

# Montana Board of Veteran Affairs

## Meeting Minutes

September 2022 Board Meeting	
<b>Date</b>	September 7, 2022
<b>Time</b>	2:00 p.m.
<b>Location</b>	1956 Mt Majo St., Conference Room #113, Fort Harrison, MT 59636

Attendance	
Members	Staff
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chairman Mike Stone</li> <li>Vice-Chairman Ryan Beston</li> <li>Barb Skelton</li> <li>Brett Cusker</li> <li>Richard Klose</li> <li>Ryan Luchau</li> <li>Klayton Carroll</li> <li>Jennifer Dalrymple</li> <li>Dean Rehbein</li> <li>Charlotte Snyder</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kelly Ackerman, Administrator</li> <li>Taryn Phillips, Budget Analyst</li> <li>Karen Grindstaff, Administrative Assistant</li> <li>Matt Manning, Cemetery Bureau Chief</li> <li>Ryan Keeler, Veteran Service Officer Bureau Chief</li> </ul>
	Absent
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Non-Voting Member Marvin Weatherwax, Jr.</li> </ul>
Non-Voting Members	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thomas Finch</li> <li>Duane Cunningham</li> <li>MG John Hronek</li> <li>Joren Underdahl</li> <li>Denny Lenoir</li> <li>Michael Waters</li> </ul>	

Meeting Minutes		
Discussion Topic	Speaker	Time
<b>Pledge of Allegiance, roll call, introductions, and welcome</b>	<b>Chairman Stone</b>	<b>14:04</b>
<b>Approval of Minutes</b>	<b>Chairman Stone</b>	<b>14:07</b>
All board members were sent the minutes from June 2022 prior to the meeting for review. Richard Klose moved to approve the minutes of the June 8, 2022, meeting; the motion was seconded. Motion carried by unanimous consent.		
<b>VHA Update</b>	<b>Duane Cunningham</b>	<b>14:08</b>
<p>PACT Act approved; more details will be provided. Non-service/non-income veterans in VA Burn Pit Registry may qualify for benefits. The passage of the PACT Act will bring new challenges to VA Healthcare in Montana. The need for additional doctors, nurses, and other staff will increase due to an additional 10,000 veterans applying for benefits under the PACT Act.</p> <p>Travel pay continues to be an issue, especially for veterans who have no computer access. Paper claims are 3 months behind schedule. They are working on hiring more claims adjusters to handle the backlog.</p>		

Also rolling out soon is PCI. PCI provides the ability to check in for your appointments via your phone instead of the kiosk. This may present a challenge for older veterans who are not technologically savvy.

Chairman Stone commented that he met with the Veteran Liaison for Senator Tester's office, Kate Hahn, and they discussed the same issues about the PACT Act staffing issues as well as the impact on our Veteran Service Officers here in Montana, especially with upcoming appeals. There were no other questions or comments.

### **VBA Update**

**Ryan Keeler**

**14:13**

The Veterans Online Engagement Access Center held in July, assisted 197 veterans in 3 days. Another event will be hosted in January 2023 which will be the end of the 3-year test period for this program. Last year, Veteran Service Officers wrote 4,036 coded claims which provide federal income when the claim is adjudicated. In fiscal year 2022, MVAD brought in \$310 million in federal dollars to the state, an increase of 35 million dollars from the previous fiscal year.

PACT Act claims are being accepted and filed, and claim numbers are increasing considerably. While claims are being accepted and filed, there will be no adjudication until January 2023 at the earliest. This is based on the VA rules for adjudicating the PACT Act claims. PACT Act claims will not be handled the same as under the Nehmer rules where only 6 regional offices handled those claims. No special regional offices will be dedicated to the PACT Act claims, which should increase the speed at which the claims are filed.

Administrator Ackerman asked if a veteran files a claim today and the adjudication process starts in January, will the claim be retroactive to the date of filing?

Ryan answered yes and if there is an intent to file, it will be retroactive to the date as well. I have instructed the Veteran Services Officers if there are claims with several different issues, PACT Act or not, to file two claims. This way we can get those claims adjudicated now and in January the PACT Act claims will be adjudicated. There were no other questions or comments.

