

# Montana Board of Veteran Affairs

## Meeting Minutes

### September 2024 Board Meeting

<b>Date</b>	September 4, 2024
<b>Time</b>	2:00 p.m.
<b>Location</b>	HAFRC Conference Room #113, Fort Harrison, MT 59636

### Attendance

Voting Members	Staff
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chairman Mike Stone</li> <li>Vice-Chairman Roger Hagan</li> <li>Richard Klose</li> <li>Kurt Nelson</li> <li>Chauncey Parker</li> <li>Jen Dalrymple</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Taryn Phillips, Budget Analyst</li> <li>Matt Manning, Cemetery Bureau Chief</li> <li>Janine Mahn, VSO Bureau Chief</li> <li>Emily Haley, Accountant</li> <li>Bridger Ellis, Administrative Assistant</li> <li>BG Renea Dorvall, Deputy Director</li> </ul>
Non-Voting Members	Executive Council
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Duane Cunningham</li> <li>Denny Lenoir</li> <li>Joren Underdahl</li> <li>MG John P Hronek</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mike Stone, Chairman</li> <li>Roger Hagan, Vice-Chairman</li> <li>Kelly Ackerman, MVAD Administrator</li> </ul>
	Absent
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Non-Voting Member Misty Kuhl</li> <li>Non-Voting Member Jeffrey Hagan, II</li> <li>Non-Voting Member Kate Hahn</li> <li>Non-Voting Member Dan Griffin</li> </ul>

### Meeting Minutes

Discussion Topic	Speaker	Time
<b>Pledge of Allegiance, roll call, introductions, and welcome</b>	<b>Chairman Stone</b>	<b>14:00</b>
<b>Approval of Minutes</b>	<b>Chairman Stone</b>	<b>14:16</b>
<p>All board members were sent the minutes from the April 2024 meeting before today for review. Vice-Chairman Hagan motioned for corrections to the minutes. Under DMA Updates, line 8, to read "Announced on April 9<sup>th</sup>, the Air Guard will be the first..."; second correction to minutes is under DMA Updates, line 10, to read "get more people to recruit to the National Guard...". Jen Dalrymple motioned to approve the minutes as corrected of the April 10, 2024, meeting; Kurt Nelson seconded. The motion was carried by unanimous consent.</p>		
<b>DMA Updates</b>	<b>MG Hronek</b>	<b>14:02</b>
<p>MG Hronek joined the meeting via Zoom from Washington, DC, where he attended the Air National Guard Senior Fly-in for the TAG and ATAG levels. They are discussing future requirements for the Air National Guard as the total force of the Air Force. MG Hronek sat in as his Title 10 status, advising DC as the TAG. MG Hronek wanted first to welcome BG Renae Dorvall to the meeting and thank her for accepting the job as the state Deputy Director of the Department of Military Affairs. She is here today to support MVAD and the board of its mission of taking care of Montana veterans. MG Hronek stated he's proud of MVAD; they continually provide great services to veterans, administrative support, and cemetery programs. The focus for MVAD during this</p>		

upcoming legislative session is to ensure our base budget is set. MVAD has been working with the Governor's office to plan budgetary needs to ensure proper funding for MVAD programs and staff. The last session didn't receive total budget, and the appropriation was not long-term, but MVAD was able to obtain financial assistance from the Governor's office to support our needs. Growing in FTE will be more challenging, but we will use our statistical data to support our need for the current modifieds to become permanent FTE. Getting this budget right for this upcoming session will be critical, and MG Hronek will look to the board for support during legislative hearings. Another financial ask MVAD proposes is in HB5, which will demolish the facility at the Fort Harrison cemetery and build a new facility to house all the equipment and staffing for operations. MVAD has also awaiting approval from the NCA regarding the Columbia Falls cemetery, we are optimistic Columbia Falls will be approved this fall. DMA and MVAD staff will be attending a State Administration and Veterans Administration (SAVA) subcommittee hearing on September 5<sup>th</sup> to pre-introduce bills for sponsorship. We have two bills that will be discussed, the first is language change in the Board of Veteran Affairs statute to align more with the functions of state government. Currently, the Administrator is hired by the Board and falls under the Board for HR duties, however, MG Hronek is the Administrator's supervisor and provides all HR support. This language change will show DMA's Director/TAG will be the supervisor for the MVAD Administrator and will represent the board in all HR actions. The second bill for discussion is Defend the Guard. MG Hronek heavily opposes this bill. Essentially the bill states there must be a declaration of war to utilize the National Guard. MG Hronek urges the Board to research this bill and join him and the Governor in opposing this bill. This bill would be very bad for the Guard because we have built a strong National Guard and need to oppose this bill.

