

# Montana Board of Veteran Affairs

## Meeting Minutes

June 2022 Board Meeting	
<b>Date</b>	June 8, 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>Brett Cusker</li> <li>Richard Klose</li> <li>Ryan Luchau</li> <li>Klayton Carroll</li> <li>Jennifer Dalrymple</li> <li>Charlotte Snyder</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kelly Ackerman, Administrator</li> <li>Taryn Phillips, Budget Analyst</li> <li>Matt Manning, Cemetery Bureau Chief</li> </ul>
	Guest
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jeff Nelson, VFW</li> </ul>
	Absent
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vice-Chairman Ryan Beston</li> <li>Barb Skelton</li> <li>Dean Rehbein</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> </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>	
All board members were sent the minutes from January 2022 prior to the meeting for review. Richard Klose moved to approve the minutes of January 12, 2022, meeting; the motion was seconded. Motion carried by unanimous consent.		
<b>VHA Update</b>	<b>Duane Cunningham</b>	
<p>Duane Cunningham gave a brief update on the VHA regarding the opening of new clinics, staffing, and the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Fort Harrison.</p> <p>Since the last board meeting, three new clinics opened in Bozeman, Butte, and Missoula. They're currently fully operational and seeing patients. There has been positive feedback about the facilities. Most of the clinics are fully staffed, but Fort Harrison is experiencing a staffing shortage. It takes about 6-9 months to get Doctors through the VA system.</p> <p>Fort Harrison celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Despite the weather, the event was great overall.</p> <p>Chairman Stone asked if any plan was in effect for the movement of the CBOC in Kalispell. Duane responded that they are looking into it but have not heard if funding has been set aside.</p> <p>No other questions or comments.</p>		
<b>Cemetery Update</b>	<b>Matt Manning</b>	

The Montana State Veterans Cemetery program will be breaking record numbers for the fiscal year 2022. Total interments for all three cemeteries have a record of 440, and fiscal year 2022 currently is at 478. This is not counting the interments done from today until June 30<sup>th</sup>. Our interments have significantly increased.

MSVC in Fort Harrison recently hired a full-time groundskeeper, Clint Williams. They have also hired a summer temp that will only work 90 total days.

During the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Fort Harrison VA Hospital, VA Under Secretary Matt Quinn and Chief of Staff Tanya Bradsher toured the Fort Harrison cemetery. The tour went very well, and the staff was able to speak about some issues and possible solutions.

The cemetery program was recently given funds to purchase new equipment. The funds were used to replace a broken backhoe in Missoula for around \$120,000 and provided two gators for the Missoula and Fort Harrison cemeteries for around \$56,000.

A volunteer program was initiated back in the August/September timeframe for the cemetery program. Currently, 375 hours have been donated to the Missoula cemetery. If anyone is interested in volunteering at one of the cemeteries, they can visit [DMA.mt.gov/MVAD/Volunteer](http://DMA.mt.gov/MVAD/Volunteer) to fill out a form. Ryan Luchau asked are there any requirements for volunteers. Matt stated there are no requirements nor restrictions, but they are not allowed to operate any equipment including lawn mowers. Any age group can volunteer if they have a signed agreement form and their parent's permission under the age of 18. Volunteers can operate a weed eater if we document the volunteer has been provided with adequate training, but this is the only type of machinery volunteers can operate.

Memorial Day Ceremonies were successful for all three cemeteries, and we've received positive feedback.

In March 2022, a bill was passed to allow burial for Guard and Reservist in a state veterans cemetery. Although they're allowed burial, the VA will not pay for the plot or provide a VA-furnished headstone. MVAD is working on creating a fund to allow payment of plot and headstone for Guards and Reservists burial, without putting the charges on the families. MVAD is hoping on having funding in FY2024 for these burials. This bill does not allow burial in Federal cemeteries. There were no other questions or comments.

**State Cemetery – Columbia Falls**

**Administrator Ackerman**

There are no updates for the proposed state veteran's cemetery in Columbia Falls. The next step for this cemetery proposal is presenting the proposal at the 2023 legislative session. If approved by the legislature and provided the funding for personnel and operations, MVAD then applies for a 100% VA reimbursable grant to develop the land and construction costs. Currently, MVAD is waiting for the legislative session to take any further action with this proposal.