### **Cemetery Update**

**Matt Manning**

**14:17**

The fiscal year 2022 ended with a record year of 498 interments across all 3 state cemeteries. MVAD had the highest number of interments in July and the busiest August in Missoula for interments. 9 out of the 16 years it has been steadily increasing. Fort Harrison has the most interments of all cemeteries in the state, and Missoula is ranked 4th for interments in the state. The workload is increasing, and staffing is unable to keep up.

Fort Harrison (MSVC) had an NCA inspection in July and it went well. Noted discrepancies concerning personnel are being corrected. The main discrepancy is ordering the headstones within 10 days of the interment and having the headstone set within 60 days of the interment. The other noted discrepancy is if there is a correction needed on a headstone, getting a new headstone reordered within 4 days. The Miles City Cemetery Manager, Kurt, and Matt have been ordering the headstones for Fort Harrison. Aaron, the Cemetery Manager for Fort Harrison, and Jeremy, the Cemetery Manager in Missoula now have access to BOSS and can order headstones, but it is still difficult to get the headstones ordered within the 4-day timeframe. The other discrepancy noted was the tagging of urns which was corrected immediately. MSVC met the criteria by one percent.

Meetings will be held with each of the cemeteries in preparation for Wreaths Across America. With HB701 funds we were able to purchase a backhoe for the Missoula cemetery (WMSVC). WMSVC currently has a loaner until the new backhoe arrives. The side-by-sides for Fort Harrison and Missoula cemeteries should arrive in January. They will have heat and air conditioning, which will greatly benefit the groundskeepers.

September 15th MVAD is holding a special service for a WWI veteran in Missoula. It is open to anyone who wishes to attend. The veteran died and was buried in Russia in 1918, then later exhumed and buried in Missoula in 1929, and has had no headstone since. Matt worked with the family to get the headstone and we want to provide a nice service in honor of this veteran. The service will be at the old St. Mary's Cemetery in Missoula.

The volunteer program is a huge success. In August volunteers logged 200 hours at WMSVC and 250 hours in July. MVAD has been working with the United Way to add additional volunteers to the cemetery at MSVC and the Kiwanis have requested to provide volunteers at the cemetery in Miles City pending approval. It is a win-win for both the cemetery and the volunteers as they provide crucial service to veterans and their families. There were no other questions or comments.

**Horses Spirits Healing**

**Barb Skelton**

**14:23**

Horses Spirits Healing is a 501c3 non-profit that provides support for disabled veterans, their families, and community members. The equine facility receives donations that pay for the sessions as well as a grant from the VA that is applied for every year that pays for the VA referrals. There are 3 certified PATH instructors (Therapeutic Riding Instructors) who are recertified every year as well as a VA counselor that is on call. Last year over 200 veterans in 3000 sessions were assisted. The veterans set their own goals in many different sessions offered to fit their needs. We receive veterans from CAMO Court (Court Assisting Military Offenders) and referrals from the VA on Thursdays. Referrals are received from the American Legion and other veteran organizations. The sessions have greatly benefited our veterans and their families both mentally and physically. There is no age limit to attend the program.

The open house will be held on Saturday, September 24th with a veteran's drill team and a presentation of colors on horseback.

Horses Spirits Healing is working with Columbia University and a university in Pennsylvania to get equine therapy recognized as a medical therapy.

Matt asked if you must be a Montana resident to attend the sessions, Barb stated no, residency is not a requirement.

There were no other questions or comments

**DMA Update**

**MG Hronek**

**14:36**

Several servicemembers are still deployed, 500-600 army and another 100 in air support in the Africom region, support at the southwest border, and on the aviation side, we responded to the floods in June. DMA will have some servicemembers returning home in November.

The mental health of our service members and veterans, especially on the army side, and the stigma associated with it is a big concern. It is not only important to be physically fit but also mentally fit to do the job. Most do not reach out for help until it is too late and ultimately, they may have to be removed from duty. Administrator Ackerman has been helping to implement a mental fitness program through the Governor's Challenge, which will be easily accessed to assist Montana's service members and veterans. Suicide rates among the veteran population are increasing to a rate of 22 a day. It is a priority DMA makes available and accessible the tools and resources they need to help those that are serving, our veterans and reduce the suicide rate.

