

Montana Board of Veteran Affairs

Meeting Minutes

April 2024 Board Meeting

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

Meeting Minutes

Discussion Topic	Speaker	Time
Pledge of Allegiance, roll call, introductions, and welcome	Administrator Ackerman	14:01
Approval of Minutes	Chairman Stone	14:04
All board members were sent the minutes from the January 2024 meeting before today for review. Roger Hagan moved to approve the minutes of the January 10, 2024 meeting; Richard Klose seconded. The motion carried by unanimous consent.		
DMA Updates	MG Hronek	14:06
The survey for Veterans' long-term care needs has gained more attention, and DPHHS has confirmed the end date will be July 15 th . Representative Dooling, the VFW, and the American Legion are all working hard to get help from the vets that they can with this survey. DMA is currently working on building a legislative plan. One priority for legislation is finding a way to solidify the budget for the VA, particularly the VSO and Cemetery Operations. We have had administrative help with Outreach, but given the number of Pact Act claims, more help is needed. Looking at the data should help us understand how many we've completed and what still needs to be done. The governor has been very supportive of the outreach that supports vets. The defend the Guard will come up during the next legislative session. Announced on April 9 th , the Army Guard will be the first to receive C130J's, a brand-new aircraft, in about a year and a half. The GRIP Program is a program that tries to get more people to recruit to the Army Guard. The State will pay any vet that recruits somebody \$1,000.00. Montana is the only state that provides this opportunity to Vets. Kurt Nelson asks if there is an advertisement for the GRIP Program. There are flyers that MG Hronek says he can email to him. During questions and		

comments, Administrator Ackerman asks for support from the Board during this upcoming Legislation anyway they can help.

MVAD Leadership Staffing Updates

Administrator Ackerman

14:18

Since January, MVAD has selected 2 regional program managers. Steve Mulonet was selected from the Havre office to be the Northern program manager, and Lindsey Berge was selected from the Billings office to be the Eastern program manager. They both have a lot of experience and have been exemplary VSOs. MVAD is currently hiring for the Belgrade Veteran Service Officer Supervisor position, and selections will possibly be this week. Once the supervisor position is filled, they can post the vacant VSO position in Belgrade. A vacant VSO position in Great Falls has already been posted. The first screen for this position will be on April 15th. This position must be filled soon because the Great Falls office is very busy and needs help. The last vacant Groundskeeper position at the Missoula cemetery has been filled. Fort Harrison has hired a new Cemetery Manager as well as new Groundskeepers. With these new hires, all cemetery vacancies have been filled. Chauncy Parker asks if Steve Mulonet will still be in Havre or if MVAD will need a new VSO in Havre. Administrator Ackerman specifies that Mulonet will continue to be in Havre and will supervise from his office. This position will require some additional traveling, but MVAD plans to request an administrative assistant for the Havre Office's next legislative session. Chauncey Parker had some concerns that this promotion would affect the service that the Veterans are receiving in this area, but Administrator Ackerman states that this position can be done from the Havre Office online and most likely will not require in-person meetings. If any concerns arise about these Supervisor positions, let Administrator Ackerman know.