Chairman Stone mentioned any questions and concerns about this cemetery can be directed to him.

There were no other questions or comments.

**DMA Updates**

**MG Hronek**

MG Hronek and MVAD are working with the Governor's Office to review the MVADs budget and create legislation to fix the budgetary issues. The State of Montana's revenues are up, but inflation is also up for the state making the need for a budget review dire. The Governor's office requested statistics showing how many veterans currently live in Montana, the rate of veterans moving to Montana, and how that affects the agency. MG Hronek gave kudos to Kelly and MVAD staff, especially the cemetery staff as the cemeteries look better than ever. MG Hronek is hopeful we will get the cemetery additional staffing this upcoming legislative session as our low staffing causes safety concerns. MG Hronek asked if there were any questions, and there were no questions or comments.

**Staffing Update**

**Administrator Ackerman**

There is one vacancy in the Veteran Services Program, and that's a Veteran Service Office in Missoula. The hiring committee is currently reviewing applications. The Administrative Office has had an Administrative Assistant vacancy for over a year, and a candidate has been selected to

start later in June. MVAD has requested a Modified position for a Miles City groundskeeper and recently was approved and announced to be filled. We are expecting this position to be filled in mid-July.

There were no other questions or comments.

**Memorial Day Ceremony Scheduling – Discussion**

**Administrator Ackerman**

For the Fort Harrison cemetery, MVAD has been testing different dates and times for the Memorial Day Ceremony. For the past few years, MVAD has hosted the Fort Harrison ceremony on the Thursday before Memorial Day at noon. This year, we had our ceremony on Memorial Day at noon and realized there was a conflict with the other veteran organizations that also had ceremonies on Memorial Day. We noticed a smaller attendance and received a few complaints about having to choose which event to go to because of the overlap in times. After discussion, the board agreed on having the Fort Harrison Memorial Day ceremony on Memorial Day at 1:00 p.m. This will allow time for travel between events and shouldn't have any overlap. MVAD will use 2023 Memorial Day as a trial run and present any difficulties to the board for further discussion.

There were no other questions or comments.

**Budget Overview**

**Taryn Phillips**

With the fiscal year 2022 coming to an end, the budget is almost spent completely. A few pending deposits were posted, so the programs now have enough money to pay for their personnel expenses, and their monthly expenses such as travel, utilities, rent, etc. We are projecting all our funds to be spent down to under \$1,000 by fiscal year-end.

MVAD was given \$200,000 in marijuana funds with the help of MG Hronek, and we have used these funds to purchase new equipment for the cemetery program, and new furniture for our office remodel.

There were no other questions or comments.

**Veterans Home Update**

**Joren Underdahl**

DPHHS has recently reorganized all State healthcare facilities under one Division, where previously they had been spread out over several different divisions within the Department. Now all State facilities, including the veteran's homes, are under the same State Healthcare Facilities Division. Previously the veteran's homes were in the Senior and Long-Term Care Division of DPHHS.

The waitlist for the Columbia Falls home is up to 203. Admissions have been slowed due to continued issues with staffing. Currently 30 open positions in the facility, so have had to move to temporary agency contract staffing for the first time in 14 years. Have 65 beds filled and 52 open beds with one admission scheduled for next week.

Several projects are pending using ARPA funding and LRBP funding to include roof resealing, HVAC system upgrades with higher efficiency filtration for infection control, flooring replacement, and Special Care Unit courtyard leveling and redesign. Some projects may require a request from the next legislature for additional funding to complete due to increase in costs of materials and labor since the projects were originally requested. For the Glendive veterans home, the state is in the process of finalizing contract terms with a new vendor to operate the facility since Glendive Medical Center has opted to not renew their contract. Eduro Healthcare, the same business that is currently contracted to operate the Butte Veterans Home, was selected pending an agreed upon contract. Census is down at the facility since the onset of the COVID pandemic, but admissions have started to pick up in the last 2 months, with a noticeable increase in Vietnam veterans coming in. Staffing challenges in the nursing department have also created the need for use of temporary agency staffing. Roofing and fascia repair projects are pending using ARPA funds.