For updates regarding the Army and Air Guard, we will have deployments next year. Recruitment has been better; we are in the low 400s for vacancies. The GRIP program is still available, anyone who has served can receive \$1,000 for helping recruit new servicemembers. MG Hronek opened for any questions, there were no questions or comments.

**MVAD Updates**

**Administrator Ackerman**

**14:19**

The MVAD Great Falls office has relocated to a new location. Finding a new location that meets our needs has been an ongoing challenge, but we secured one in July 2024. The new address is 104 2<sup>nd</sup> St S, Ste 200. Safety concerns with the previous location prompted this move. The transition to the new site was difficult. There were issues with the air conditioning, and the Wi-Fi wasn't set up until this week. We are officially all set up, and Administrator Ackerman invites all board members to stop in and thank our VSOs for what they dealt with during the transition. The MVAD Butte office will remain in the old readiness center. A new readiness center has been constructed in Butte, and the original plan was for the MVAD Butte office to move to the new building. However, there wasn't adequate space for our staff; it was not ADA accessible and wouldn't be the best option for MVAD. The Mayor of Butte purchased the old readiness center, so DMA and MVAD leadership met with the mayor and agreed to stay in the old readiness center. MVAD will pay an annual lease of \$1.00 per year for the next ten years.

MVAD has been filling all vacancies and has one left for a Groundskeeper in Fort Harrison. The governor's office approved this new, modified position in FY2025. Interviews are being conducted this week. MVAD is still integrating the production of the software company Qualtrics in the programs. The software has been working exceptionally well and is collecting data throughout the state. MVAD is also implementing a cemetery management software program, for which Bridger Ellis is currently transferring the data from Excel spreadsheets, Word documents, and PDFs to the software. Administrator Ackerman concluded the MVAD updated discussion and opened it for questions or comments. Vice-Chairman Hagan asked what Qualtrics provides in terms of data and analytics. Taryn responded that we are currently collecting data on the services we provide to veterans. Our focus for these first surveys is to use data to assist leadership in strategic planning and future needs. Questions asked include where veterans are demographically located, how far they traveled to meet with a VSO, if outreach would benefit their town, how long it took to receive a callback or returned email, and general questions like if the office was clean and organized. The benefit of Qualtrics is that we can use the software to build it to meet our needs; we are just at the first stage of this program and are utilizing it to provide data to justify our staffing needs. Duane asked if the survey is open to only veterans who file a claim. Taryn responded that the survey is available to any veteran who received a service from a staff member; it could be a simple phone call to ask a question, file a claim, etc. The cemetery program also has a survey open to the public, and QR codes are posted at each location. Vice-Chairman Hagan asked if the data is available only to MVAD or the public. Taryn responded the data is only available to MVAD at this time. Data can be shared with anyone who requests the information. We haven't gotten to the stage of determining what data should be available to the public versus only available to internal stakeholders. Vice-Chairman Hagan mentioned we need to have a clearinghouse for all publicly available

resources available to veterans and asked if Qualtrics is capable of doing this. Taryn responded this is the plan in the upcoming stages.

Kurt Nelson asked if the financial impact data is part of the survey and the data we collect. Janine Mahn responded that the financial impact metrics are calculated internally by MVAD to calculate the federal dollars the VA awards veterans due to the claims we produce.