VHA Updates

Duane Cunningham

14:25

The Interim Director position was closed last week, and they have a director. The VA has gotten on board with advertising the Veteran long-term care needs survey and has posters that they are waiting to be laminated. Two-factor authentication is being pushed to every government agency right now. Duane Cunningham states that probably within the next 48 months, every program used by government agencies will require two-factor authentication. One type of authorization is ID.me. This program has recently been having troubles where it will say that it will text the Veteran a code, and they will have to call in to get their code instead. Login.gov seems to be an easier way to log in and should be recommended if Vets ask. VHA has a glitch in the system when sending appointment letters. This glitch will tell Vets to schedule an appointment by a date that has already passed. Vets need to ignore the date and then make the appointment anyways. The VHA Optometry department went through an inspection last year, and it was found that they were sending Vets into town to their preferred provider and getting whatever kind of glasses they wanted without reaching out to the VA to get the frames and lenses from the VA Vendors. The vet must continue to get frames and lenses from the VA vendors because if they do not, they must pay out of pocket for the costs. This is effective July 1st, 2024. Recently, there has been a problem where vets have called the VA during an emergency, and the VA told the vet to see a doctor. The vet will be confused as to why they are receiving a bill in the mail if the VA directed them to the hospital. The VHA has told them that if they call during an emergency, anybody will tell them to go to the hospital, but this doesn't mean the VA authorizes payments for these visits. TriWest bills pay the VHA bills for emergencies, and if a Vet or family member of the Vet receives emergency services, they need to call TriWest within 72 hours. TriWest can be contacted at (888)-795-0773 or (887)-881-7612. An upcoming event in Glasgow on June 27th is a PACT Act Vet Fest in collaboration with the VFW. It will bring a lot of attention to Veteran Affairs, and it will bring out legislators as well. Duane Cunningham suggests having the MVAD set up a table at this event. Kurt Nelson brought up concerns about the travel navigation on the website. When trying to claim a travel on the website, it redirects the person to the wrong page, and to resolve this issue, it will be passed along to the people who work on these claims.

VBA Updates

Janine Mahn

14:35

Referring to the discussion about the MVAD hires, Steve Mulonet will be the supervisor of the Northern region, which covers Havre, Great Falls, and Helena. Lindsey Berge will supervise the Eastern region, which covers Billings, Belgrade, and Miles City. Bryan Zipp is the Western supervisor, covering Kalispell, Missoula, and Butte. For upcoming events in May, there is a Women's Symposium in Laurel on May 4th, Tribal PACT Act Event in Fort Belknap on May 7th, the Northern Cheyenne Community Health Fair in Crow Agency on May 15th, the 11th Annual Heroes at Home BBQ/Veteran Suicide Awareness & Prevention RUN/WALK/RUCK in Missoula on May 18th, and the Memorial Day Ceremony in Fort Harrison on May 30th. The VSOs have done an excellent job attending Veteran events and the events hosted by the VFW and American Legion statewide. The MVAD will have its annual training next week; everybody will be getting together for the first time since 2022. In the month of March, the VBA did 114 PACT Act Claims, which brings the total of the fiscal year to 875. The national VBA has surpassed 1 million PACT Act claims this year and has brought over \$4.6 million to veterans.

In all of Montana, they have done about 6,215 claims with an average grant rate of 81%, which is above the national average.

