

Montana Board of Veteran Affairs

Meeting Minutes

January 2023 Board Meeting

Date	January 11, 2023
Time	2:00 p.m.
Location	1956 Mt Majo St., Conference Room #112, Fort Harrison, MT 59636

Attendance

Members	Staff
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chairman Mike Stone Barb Skelton Richard Klose Ryan Luchau Klayton Carroll Jennifer Dalrymple Dean Rehbein Charlotte Snyder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kelly Ackerman, Administrator Taryn Phillips, Budget Analyst Karen Grindstaff, Administrative Assistant
	Guest
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Matt Manning, Cemetery Bureau Chief Ryan Keeler Winston Taylor Amanda Casey Mike Waters (Denny Lenoir) Kate Hahn Jonathan Elm
Non-Voting Members	Absent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thomas Finch Duane Cunningham MG John Hronek 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vice-Chairman Ryan Beston Joren Underdahl Marvin Weatherwax

Meeting Minutes

Discussion Topic	Speaker	Time
Pledge of Allegiance, roll call, introductions, and welcome	Chairman Stone	14:00
Approval of Minutes	Chairman Stone	14:02
<p>All board members were sent the minutes from September 2022 prior to the meeting for review. Richard Klose moved to approve the minutes of the September 07, 2022, meeting; the motion was seconded. Motion carried by unanimous consent.</p>		
VHA Update	Duane Cunningham	14:03
<p>Doctors and providers have been hired at VA hospitals improving staffing shortages, but there is still a shortage of nurses and administrative staff. Travel pay continues to be an ongoing issue for our veterans due to staffing and technology as the website is confusing to elderly veterans. This issue is being addressed at the Congressional level.</p> <p>Veterans not originally eligible to file under the PACT Act are being re-screened for eligibility. As of January 11, 2023, there have been 7,564 veterans screened for potential toxic exposure. Of those, 3,581 required a follow-up measured by a clinical reminder, and 2,572 follow-ups were processed</p>		

within the 14-day timeframe. The national goal is 60% of veterans screened, and Montana VA is at 73%. Once screened, they can be referred to enrollment, VBA to file a claim, or VHA for additional screening.

Some additional information on the PACT Act. The new Agent Orange presumptive locations added by the VA are Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Guam, American Samoa, and Johnston Atoll. New Gulf War presumptive locations added by the VA are Afghanistan, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Uzbekistan, Yemen, or the airspace above. The VA has added additional cancers, diseases, and other toxic exposures to the presumptive conditions based on the PACT Act.

The Compact Act provides free emergency behavioral healthcare for veterans. Effective January 17th, a veteran who has not enrolled in healthcare, has 24 months of service, and has an honorable discharge can now be seen at any VA or community healthcare facility.

The Service Act provides mammography screenings to female veterans including those who have been exposed to toxic substances in certain locations.

Fort Harrison celebrated its 100th Anniversary on May 20th, 2022. Despite the weather, the event was great overall.

Chairman Stone asked if any plan was in effect for the movement of the CBOC in Kalispell. Duane responded that the VA is looking into it but has not heard if funding has been set aside.

No other questions or comments.

2023 Legislative Session Updates	Administrator Ackerman	14:09
---	-------------------------------	--------------

A proposed bill will restructure the statute on how the board is comprised under the Red Tape Reduction Act. Currently, there isn't a house bill number for this proposal.

The primary bill MVAD is proposing is HB 81 which provides a cemetery located in Columbia Falls adjacent to the Montana Veteran Home. The proposed bill has passed the House Administration Committee and the House floor and is currently in House Appropriations due to the fiscal note. Administrator Ackerman will be attending the Appropriations hearing in person.

There is another proposed bill, LC 0170, entitled "An Act Establishing A Decennial Veterans Long Term Care Needs Study," that is not a proposed bill by MVAD, but MVAD supports the bill. The need for a veteran's home in Great Falls was the catalyst for this proposed bill. In working with Public Health and Human Services, it was realized that Montana does not have an updated Long Term Care needs study for veterans. For Montana's veteran population, MVAD goes by the information published by the VA on its national website, which is not updated frequently. Currently, there isn't a house bill number for this proposal. Administrator Ackerman encourages everyone to track this proposal.

Major General Hronek and Administrator Ackerman will be offering testimony on Monday, January 16th to the budget committee. Administrator Ackerman encourages everyone to watch the hearing by going to leg.mt.gov and clicking "Watch/Listen to Meetings".

