

Montana Board of Veteran Affairs

Meeting Minutes

January 2022 Board Meeting	
Date	January 12, 2022
Time	2:00 p.m.
Location	1956 Mt Majo St., Conference Room #113, Fort Harrison, MT 59636 and Zoom

Attendance	
Members	Staff
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chairman Mike Stone Barb Skelton Brett Cusker Richard Klose Ryan Luchau Klayton Carroll Jennifer Dalrymple Dean Rehbein Charlotte Snyder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kelly Ackerman, Administrator Taryn Phillips, Office Manager Matt Manning – Bureau Chief, Montana State Veterans Cemetery Program Ryan Keeler – Bureau Chief, Montana State Veterans Services Program
	Guest
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gary White
	Absent
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-Voting Member Marvin Weatherwax Jr. Non-Voting Member Anson Nygaard Vice-Chairman Ryan Beston
Non-Voting Members	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MG John Hronek Thomas Finch Duane Cunningham Joren Underdahl Denny Lenoir 	

Meeting Minutes		
Discussion Topic	Speaker	Time
Pledge of Allegiance, roll call, introductions, and welcome	Chairman Stone	14:00
Approval of Minutes	Chairman Stone	14:04
All board members were sent the minutes from August 2021 prior to the meeting for review. Richard Klose moved to approve the minutes of the August 11, 2021 meeting; motion was seconded. Motion carried by unanimous consent.		
VHA Update	Duane Cunningham	14:05
<p>Duane Cunningham gave a brief updated on the VHA regarding patient care facilities, COVID-19 and flu vaccines, travel pay, and staffing issues.</p> <p>The patient care facility in Butte has an opening scheduled for May 3rd, 2022. There is also an opening in Missoula on January 28th, but it's only available by invite only. Travel pay is a continuing issue for veterans traveling for care. Many veterans who don't have access to computers are experiencing delays and complications. The VA is continually working to fix this issue. VA hospitals are experiencing nationwide staffing shortages, but still has enough staff to function. COVID-19 and flu vaccines are available at all local VA clinics to veterans and dependents. All veterans and dependents are urged to stay up to date on their vaccinations.</p>		

There were no other questions or comments.		
VBA Update	Ryan Keeler	14:10
<p>The VBA (Veterans Benefits Administration) is running at a 25% in-person rate. This resulted in the Fort Harrison VBA office having slow decision rates. Blue Water Navy claims are experiencing a slow acceptance rate because there are only 4 offices processing the claims. The division has Blue Water claims that are over 2 years old, and there's no options for the VBA to expediate these claims.</p> <p>VA disability compensation rates received a cost-of-living increase of 5.9% for 2022.</p> <p>There were no other questions or comments.</p>		
Cemetery Updates	Matt Manning	14:12
<p>The Montana State Veterans Cemetery Program (MSVCP) had record number of burials at all 3 state cemeteries in fiscal year 2021. MSVCP is expecting to exceed those numbers for fiscal year 2022.</p> <p>Three vacancies were filled since August 2021. Aaron Ward was the acting Cemetery Manager at Fort Harrison, and accepted the permanent position. Aaron has been an employee since spring 2020 and will be a great asset as Fort Harrison's Cemetery Manager. Rick Hovik accepted the full time Landscape Technician position and will work with Aaron. Jeremy Millert accepted the Missoula Cemetery Manager position. Both new employees have been a tremendous help and are great additions to the team.</p> <p>Fort Harrison's work shop was broken into and required the division to purchase and install new security cameras. The cemetery now has cameras that will stream footage 24/7, even during power outages.</p> <p>Wreaths Across America was a success at all 3 state cemeteries, every veteran had a wreath donated.</p> <p>Matt Manning conducted training at the American Legion convention for standardizing military honors. The American Legion executive committee gave positive feedback and it was a great collaboration.</p> <p>Matt was approached by 2 of Senator Testers representatives and a representative from the NCA (National Cemetery Administration) to offer support for the program. Matt will be in contact with those representatives for better support of the cemeteries.</p> <p>There were no questions or comments.</p>		
State Cemetery – Columbia Falls	Chairman Stone	14:15
<p>Chairman Stone gave an update for the proposed new veterans cemetery in Columbia Falls. The need has been verified and MVAD will be moving forward with the process of requesting the new cemetery. The land has been mapped and plotted. The next steps are to meet with a Governor's representative for Governor's approval, then propose a bill at the 2023 Legislative Session, then apply for a VA grant. There is a drafted proposal ready for the legislative review, the division is waiting on Governor's approval before submitted the proposal. Even though the construction and equipment will be paid for by the VA, the division has to get legislative approval for the operation costs. It has been determined the estimated cost of operation is \$175,000 per fiscal year. This includes all operations and personnel expenses. Questions regarding the proposed new cemetery can be directed to Mike Stone at 406-260-1954 or 12cstoneman@gmail.com.</p>		
DMA Updates	MG Hronek	14:20
<p>Last legislative session was a great year where new bills were passed. The department will be reviewing the Veteran Affairs budget and seeing how to better their budget. Their budget consists of state special revenue and the department wants to look at fixing the funding to include increased General Funds. HB701, the marijuana bill, was passed and MVAD will receive up to \$200,000 every fiscal year which will help improve the budget. But, HB701 is also special revenue and not a General Fund. MVAD is looking for revenue that is stable so the division can plan for projects, pay increases, and providing adequate resources.</p>		

DMA has deployed over 1,000 airmen and soldiers at this time. The department sent out over 1,000 this last year for civil arrest, covid response, and fires. They are tremendous assets because they are civilian soldiers going back and forth to their employers. There were no questions or comments.

