans in the Bozeman area were not able to use their death benefits locally. They reached out to Joe Foster and toured the veterans cemetery at Ft. Harrison. Communicated with the congressional offices and the city commission to come up with a plan to create the Southwest Montana Veterans Cemetery that would follow the National Standards and National Guidelines that the city owns and manages. If the cemetery ever became a State or Federal facility it would be in compliance. The cemetery is located at Sunset Cemetery and is ½ acre. Next summer they plan on putting in the irrigation system and retaining walls. Future plans for a committal shelter, six Columbarium holding 246 niches and in ground ash. Hank Adams and Jim Korth, with the Veterans Alliance of SW MT have done a remarkable job of fund raising and getting donations for the cemetery. Joe Foster mentioned that this is a great model for other cemeteries.

Megan Bradbury, Acting Chief, VA Health Administrative Services talked about the new pilot program that will significantly improve care received on the Veterans Choice Program. Montana was chosen to do a soft-opening beginning September 13, 2017 through the end of the month to work out any kinks and develop solutions to reconcile them. Montana VA will not be doing any proactive public engagement on the pilot until the first week of October. MT VA has taken over the scheduling. Calls go directly to VA employees who are aware of the population and the distance between cities. VA is still using Health Net for payments but they now have a dedicated team working for Health Net to coordinate with community providers to get their payments in a timely manner.

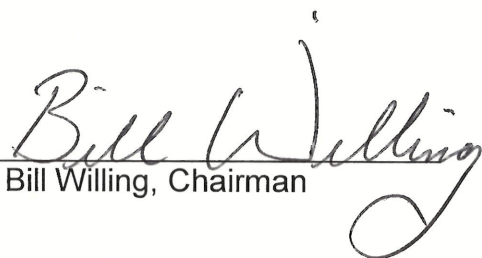
Approximately 5 years ago Fort Harrison was selected for the electronic claims processing. Joe made the decision to try out this pilot program by investing in equipment training so our folks could submit electronic claim products. We were recognized as possible one of the first states to have 100% in electronic claims submission on disability compensation claims. Now the VA put out a press release on Decision Ready Claims. Veterans who choose to submit their claim under DRC can expect to receive a decision within 30 days from the time the VA receives the claim. It also states that the VSO's will ensure all supporting evidence such as medical records and military documents are included with the claim. The issue with that is the VSO's don't have access to those documents

and the VA really has the duty to assist by obtaining those documents when a claim is submitted.

Joe discussed with the Board the reduction to state budgets. Our division is required to cut 10% out of their General Fund budget for the next two fiscal years. Joe stated this will affect our veteran outreach program. Joe has asked the Board members and the Service Organization to write letter and also comment on the Governors web-site about how cutting the outreach program will negatively impact the veterans.

Discussion then took place as to the next Board meeting. It was determined that the next Board meeting will be a teleconference meeting January 25, 2018 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