Chauncey Parker asked a question regarding the Qualtrics software. It was stated earlier that this data was being used to justify current staffing, but is it also being used to evaluate the need for additional VSO? MVAD responded yes. Chauncey Parker also commented that, hopefully, we will be able to track data and find information on native veterans specific to tribes. MVAD responded that yes, and we can track that data as well.

### VHA Updates

Duane Cunningham

14:37

A nationwide mandate will come on February 1, 2025, preventing access to a government website without an IDme or login.gov. This includes government agencies like the Department of Veteran Affairs, IRS, etc. Many veterans do not have IDme and won't be able to access MyHealthyVet until they make an account. From October to November of 2024, every UPS facility will receive a kiosk to assist people in getting an IDme account. This will help them upload a photo and fill out the required fields, making the process easier for veterans. Montana will be one of two states to trial a kiosk in the VA hospital, hopefully by the end of October 2024.

Comment from Duane: He has received phone calls regarding the new office in Great Falls, and veterans have stated they are pleased and have been saying good things.

Administrator Ackerman asked if any advertisements regarding the new mandate had been pushed or if any posters were available. Duane answered no; there had been no advertisement push.

### VBA Updates

Janine Mahn

14:44

The MVAD Veteran Services Program is currently fully staffed. MVAD restructured its organization to add two supervisors, one for Billings and one for Kalispell. This ensures that all offices have the same structure and advancement opportunities, which will help with retention and consistency in the Veteran Services Program. As of August 1st, all vacancies have been filled. MVAD's caseload for FY24 was 5,894 claims, a record-breaking number, and the overall financial impact is over \$400 million, also a record-breaking number. MVADs growth for claim products from FY2022 to FY2024 is 45.83%, and MVADs growth for compensation to veterans from FY2022 to FY2024 is 37.70%. Our concern is that while our VSOs care for the veterans, we also care for our staff. MVAD's total claims for July 2024 to present is 1,064, which has already surpassed last year's numbers for this time frame. PACT Act claims produced by MVAD for July 2024 to current are 236. VBA informs MVAD of VA events for VSOs to participate. These VA events are incredibly beneficial, and MVAD can substantially support veterans at these events. Upcoming events in Montana will be shared shortly in the September board report for board member support. Chairman Stone asked Janine to share MVAD's statistics and information for an upcoming meeting he is attending. Janine stated she would share our newsletter, which shows our statistics. This data will also be listed on the monthly board report.

### Veterans Home Updates

Joren Underdahl

14:53

The Columbia Falls MVH occupancy is 67%, and qualifying admissions are accepted without a waitlist. The annual VA inspection/survey was conducted during the last week of May and cited zero clinical or health concerns. MVH continues to have about 19 open positions, 14 of which are certified nurse aides. MVH is using agency travel staff to supplement their services so they can continue to accept admissions and provide high-quality care. Other than some final trim and doorway transition issues, the flooring replacement project has been completed. The Special Care Unit (memory/dementia care) courtyard improvement project is nearly complete with lighting, fence/gate, and railing. The roofing replacement project is almost complete, with edge trim pieces being installed to finish out. With the roof project finishing up, the project to update the HVAC system for higher-level filtration is also nearly complete, with initial startup, testing, and balancing of airflows being done this week.

The Glendive EMVH occupancy remains around 65% capacity. EMVH is due this month for their annual VA inspection and survey. The exterior project to replace the fascia and repair the roof is complete, and the interior remodel is waiting on funding to complete the rest of the project. The project to install a commercial laundry in the facility has been completed, allowing the facility to process its laundry in-house and not send it out to an outside vendor. A new Director of Nursing (DON) is in place at the facility; the Assistant DON (ADON) stepped up when the position was vacated, and a new ADON was hired. A new Medical Director has also been contracted since the loss of service with Glendive Medical Center. He is a physician out of South Dakota specializing in nursing home care, and he hired a local mid-level practitioner to be at the facility each week. The new doctor is also a pilot and flies from South Dakota to Glendive to see the home's residents.