EMSVC Expansion Project Update

Administrator Ackerman

14:27

The cemetery expansion project in Miles City is holding at 99% completion. The contractor will finish a few items on the shelter and the project will be finalized spring 2022. Richard Klose commented that he was present at the grand opening, and the cemetery is beautiful. Administrator Ackerman mentioned the committal shelter is used at the NCA as the national standard. The contractors built the committal shelter perfectly.

Budget Overview

Administrator Ackerman

14:30

Handouts were provided via email regarding the divisions statistics and current budget standing. These stats are the stats from the first 6 months of FY 2022, July 1st, 2021 to December 1st, 2021. On the front page, it shows the Veterans Services Program statistics of claims produced and financial impact. On the back page, it shows the Veterans Cemetery Program number of burials and estimated revenue. It also shows the number of FTEs MVAD owns and the location of where those FTEs are allocated. The cemetery is funded through plot allowances from the VA, family payments and county payments for headstones. Those funds are considered special revenue and goes into a special revenue account. It's not a constant fund and changes every fiscal year. MSVCP received general funding for the first time in FY 2022 of \$65,000. The program will receive \$50,000 in FY 2023. The general fund only covers the cost of 1 employee including benefits, so the division will be asking legislature to continue giving general funds and increase to cover more than 1 employee. Because the special revenue is not a reliable source of revenue, we have to explore other options of obtaining stable revenue. There were no questions or comments on the budget.

Veterans Homes Update

Joren Underdahl

2:42

The Eastern Montana Veterans Home in Glendive is looking for a new care facility contractor as the Glendive Hospital will no longer carry the contract after the end of the fiscal year. The veterans home has an 80 bed capacity and 49 are currently occupied. Four staff members are currently out with COVID. The Butte Veterans Home is continually admitting to their facility. There is a waiting list for the cottages that aren't open yet. They have a secured cottage for dementia residents that also has a waiting list for when it opens. There are no COVID cases in the Buttes Veterans Home. The Veterans Home in Columbia Falls has paused admissions and has started a waiting list for admissions. They have 105 beds with 74 filled. There are 30 open staffing positions that they have not been able to fill. Until more staff are hired, they will not be able to admit more patients. Columbia Falls has 3 residents and 10 staff sick with COVID. Wreaths Across America was successful and every veteran had a wreath for their grave. A resident that served as an Army Nurse in WWII celebrated her 100th birthday at the facility. Administrator Ackerman asked Joren if the staffing issues were because of funding. Joren said the Columbia Falls Veteran Homes is fully state owned and operated. Their budget consists of special revenue received from the cigarette tax. The other two facilities are contracted so are operated under a different budget. Joren mentioned other nursing facilities in Columbia Falls are also short staffed so it's an issue for the location. They were able to give pay increases which helped with not losing staff, but it has not helped recruit new staff. There were no other questions or comments.

Fort Harrison Headquarters Remodel Update

Administrator Ackerman

2:49

Headquarters' office in Fort Harrison next to the American Legion and VFW office has a moisture problem affecting the carpets. A remodel has been in the process since March 2021. MVAD received draft plans from the project yesterday and will approve of the plans. Its out for bid for the month of January and anticipates starting the remodel in March.

Potential Legislation for 2023 Session

Chairman Stone

2:50

Chairman Stone started with the goals to accomplish for the legislative session in 2023. MVAD first drafted proposal is 10 additional FTEs that consists of 6 administrative assistants, 3 cemetery landscape technicians, and 1 accountant. MVAD is also asking for 3 additional leased vehicles, one for each bureau chief and one for the Billings office. The majority of our offices are understaffed and need assistance answering phones, replying to emails, scheduling appointments, and filing. The cemeteries are understaffed in landscape technicians, and the Eastern cemetery only has 1 employee. To be in compliance with safety protocols, it's essential to have a minimum of 2 FTE in each cemetery. The Director's Office is doing a re-organization study, and we are anticipating financial work to be passed to the division. With the extra work load, we need an additional financial employee. These legislative proposals are the first draft, and we are expecting to work on these for the next 6 months.

Board Member Vacancies / Ending Terms	Chairman Stone	2:57
There are no ending terms.		

Issues / Comments / Questions

There are some discrepancies on the list of board members between MVADs board listing and the Governors website. Chairman Stone will work with Taryn and the Governor's office to fix this. Administrator Ackerman mentioned there are a few board members who will not be on the board anymore, but until they are replaced, they will still be a board member. Richard Klose commented that he would like to be informed of any events on the eastern side of Montana so he can attend.

Public Comment

There were no public comments.


Next Meeting

The board voted on hosting 3 meetings this year instead of quarterly. The next meeting will be June 8th, 2022, at 2:00 p.m. in Fort Harrison, MT. A zoom link will be provided for any who are not available for in person.

Adjournment

Chairman Stone adjourned the meeting at 15:08.


Taryn Phillips, Recorder


Mike Stone, Chairman