More veterans are coming to the state of Montana, and services and support need to be available and accessible to those veterans. The concern legislatively is how to continue to provide the necessary services to meet the growing demand for new veterans in the state. Administrator Ackerman is providing the data on revenue received and the number of veterans moving into the state so we can make sure we have the funding for MVADs Veteran Service Officers on the administrative side to handle the growth. This will be critical data to present in the next legislative session to provide this support.

The other legislative proposal is to hire more staff for MVAD cemeteries. The number of current staff at the cemeteries is a safety concern.

Also, MVAD is hoping to get initial concept approval for the Columbia Falls Cemetery.

There were no questions or comments.

**EMSVC Expansion Update**

**Administrator Ackerman**

**14:47**

The expansion project is about 98% complete. The floor in the committal shelter needs to be resurfaced. The complete expansion project needs to be done by October.

Now that there is a committal shelter, a few fires have started in the shelter, but it sustained no serious damage. Security cameras have been installed and hopefully, this will deter further issues.

There were no questions or comments.

**Veteran Home Update**

**Joren Underdahl**

**14:49**

Columbia Falls is currently at 53% capacity, with a waitlist of 202. Admissions continued to be slowed down due to staffing shortages. We have 34 open positions and are using temporary contract staff to fill some shifts for nurses and nurse assistants. High competition for all healthcare staff across the many facilities in Flathead County, as well as the high cost of housing, has made recruitment and retention our biggest challenge. Due to increasing construction costs, project money from the flooring and courtyard projects has been diverted to prioritize and complete the roofing project. Additional funds will be requested from the next legislature to readdress/complete the flooring and courtyard, as well as the HVAC airflow and filtration upgrades which are also unable to be completed due to increased costs above appropriation.

Butte cottages 1-3 are currently full. Cottage 4 is being used for the Veteran memory Care unit although we are not getting cost shares due to not being VA Recognized yet. Cottage 5 is complete, but the Recognition Survey process will not begin until the walkway project is completed given the corridor will connect cottages 4 & 5. The storage shed has arrived on site and is being fitted with electrical, sheetrock, and flooring. Work has begun on the dietary storage area in the garage that will allow for the cooler purchased by the southwest Veterans Foundation to be installed. Upon completion of the dietary area and the storage shed, we will begin the on-site laundry facility located in the garage. Actively admitting to the facility, and currently have 29 Veterans on the waitlist (non-secured), and 5 on the waitlist (for secured). Actively hiring currently with multiple openings which prevent the facility from bringing on more residents. Currently trying to staff the facility without bringing on any staffing agencies.

Glendive currently has 60 residents which is 75% of capacity. The memory care unit which is 16 beds is at 80% capacity. Last fall the current operator, Glendive Medical Center, notified the state of their intention to leave the contract a year early which would have resulted in an end date of June 2022. After two requests for proposal posting the state was unable to identify and contract a new operator. GMC has agreed to operate the facility to the end of the original contract until June of 2023. The state continues to search for a new contractor. There are three major projects in the planning stages: Remodel the interior of the building primarily in the resident rooms, hallways, and lobby areas. There will be new flooring, cabinetry, countertops, sinks, and paint throughout. Anticipating work being done across the winter months. The project to address ongoing problems with the roof and the fascia surrounding the building should start soon with work beginning this Fall. While the building has space designated for a comprehensive laundry area it is not fitted with a commercial washer and dryer. To date, the laundry has been transported to Glendive Medical Center. To make this more viable for a new vendor, the state is working to restore the laundry area to full functional capacity. There is no waitlist as there are beds available in each unit and there are currently 10 applications being processed for admission. Noticing an increase in Vietnam veterans and more mental health needs in our current admissions. Currently, 85% of the hours worked in direct patient care are staffed by agency personnel mostly from out of state. These are long-term contracts with most being at least 3 months. Many travelers return again and again which helps with continuity of care, but the situation is very expensive and potentially unsustainable.

Ryan asked when outreach would start in the Columbia Falls area veterans' home. Joren said I believe we can get this started again, post-covid as it has been a huge benefit to our veterans. There were no other questions or comments.