The Butte SWMVH occupancy for the 3 VA-certified cottages has been 100%. The annual VA inspection and survey were conducted last week, and we await the final report of any findings. The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> cottages have yet to be certified by the VA, but a recognition survey has been ordered for December 2024. These cottages are, however, being utilized for patient stays when other funding sources are available. Cottage 4 is at 80-100% occupancy, and Cottage 5 is unoccupied. Staffing is provided by the contract company, Eduro, which operates the facility. We need full staffing for cottage five and other CNA, nursing, dietary, and housekeeping staff. Connectors have been built between the cottages to improve resident and staff experience, especially during inclement weather. All three connectors are complete and in the final walk-through approval phase with architecture, the state, and life safety. The State has applied for a VA Construction Grant to fund the 6<sup>th</sup> and final cottage building, now pending approval from the VA. The physical therapy flooring project has been completed; the old flooring was becoming a tripping hazard. Vice-Chairman Hagan praised Administrator Ackerman and Joren Underdahl. A constituent had been putting off going to a veteran's home, and Administrator Ackerman connected the veteran with Joren, who took care of the veteran quickly.

<b>Legislation Asks/ Scholarship Application</b>	<b>Administrator Ackerman</b>	<b>15:02</b>
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MVAD is currently evaluating the plan for legislative asks, and it's too early to discuss it at this board meeting. MVAD will have this discussion topic on the agenda for the next board meeting. Instead, Administrator Ackerman will change this discussion topic to the Purple Heart Scholarship Application. MVAD received the first-ever Purple Heart Scholarship for a veteran attending Flathead Valley Community College. He submitted the application and his DD-214 to the administrative office, which is available for review by the Board members. He is eligible to receive this \$1,000 scholarship and is being awarded the scholarship.

<b>Governors Challenge</b>	<b>Janine Mahn</b>	<b>15:10</b>
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MVAD has two VSOs representing the division in the Governor's Challenge meetings: Sara Ball in Missoula and Brenda Evans in Havre. The Governor's Challenge is to prevent suicide among servicemembers. Janine attended a NASDVA conference in Administrator Ackerman's absence, and there was a heavy focus on the Governor's Challenge. Janine spoke with other states to see what other states are accomplishing, and she is bringing back ideas to share with the team, increasing MVAD's efforts. There is an event on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2025, in Billings, which our staff will attend. BG Dorvall commented that MG Hronek met with the Governor to discuss having the Governor's Challenge revived. This program hasn't received any funds since it was initiated, and it was brought up potential funding might be available down the road. Vice-Chairman Hagan commented that he attended an innovation conference in San Diego and has new ideas from different states. It's exciting to see this project revived. The focus here in Montana was three priority areas: identifying risks, connecting, and increasing lethal means of safety and planning. There is a meeting this month, September 24<sup>th</sup>, to pursue the third priority group of lethal means safety. Vice-Chairman Hagan thanked everyone involved and stated it's encouraging to hear there is potential funding.

<b>Budget Overview</b>	<b>Taryn Phillips</b>	<b>15:19</b>
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MVAD ended FY24 in the positive for both appropriation and cash. HB2 General Fund, which funds the Veteran Services Program and the Administrative Office, was 100% spent. HB2 State Special Revenue spent 99% on personnel expenses and 98% on operations. The remaining funds were restricted funding that could only be used for certain expenses. The cemetery program was spent 90% on personnel and 39% on operations, ending with \$62k in cash. The cash rolls over to the next fiscal year to provide enough money to cover July and August expenses. Vice-Chairman Hagan asked if these funds carry forward to the new fiscal year. Taryn answered that only one of these funds carries forward: the restricted funding unspent in HB2 state special revenue. These funds are used for Legislative Audit costs and are our only carry-forward fund.

