

Montana Board of Veteran Affairs

Meeting Minutes

January 2024 Board Meeting

Date	January 10, 2024
Time	2:00 p.m.
Location	Teleconference, HAFRC Room #112, Fort Harrison, MT 59636

Attendance

Members	Staff
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chairman Mike Stone Jen Dalrymple Roger Hagan Richard Klose Kurt Nelson 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kelly Ackerman, Administrator Taryn Phillips, Budget Analyst Matt Manning, Cemetery Bureau Chief Janine Mahn, VSO Bureau Chief
Non-Voting Members	Guest
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duane Cunningham Denny Lenoir Joren Underdahl MG John P Hronek Daniel Griffin Scott Hagan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bill Woon, Special Forces Association
	Absent
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-Voting Member Misty Kuhl Non-Voting Member Kate Hahn

Meeting Minutes

Discussion Topic	Speaker	Time
Pledge of Allegiance, roll call, introductions, and welcome	Administrator Ackerman	14:01
Approval of Minutes	Chairman Stone	14:22
<p>All board members were sent the minutes from the November 2023 meeting prior to today for review. Roger Hagan moved to approve the minutes of the November 01, 2023, meeting; Richard Klose seconded. Motion carried by unanimous consent.</p>		
DMA Updates	MG Hronek	14:05
<p>The State of Montana is currently on the off year for the legislative cycle which means we will spend 2024 preparing for the upcoming session while reflecting on the 2023 session. MVAD had a bill pass during the 2023 legislative session which restructured the Montana Board of Veteran Affairs. MVAD also had some issues with funding for their base budget, so DMA will focus on fixing the base budget for MVAD to provide a solid starting point for upcoming biennium's. We are currently in the first step of the legislative prep which is discussing what MVAD's needs are. MVAD is looking to request funding for all the new personnel, and an equipment fund for the cemetery program. Administrator Ackerman will provide more details later during this meeting.</p> <p>Roger Hagan provided study information to MG Hronek from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) regarding reservist receiving compensation. There is a disconnect from active duty and reservists getting assessed into the VA system. This study highlighted that disconnect and they are working on solutions for this issue. There will be a new form called DD214-1 which will have a better synopsis of a reservist's federal service, their training, and prior service. This form will start for</p>		

veterans leaving the service now, it will not backdate to veterans who have already separated. New guidance and instruction from Department of Defense will be distributed within the next year.

MVAD Updates

Administrator Ackerman

14:26

The Montana Veteran Affairs Division has had a tremendous amount of staffing changes for fiscal year 2024. MVAD obtained 10 FTE as modified positions which contain 6 Administrative Assistants placed in 6 of the 9 Veteran Service Offices, 3 Groundskeepers, and 1 Accountant. All Administrative Assistants and Groundskeepers have been hired and are on board. The Administrative Assistants are in Belgrade, Billings, Butte, Great Falls, Kalispell, and Missoula. Each cemetery received 1 Groundskeeper. The accountant position was originally posted in September but was pulled and reposted at a higher wage to match what other departments pay for Accountants. The higher wage should be posted to mt.gov this week. The vacancies the agency currently have consists of; a Cemetery Manager in Fort Harrison, two Groundskeepers in Fort Harrison, two Veteran Service Officers in Belgrade and Great Falls, two VSO Program Supervisors in the North and East regions, an Accountant, and an Admin Assistant in the headquarters office. MVAD has had multiple retirements of upper management positions in the Veteran Services Program. The VSO Bureau Chief, Ryan Keeler, resigned in August 2023, and was filled interim by Janine Mahn. Janine Mahn was selected as the permanent Bureau Chief effective January 2024. Janine's prior position as the East VSO Program Supervisor will be recruited along with the North VSO Program Supervisor which was held by Dan Arnold. Dan Arnold not only held the position as the North VSO Program Supervisor, but also as the Department Service Officer for the VFW. Once the two Program Supervisors are selected, MVAD will move forward with recruiting the two VSOs with the expected timeframe of February to March.