**Budget Overview**

**Taryn Phillips**

**14:57**

The fiscal year 2022 ended July 1st in the positive. DMA hired a new CFO two weeks before fiscal year-end. The biggest obstacle was making sure we had the cash to spend the authority. The authority left was not spent due to not having the cash. Since the fiscal year 2023 just started, at this time MVAD can afford our current operations, but, MVAD does not have the funding for more outreach or equipment repairs that need to be done on the cemetery side.

There were no questions or comments.

<b>Potential Legislation for 2023 Session</b>	<b>Administrator Ackerman</b>	<b>15:02</b>
<p>The legislation MVAD is proposing is in direct correlation to the staffing shortage and how MVAD receives revenue, whether it is state-special funds or general funds. The first proposal before the legislature is one full-time groundskeeper for each of the cemeteries and 6 full-time administrative assistants in the VSO offices to handle the outreach program. The second legislative proposal is the Columbia Falls Cemetery due to the growth of the veteran population in Flathead County. The cemetery will be located next to the Veteran's Home. The proposal is awaiting approval of the new construction grant. The third proposal is for a full-time Accountant in MVADs administrative office to assist the Budget Analyst. The fourth proposal is for two additional motor pool vehicles to grow the outreach program. A motor pool vehicle was delivered to the Billings office to start their outreach program.</p> <p>The final proposal is to change the language in the statute for HB701 to read that Montana Veterans Affairs Division revenue received from recreational marijuana will be 3% or \$200,000 whichever is greater or have the cap removed. Currently, it is 3% or \$200,000 whichever is less which caps it at \$200,000. There were no questions or comments.</p>		
<b>Fort Harrison Headquarters Remodel Update</b>	<b>Administrator Ackerman</b>	<b>15:18</b>
<p>The furniture is now in the conference room, and MVAD is waiting for the data cable to be run so the TV can be mounted. This will be MVADs first dedicated conference room. The receptionist desk is being set up today in MVADs administrative office. There were no questions or comments.</p>		
<b>Board Member Vacancies/Ending Terms</b>	<b>Administrator Ackerman</b>	<b>15:20</b>
<p>The board currently has two vacancies in voting and two in non-voting member positions. The Governor's office is not adding or replacing board members at this time, so if you are a board member, and you are past your term ending date, you are still a board member until you are replaced by the Governor's office. Currently, we still have a quorum of 6 board members. Richard Klose asked if quorum requirements would need to be adjusted. Administrator Ackerman said yes, we would have to since for a quorum we need 6 board members. As it stands, either the language in the statute would need to change or the term of board members would need to be extended beyond a one-year term. There were no other questions or comments.</p>		

### Issues / Comments / Questions

The gun show is this weekend in Kalispell, and we expect the VSOs will be referring 15 to 20 veterans for the 3-day event. Chairman Stone will also be dropping off stress balls and pill boxes for the Libby Stand Down from the coalition.

In Forsythe and Miles City for the Suicide Prevention Training, you can come when sugar beet harvesting is done.

There will be a Women's Veterans Town Hall on September 9, 2022, at 5:00 pm on the VA's Facebook page.

The Governor's Challenge meeting that was supposed to be held in September is now postponed until November. It will be more comprehensive and have organizations that have a part in touching the lives of our veterans and their families. Updates to follow.

### Public Comment

There were no public comments.

### Next Meeting

January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022, at 14:00 at Fort Harrison, MT MVAD Conference Room 112.

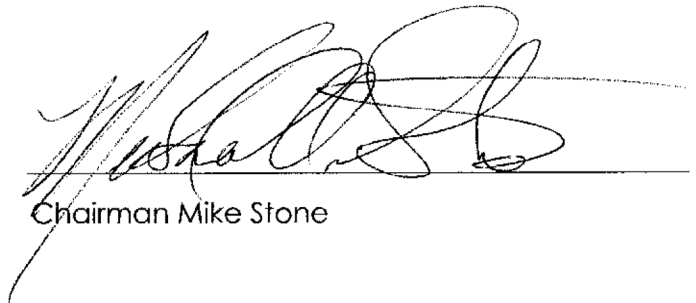
**Adjournment**

Chairman Stone adjourned the meeting at 15:30

*Karen Grindstaff*

---

Karen Grindstaff, Recorder



Chairman Mike Stone