<b>Cemetery Expansion and Program Updates</b>	<b>Matt Manning</b>	<b>15:26</b>
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The Western Montana State Veterans Cemetery (WMSVC) in Missoula recently underwent an NCA inspection. There were four discrepancies, one was that paper towels weren't restocked in the bathrooms, even though a checklist had been signed stating that the bathroom was restocked and clean. Overall, the inspectors were pleased, and we received high scores. MVAD has identified two more First Special Forces veterans in Fort Harrison, and we have reordered stones for these veterans. MVAD has also ordered new medallions to adhere to the headstones. We are currently working on ordering a monument to be placed in Helena by August 2025 for the First Special Forces reunion. Fort Harrison is receiving bids for the construction expansion grant, which closes on September 17<sup>th</sup>. Fort Harrison is running out of space in the columbarium walls quickly. Columbia Falls cemetery establishment grant has been submitted to NCA and is awaiting priority listing. Columbia Falls is estimated to serve 17k veterans within a 75-mile radius, so we estimate priority listing number 29. This is a rough estimate, and MVAD will not know the priority listing until later this year. MVAD is currently accepting pre-registrations for the Columbia Falls cemetery. Missoula had a windstorm that

destroyed 25 trees' roots, and an additional five trees were excessively damaged. The trees were removed the same day with help from the VFW, American Legion, and Groundskeeper in Fort Harrison. Fort Harrison is receiving applications for the third Groundskeeper and is interviewing this week. Applications are improving; it's believed to be because of the increased wages in the Cemetery Program. Missoula has 400 niches that are unusable in our cemeteries due to a standard set by NCA. They are in excellent condition and can be donated to other cemeteries that don't fall under the NCA guidelines. Missoula is due for an expansion this upcoming federal fiscal year, and there is a possibility of obtaining more acreage to keep expanding our cemetery.

### Issues / Comments / Questions

Vice-Chairman Hagan stated that the board should consider interacting more with DMA regarding budget preparation for MVAD. The Board should be involved in the legislation process and budget preparation. The Board should also consider a subcommittee to review rules and statutes that affect veterans to review and consolidate rules. Shannon Wilson has replaced Joe Fletcher as the appointed Vice-Chair at the VFW Department; she is also a Great Falls city commissioner and is involved in upcoming legislation to promote veteran and military issues. She will be an asset to our legislation statewide and nationally. Vice-Chairman Hagan also stated he is no longer a lobbyist but will still attend legislation for public comment as a veteran. He does not plan on representing any organization but will represent the Board if asked.

### Public Comment

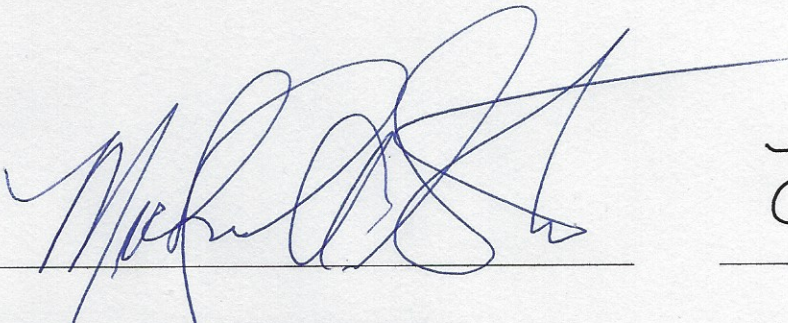
None.

### Next Meeting

December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024 at 14:00 via teleconference.

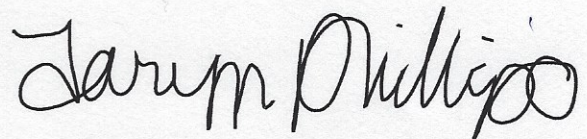
### Adjournment

Chairman Stone adjourned the meeting at 15:43.



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Mike Stone, Chairman



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Taryn Phillips, Recorder