VHA Updates

Duane Cunningham

14:36

The Interim Director at the Fort Harrison VA Hospital is extending their position as Interim Director. The staffing issue is still relevant: there have been quite a few positions filled, but also many people resigning. The Billings VA hospital is utilizing interim doctors as they fill the vacant full-time positions. VHA is integrating into a new records management system by the end of 2024. There is also a new app that combines VHA and VBA that is published. There are a few key features that aren't available on the app yet, but it's expected to be completed by the end of the year. This app is called VA Health and Benefits and uses ID me or login.gov to create an account. The login.gov is easier and more user friendly, but it still requires submission of an identification card. This app has a page for healthcare including medical information, messaging providers, tracking appointments; and has a page for benefits which includes claim tracking, disability information, and compensation award information. The ability to submit for travel pay will be added to the app by the end of the year. Duane will be traveling across Montana to convert around 40,000 people to the app. Duane then gave an update on the Long-Term Needs Study run by the Department of Health and Human Services (DPHHS). The website for this project is published and ready for viewing. The survey is estimated to be 10 minutes and contains 55 questions. The survey is currently only offered in a digital format because DPHHS doesn't have the funding or staffing to consolidate results of paper surveys. This issue was just brought to Duane and Roger Hagan's attention on January 9th and is being discussed. It was agreed paper surveys are extremely beneficial because most elderly veterans won't participate in a digital survey. Duane encouraged all members to forward the link to the website to all veterans and spread the word that the survey is ready for use. The website is: <https://dphhs.mt.gov/veteransLIC/>.

VBA Updates

Janine Mahn

14:43

MVAD is currently internally recruiting for the North Region Veteran Program Supervisor, the East Region Veteran Program Supervisor, and the VFW Department Service Officer. Claims production for July 1, 2023 to current are 2,833 total claims and 618 PACT Act claims. Nationally there are 5,743 PACT Act claims with 81% acceptance rate and an average of 163 days for turnaround. There is a backlog of claims due to nationwide vacancies of claim adjusters. MVAD attended events in Pablo and Browning which were huge successes, and it has been decided those events will continue to happen. The next scheduled events are in September and October 2024 in Pablo and Browning. These events bring together the veterans, VBA, and a VSO to produce claims. MVAD also has been performing outreach since the beginning of the year and attending the Standdown events in Fort Benton and Crow Agency. Dan Griffin asked if the backlog of claims is specific to Montana or nationwide; Janine answered it's nationwide due to low staffing.

Veterans Home Updates

Joren Underdahl

14:48

A Chief Administrative Officer for the Healthcare Facilities Division was selected, her name is Jennifer Savage and has oversight of all the Montana Veterans Homes.

Montana Veteran Home in Columbia Falls has an occupancy of 59% and admissions are ongoing from the waitlist. There are over thirty vacant positions, mostly consisting of Certified Nurse Aides. Using agency travel staff to supplement so we can continue to accept admissions and provide care. The flooring replacement project has also been recently awarded to a local contractor with work scheduled to begin next week. This will be highly disruptive due to asbestos abatement of flooring tile/glue in the old floor and will require temporarily relocating entire hallways of residents at a time to other empty rooms to allow for the abatement. Special Care Unit (memory care) courtyard improvement project has been awarded to the same local contractor doing the flooring replacement, with work to begin in the spring as weather allows. Project to upgrade to HVAC system for higher level filtration has been stalled until the roofing replacement project is started. The roofing placement project has been awarded, work to begin in the spring as weather allows.