<p>Veterans Home Updates</p> <p>Columbia Falls occupancy is at 55%, and admissions are currently being accepted without a waitlist. Continue to have about 30 total open positions, 20 of those being Certified Nurse Aides. Using agency travel staff to supplement so we can continue to accept admissions and provide high quality care. Flooring replacement project will be completed by the end of the month. This has been highly disruptive due to asbestos abatement of flooring tile/glue in the old floor and temporarily relocating residents' entire hallways 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 soon, as weather allows. Project to upgrade to HVAC system for higher level filtration has been stalled until the roofing replacement project is started. Roofing replacement project has been awarded, work to begin as soon as weather allows.</p> <p>Glendive occupancy has been hovering around 65% capacity. Seeing some younger vets coming in, as young as 42 years old. Interior remodel nearing completion, and the EMVH Foundation has volunteered to assist with decorating the newly remodeled hallways. Exterior project is nearly complete with a delay happening due to the contractor waiting on materials to finalize the project. EMVH had their annual CMS survey/inspection in February and had no deficiencies or citations. Project to install a commercial laundry in the facility is expected to be completed by the end of this month which will allow the facility to process its own laundry in-house and not sending it out to the medical center to be cleaned. Glendive Medical Center has given notice to end their contract for physician services and Medical Director, so the facility is currently looking for providers to take care of the veterans of the home</p> <p>Butte occupancy for the 3 VA certified cottages has been 100%. 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. Cottage 4 is at 80 – 100% occupancy and Cottage 5 is unoccupied. Connectors are being built between the cottages to improve resident and staff experience, especially during inclement weather. One connector is complete, and two others are in progress with interior work to begin soon. Construction is on track to be completed this fall. The State has applied for a VA Construction Grant to fund the building of the 6th and final cottage, now pending approval from the VA. A new State Administrative Officer/Liaison for the facility started in January. She is a native to Butte, and her name is Arin Boehmer.</p>	<p>Joren Underdahl</p>	<p>14:41</p>
<p>Qualtrics Contract</p> <p>MVAD has contracted with a company called Qualtrics, it's a data collection and analytic software. MVAD is using it to conduct surveys to connect with Veterans as well as employees. They have 2 projects ongoing with Qualtrics. The first is a survey for the employees of MVAD to understand better how they feel about their place in MVAD. The survey closed on March 15th, and they've reviewed the feedback to improve the working environment for each office. The second survey will connect veterans and their family members. The survey was just finalized, and every office and cemetery will have an iPad to help the Veterans take the survey while receiving services from VSOs and cemetery managers. This survey is to help MVAD understand where they should be allocating their resources appropriately and to see if MVAD needs to expand their Outreach program. This contract started in October, and the training is almost complete. These surveys should be ready to publish in the next couple of weeks, and the iPads will be distributed next week. MVAD will be able to present the results at the next meeting.</p>	<p>Taryn Phillips</p>	<p>14:48</p>
<p>Board Discussion Topics: Monthly Report, Governor Challenge Involvement, and Long-Term Care Needs Study</p> <p>Administrator Ackerman, Matt Manning, Janine Mahn, and Taryn Phillips meet monthly to create the monthly report they give to MG Hronek. It has updates on the burials, the PACT Act claims, and events. Administrator Ackerman suggests providing the board with a monthly update every month through email instead of a quarterly newsletter. Kurt Nelson asks if the events can be extended to show even more upcoming events, and Administrator Ackerman agrees to include that. Administrator Ackerman specifies how important it is to know about upcoming events because she needs to provide that information to MG Hronek. Janine Mahn said she is working closely with somebody who oversees a lot of similar events, and she knows of events for later dates that just do not have a scheduled date just yet, and Janine confirms she will work on getting those dates. Chauncey Parker asks if the PACT Act claims done by the VBA are tracking which tribes these</p>	<p>Administrator Ackerman</p>	<p>14:54</p>

claims are being done in. Janine Mahn replied that tracking this information shouldn't be hard with how they collect data.

Eric Beal and Brenda Evans will represent the MVAD for the Governors Challenge.

There have been 2472 online survey submissions and 142 paper submissions. Administrator Ackerman confirms that the posters have yet to be put up because they are not yet laminated but should be soon.

A speaker has been confirmed for Memorial Day.