Regarding the Butte veterans home, cottages 1-3 are full and cottage 4 is being opened for short term rehab stays. Cottage 5 is having flooring work done and should be completed soon and ready for a certification inspection. Bid selection for the covered walkway project is scheduled for tomorrow, 6/9/22. Currently have a wait list of 28 for their non-secured beds and 10 needing a secured bed. Secured meaning they are at risk for wandering and need a more secure environment to prevent them leaving unsupervised.

Administrator Ackerman asked if they're down 30 people in Columbia Falls or for all three homes. Joren stated the 30 vacancies are only in Columbia Falls, and he's not sure of exact vacancies in the other homes.

There were no other questions or comments

<b>Fort Harrison Headquarters Remodel Update</b>	<b>Administrator Ackerman</b>	
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The Headquarters remodel was originally planned to start on April 18<sup>th</sup>, but because of supplies and materials, construction didn't start until May 16<sup>th</sup>. There is no specific completion date yet, but we were told the last of the materials will be available mid-July and it would only take 1-2 weeks for completion once materials are delivered.

There were no other questions or comments.

<b>Potential Legislation for 2023 Session</b>	<b>Administrator Ackerman</b>	
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MVAD proposed to change the language in House Bill 701 (marijuana revenue) to say \$200,000 or 3%, whichever is greater. Currently, the language reads \$200,000 or 3%, whichever is less, putting a cap on how much MVAD can receive in revenue.

MVAD has requested legislation to be passed to open and fund a new cemetery in Columbia Falls.

For House Bill 2, MVAD requested 3 full-time groundskeepers, 1 for each cemetery. With the cemetery interments increasing every year, MVAD is in desperate need of more staffing which will also provide more safety to our current employees. MVAD also requested 6 full-time employees for our Veteran Services program. These FTE will be Administrative Assistants who will answer phones, manage schedules, and handle filing. MVAD also requested an Accountant position to provide financial services to the Budget Analyst. MVAD currently only has one financial employee, and the workload is increasing every year. In total, MVAD is requesting 10 FTE for the 2023 legislative session to be funded through House Bill 2.

MVAD requested 3 additional motorpool vehicles to be contracted, one for each Bureau Chief and one for the Billings office. The Billings office restarted their outreach program and will need a motorpool vehicle to complete outreach.

Administrator Ackerman is discussing with the Governor's office our budget, and determining if MVAD needs to request more General Funding. MVAD is hoping the 3% HB701 funds will cover the expected shortage, but if not passed, MVAD will have to request additional General Funds.

There were no other questions or comments.

<b>Board Member Vacancies</b>	<b>Administrator Ackerman</b>	
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There is a current vacancy in the Voting Tribal Member position. There are also vacancies in the Non-Voting Office of Indian Affairs, Senator Testers, and Representative Rosendale positions. The offices have been given instructions on how to apply to the board and MVAD has been waiting for the Governor's office to appoint the new members.

There were no other questions or comments.

### Issues / Comments / Questions

None.

### Public Comment

Chairman Stone gave kudos to the Veteran Service Officers in Havre. Steve and Brenda were able to help Chairman Stone move his daughter to Havre. Ryan Luchau mentioned connecting MVAD to the nonprofit community and suggesting a link on our webpage to the JCF website. There are around 79 nonprofits in Montana doing Military support and working with veterans. Administrator Ackerman asked Ryan to contact her after the fiscal year-end to set up a meeting and further discuss linking the nonprofit community to MVAD.

### Next Meeting

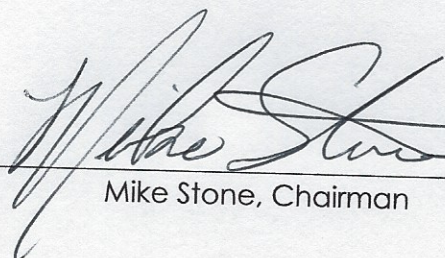
September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022 at 14:00 at Fort Harrison, MT.

### Adjournment

Chairman Stone adjourned the meeting at 15:15.



Taryn Phillips, Recorder



Mike Stone, Chairman