Mr. Waters asked with the new demands for processing claims under the PACT Act, and the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019, will additional VSOs be added to handle the increased claims. Administrator Ackerman stated MVAD is proposing to have a budget that supports additional staff whether it be VSOs or administrative assistants. The increase in claims under the PACT Act and the additional workload on our VSOs is included in Kelly's testimony for hearings. Since the PACT Act passed, MVADs workload has increased by 28%. MVAD hopes the legislature will support us in our efforts to hire additional staff to process the increase in claims and continue supporting Montana's veterans.

There were no other questions or comments.

DMA Updates	Major General Hronek	14:17
--------------------	-----------------------------	--------------

Staffing has not increased in MVAD since 2015. With the growth of Montana's veteran population, the increase in claims under the PACT Act, and the increased need for more outreach, the need for staffing has become critical. Currently, the MVADs outreach program is only assisting 50% of Montana veterans. The bill proposal accounts for 6 administrative staff to assist the VSOs, and this will allow the VSOs to do more outreach. This bill also provides the addition of an accountant in the administrative office and three groundskeepers for the Cemetery program.

Great support from the VFW and AL on HB 81 (Columbia Falls cemetery proposal). The bill passed 19-0 and is now in the fiscal committee.

No questions or comments

PACT Act/VBA Updates

Ryan Keeler

14:21

Since the PACT Act was signed into law on August 10, 2022, MVAD claims have increased by 21%, and phone calls and emails have increased by 28% in two months. The PACT Act, also referred to as the toxic exposure bill, expands benefits, and VA healthcare for veterans who have been exposed to Agent Orange, burn pits, chemical weapons, or other toxic substances in presumptive exposure locations. Presumptive means that if a veteran has a presumptive condition, established by law, the veteran does not need to prove that their service caused the condition or disease. They only need to prove the condition or disease exists and prove they were in the presumptive location and meet the service requirements for the presumption.

There are 12 new presumptive cancers and 12 new conditions under the PACT Act for those who were exposed to burn pits in the Gulf War, Horn of Africa, and other areas after certain dates. VSOs need to know what date(s) the veteran served, and do they have one of the presumptive conditions or diseases. Once proven, the veteran will automatically be granted healthcare and benefits.

There are 3 new radiation presumptions, the Enewetak Atoll, Palomares Spain, and Thule Air Force Base in Greenland. There are also 2 new Agent Orange presumptions, high blood pressure and MGUS (Monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance).

Ryan Keeler will be providing the most current data to Administrator Ackerman this week on the number of claims filed.

There were no questions or comments.

Impact Montana

Ryan Luchau

14:25

Ryan Luchau presented information on Impact Montana. Impact Montana was established in 2014 as a fiduciary for two additional organizations and the program side of Impact Montana. Since then, it has become more of a grassroots organization of Montanans helping Montanans. Impact Montana's mission is to provide support for current military, veterans, first responders, and their families to define their purpose, connect with health and community and strive for what they value. Impact Montana believes it takes a community and is actively creating a statewide community through integrative health solutions, service partners, impact partners, Impact business partners, volunteers, nonprofit organizations, and other service organizations. Testimonials of success stories from individuals participating in Impact Montana are available on the Impact Montana website. A PowerPoint presentation is attached to these minutes for further information.

Karen Grindstaff asked about the cost to veterans or their families for Impact Montana. Ryan stated because they are a grassroots organization, it depends on the capability of the individual and their families. If the individual has the financial ability to contribute, we ask them to do that, this helps them invest in their personal growth. Impact Montana does ask everyone to contribute a nominal fee of \$20/month as part of the individual's personal growth.

Jen Dalrymple asked how candidates are screened for Impact Montana. Ryan stated individuals go to our website and fill out a qualification form, and Ryan connects with the individual. Documentation such as a DD214 is not required, if more information is needed, Impact Montana will reach out to a reference referral to validate the information.

No other questions or comments.

Cemetery Update

Matt Manning

14:49

MVAD had a record number of interments in July and August. The number of interments dropped from November to January. MVAD is above the monthly average of interments but behind last year by 3%. Since initiating the volunteer program last year, MVAD has had 699 volunteer hours in Missoula and 714 volunteer hours overall. The volunteer program has been very successful in Missoula. MVAD is working on getting a volunteer program at Fort Harrison and Miles City cemeteries. The United Way has posted a need for volunteers on its website. There has been some interest but no follow-through. The Fort Harrison expansion is projected to start in fiscal year 23.