Budget Overview	Taryn Phillips	15:09
<p>MVAD has received about \$1.5 million for all the VSO programs. This is a general fund, and it usually covers personnel costs, such as payroll and benefits. MVAD has received \$59,000 for operating expenses, but \$30,000 of that was given to Ravalli County, so the fund for operating expenses is low. The amount that is left usually covers the expenses for the Outreach program. MVAD has spent 64% of personnel and 58% of operating. As a state agency, MVAD is required to spend state special revenue before spending the general fund. For state special revenue, MVAD gets about \$900,000 appropriated, and they are currently -\$88,000. There is a pending deposit of about \$58,000. The license plate revenue isn't received until the end of the fiscal year, so MVAD spends it down into the negative and then reimbursed at the fiscal year's end. The veteran cemetery program is statutorily appropriated, so this fund is not something that MVAD gets through legislation, and they can spend as much cash as they currently have. Currently, the cemetery program has -\$30,000 and about \$16,000 pending deposits. During the winter, the burials are lower than during the rest of the year so negative numbers are expected because operating and personnel expenses still occur. The burials have started picking up, so this fund should be headed positively soon. Once this fund is positive, MVAD will look at what they should be spending on their summer operations.</p>		
Cemetery Expansion and Program Updates	Matt Manning	15:14
<p>The cemetery program is currently at 645 volunteer hours which equates to about 50,000 dollars saved in manpower. The volunteers have helped a lot, and some have specified how much it has also helped them. One of the volunteers in Missoula was awarded the Governor's Award of Excellence. The 1st Special Service Forces medallions are now authorized in state and local cemeteries. They will be getting the headstones back in their cemeteries. They plan on replacing the headstones that are damaged and placing medallions on them. They are working on the Memorial Day ceremony. The new hires are doing an excellent job, and MVAD looks forward to seeing how they do in the Summer. They also hired 2 new Groundskeepers in Missoula who start this month; this will help prevent the traveling between cemeteries that was required to keep them up and running. The grant for the Columbia Falls cemetery has changed from \$8 million to \$20 million due to inflation. The cemetery program has also lowered the burial fees for the Guard Reservists to make it more affordable for the service members. There have been about 5 or 6 interred since the fee changes. The cemetery program has purchased two vehicles for Matt Manning and Kurt Holmlund to make it easier for travel between towns. Missoula is doing inspection preparation. There has been an issue with Veteran headstones in private cemeteries. There have been a few instances where they were shipped and delivered, and no one can locate where they are. Matt Manning is looking further into this. Duane Cunningham asks for more pamphlets for the VHA.</p>		
Vice-Chairman Election	Voting Members	15:24
<p>The board now holds a vote to fill the vacant Vice-Chairman position. Administrator Ackerman asks if anyone else would like to apply and confirms that she has only received one application from Roger Hagan. Kurt Nelson starts a unanimous vote for Roger Hagan. Richard Klose seconds and Roger Hagan is now the Vice-Chairman of the board.</p>		

Issues / Comments / Questions

Dan Griffin asks how monthly report data is pulled. Janine Mahn answers that it is all internal data from an Excel program within the division. The PACT Act claims data is reported from each office. Roger Hagan talks about being in the SAMHSA Governors Challenge. The Governor's Challenge is gaining attention. There is a conference for the Governor's Challenge in San Diego in June, and Roger Hagan will be in attendance. The Governor's Challenge is having a Teams meeting on May 21st, and Roger Hagan has suggested including the Board in the email stream. There are 3 things the Governors challenge is working on. The first one is working with the Primary Care Association to talk about Veteran's mental health. Another one they are working on is firearm security for

Veterans. Roger Hagan also highlighted how many veteran organizations there are that the board isn't aware of. He suggested looking into these to confirm their validity and get their contact information. He wants to get them in contact so they aren't duplicating tasks to ensure they are the most productive they can be. MG Hronek speaks about how they are prioritizing finding another location for the Great Falls office. The service club is closing because of the lack of income that came in to support it running. Since it is a historical site, it will be turned into a community center called the Devil's Brigade. Kurt Nelson asks if the monthly updates can include national events for Vets. Administrator Ackerman agrees that this should be included.

Public Comment

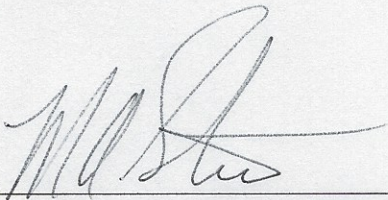
None.

Next Meeting

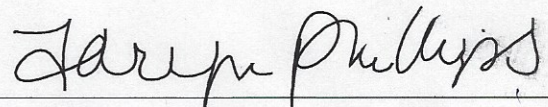
September 4th, 2024 at 14:00 in person in Fort Harrison, MT.

Adjournment

Chairman Stone adjourned the meeting at 15:56.



Mike Stone, Chairman



Taryn Phillips, Recorder