The Eastern Montana Veteran Home in Glendive has an occupancy hovering around 66% capacity with the Memory Care Unit mostly full. The facility recognizes concerns related to veterans who are living with dementia and who have aggressive behaviors and are at risk of denial of admission or discharge. Plans are being developed to apply for a VA Construction Grant to remodel an area in the existing building to provide a secure, safe environment for these veterans without placing others in harm's way. This grant application is due in April and if approved would lead to a Long-Range Budget request to be discussed in the 2025 legislative session unless other match funding can be identified. Interior remodel being done with COVID funding is moving right along with Phase I complete, Phase II 70% complete and Phase III scheduled to begin in February. The exterior project is nearly complete with a delay happening due to the contractor waiting on materials to finalize the project. EMVH Foundation is spending >\$70,000 to improve the resident courtyard with Phase I and II being completed due to the weather holding out this Fall; Phase III will be completed in the Spring. The new management company, Eduro, which took over operations in March remains successful keeping the management personnel mostly in place and has managed to significantly reduce the use of traveling nursing staff by hiring locally.

Southwest Montana Veteran Home in Butte has nearly 100% occupancy for the three VA certified cottages. The 4th and 5th cottages have yet to be certified by the VA and the request for this recognition survey has been delayed due to the construction of building connectors. These cottages are however being used for patient stays when other funding sources are available. Connectors are being built between the cottages to improve resident and staff experience. One connector is complete and the other two have been started. The State has applied for a VA Construction Grant to fund the building of the 6th and final cottage. This will be reviewed by the VA in the Spring. A new State Administrative Officer/Liaison has been hired and will begin employment on January 9th. She is a native to Butte, and her name is Arin Boehmer.

Roger Hagan mentioned there was an increase of minimum dollars from cigarette tax to DPHHS.

2025 Legislation and Future Strategies

Administrator Ackerman

14:55

In preparation of the 2025 legislation, MVAD is brainstorming ideas for legislative asks and potential bills. MVAD is planning to focus this session on obtaining a sustainable base budget for the agency, along with asking our modified positions to become permanent. The 10 modified positions are estimated at \$700,000 per fiscal year, and we plan on requesting an additional three FTE to put an Administrative Assistant in every VSO office. The additional three FTE costs an estimated amount of \$300,000 per year. MVAD is also looking for funding for the cemetery program that is consistent and sustainable. The current funding is based on how many burials are performed each year, and a small percentage of license plate transfers. Cash is always low, and with the raising costs of personnel and operations, the program needs HB2 funding. MVAD proposes changing the statute for the cemetery program to only be statutorily appropriated for operations and maintenance; and all employees' wages and benefits be covered under HB2. MVAD is also looking to fix the appropriation for the marijuana revenue. MVAD is currently allocated \$200,000 cash each fiscal year from the revenue of marijuana sales; however, MVAD is not allocated appropriation for the fund. The \$200,000 cash will be unspent until the appropriation is fixed through legislature. We are also looking at increasing funding to cover the expected cost for the Great Falls new office lease. The current lease is around \$1,000 a month, and we are expecting a new lease to cost around \$3,500. One last line item MVAD is proposing is a continuous equipment fund for the cemetery of \$300,000 per year. This will ensure equipment for the three cemeteries, soon to be four cemeteries, will be on a consistent replacement schedule.

MG Hronek reminded all board members that all legislative planning we've discussed is not the final plan and has not gone through the approval process in the Governor's office. This plan is the first step to planning for the session, and it's all a discussion about the vision for MVAD.

Upcoming Events in Each Region

All Board Members

15:08

In Great Falls, there will be a VFW District 1 mid-winter conference on January 27th. It was asked if a Veteran Service Officer will be in attendance since the VFW Department Service Officer is currently vacant. Janine

offered to have a Veteran Service Officer in attendance, but it was determined a VSO was not needed for this conference.

MVAD Annual Training will be held in Helena on April 15th-18th 2024 at the Best Western hotel.

Women Veteran's Symposium on May 4th in Laurel.

Health and Wellness Fair on June 25th in Glasgow.

Budget Overview

Taryn Phillips

15:20

Fiscal year 2024 is on track for expenditures. The division should be spent under 50% of authority as of January because January 1st marks the half-way mark for the fiscal year. The Veteran Services Program has 55% spent in general fund for personnel, but only 34% spent for personnel services through state special revenue so the spending levels out. The cemetery program is experiencing a cash shortage with the cash being -\$14,622 as of January 5th but has pending deposits of \$21,655. The cemetery program is a constant juggling act with cash because payroll is around \$20,000 per pay period. MVAD is focusing on fixing the cash issue in the cemetery program during this next session.

Cemetery Expansion and Program Updates

Matt Manning

15:23

The three cemeteries have all grown in internments in the past few years. The voluntary work has been helpful and the Missoula volunteers were recently awarded for their service. There is an inspection in Missoula scheduled for July 16th and 17th, 2024. The biggest concern for the inspection is not being able to place headstones during the winter. Expansion for the Missoula cemetery is scheduled in the spring/summer of 2025. Fort Harrison received \$2 million in an expansion grant to include additional columbarium walls and more inground burial sections. This grant will not fund roads or paving, so MVAD will have to budget the costs of paving. MVAD also requested the \$2 million grant to fund a new administrative building for the cemetery employees. This would include private offices, a conference room, a break area, and bathrooms. The current shop has a private office, and a break room which holds the two groundskeeper's desk. It is not ideal for privacy, and it's not safe for the public to meet with our staff due to the equipment. MVAD is proposing legislation to provide funding in building a new shop in a better location, and a larger shop to maintain all our equipment appropriately.

The potential Columbia Falls Veterans Cemetery is currently being worked on for an establishment grant through the National Cemetery Administration. The State of Montana currently owns the land through DPHHS, meaning we will be able to submit a pre-application and supporting documents during the state fiscal year 2024. Once the pre-application is submitted, we will be put on a wait list for funding to become available. The grant estimated cost is \$8 million and this would provide enough burial space for the first 10 years as well as the necessary equipment.

Reminder to all board members for information, spouses and dependent children are eligible to be buried in a state veterans cemetery with an eligible veteran. Contact Matt at 406-721-2995 with any questions regarding eligibility requirements. Corey Shea ACT, if a servicemember died as result of hostile casualty or from training-related injuries and has no spouses or children to be buried with the servicemember, the parents can be interred with the servicemember.

Question from Jen Dalrymple – what are the current fees for spouse internments in the state veteran's cemeteries? Matt listed the different internments and the costs for each type of burial which is also listed on the DMA.mt.gov/MVAD website. Roger Hagan asked Matt to send the current rates for the cemeteries to himself and Jen.

Joren mentioned the Columbia Falls permanent easement is currently being discussed by lawyers to officially sign the land over to MVAD.

Roger mentioned he received a map from Undersecretary Matt Quinn showing all the federal and state cemeteries in the USA, Roger will give the map to Administrator Ackerman to mail to Matt Manning.

Issues / Comments / Questions

Administrator Ackerman mentioned to Roger his involvement in the SAMHSA Washington DC conference. Administrator Ackerman advised Roger to represent the Montana Board of Veteran Affairs during this conference and attend as a board sponsored activity. MVAD had involvement in SAMHSA for over 5 years and was the representative for the Governor's Challenge, and this event would be a good opportunity to represent the board. Chairman Stone agreed and gave permission to represent the board.

The voting board members will receive official business cards in the mail in the next couple of months.

Public Comment

None.

Next Meeting

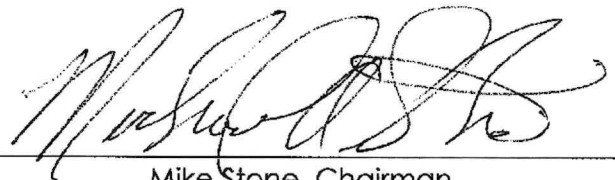
April 10th, 2024 at 14:00 in person in Fort Harrison, MT.

Adjournment

Chairman Stone adjourned the meeting at 15:51.



Taryn Phillips, Recorder



Mike Stone, Chairman