The Shining Honor Project is a program where individuals with a disability come and clean the headstones of veterans. While there isn't a need for this in the state veterans' cemeteries, as the headstones are in great shape, there is a need in Columbia Falls and Fort Missoula cemeteries for this service. Last month, Matt Manning reached out to a veteran's spouse in St. Ignatius MT whose husband passed away 3 years ago and still had no headstone. Matt went to St. Ignatius and submitted the paperwork for her.

Honor Guard numbers for the Army National Guard are down providing a challenge for funeral honors at the cemeteries. Matt will be following up with Major General Hronek to prepare for the busy season with the staffing shortage.

Jen Dalrymple gave a shout-out to the cemetery manager, Aaron, in Helena for helping one of our Townsend widows get the correct headstone for her husband. Aaron did a great job.

No other questions or comments

Budget Overview

Taryn Phillips

14:53

At the halfway point of the state fiscal year, the MVADs budget is looking good overall. MVAD has not spent over 50% of the authority and MVAD should end the fiscal year in a positive. The major budget concern is the cash balance for the cemetery program due to the low interment numbers. MVAD is in the process of repairing and replacing equipment for our cemeteries. MVAD is requesting \$750,000 in the 2024 biennium for equipment replacement. If this is granted, the cemetery program can replace all the outdated equipment for all three cemeteries.

There were no questions or comments.

Veterans Home Update

Joren Underdahl

14:55

MVH Columbia Falls has recently been recognized in the *U.S. News & World Report*: Montana Veterans Home Nursing Home is among the elite 16% of Skilled Nursing Facilities that earned a "High Performing" rating, the highest possible achievement. You can see the facility's ratings, along with related data and descriptions, on its U.S. News Profile page <https://health.usnews.com/best-nursing-homes/area/mt/montana-veterans-home-nursing-home-275100>

Census is currently at 53% capacity, with a waitlist of 138. MVH has resumed admissions to decrease the waitlist. MVH is using temporary contract staff to fill some shifts for nurses and nurse assistants as we currently have 33 open positions, most in the nursing department, but also openings in support services (housekeeping, recreation, food service, etc.) as well. Wages and housing issues persist in causing recruitment and retention challenges. The Wreaths Across America ceremony at the MVH cemetery on 12/17/22 was a great success with enough wreaths donated to cover all 870 sites and was covered on the local news. <https://www.kpax.com/news/local-news/flathead-county/families-and-veterans-gathered-for-the-wreaths-across-america-ceremony-and-experienced-a-slight-delay>.

Unfortunately, MVH started the New Year with an outbreak of COVID in the facility with 29 residents testing positive over the last week. Most of the residents are fully vaccinated and have no severe symptoms. MVH also has 12 staff out with a positive test.

SWMVH Butte is making progress on the walkway project. The initial walkway to be completed is between Cottage 4 and Cottage 5. Once this walkway is finished, Eduro Healthcare (operator at SWMVH) will request a V.A. survey/inspection for Cottages 4 and 5. A request for supplemental funding to complete all the walkways is in the HB 5 request for the current legislature's consideration. The current census at SWMVH is 46 residents. Cottages 1-4 are filled (excluding the 2 rooms in Cottage 4 that are closed due to construction). Eduro Healthcare is hoping to open Cottage 5 in the next month. They are currently in the process of hiring staff for the 5th Cottage. The DPHHS Healthcare Facilities Division is currently recruiting for a new State Liaison/Administrative Officer for the facility to replace Ashley Bair, who recently resigned from the position.

EMVH Glendive remains about 65% full. Veterans with long-term behavioral health needs have been denied admission during the last year due to fear for the other resident's safety. This has resulted in conversations regarding the feasibility of modifying an area in the building to care for those with these types of health challenges. The facility has a project in the planning phases that will insert a full-service laundry area to allow the facility to perform resident and facility laundry onsite rather than using an outside vendor for the service. Also in the planning phases are two other

construction projects, one to address a roof leak and damaged fascia and the other to update resident rooms to ensure a more aesthetic and cleanable environment. Glendive Medical Center continues to operate the facility currently, the state continues direct negotiations with a new contractor with the goal being having that new contractor take over operations in the coming months.

No questions or comments.

Board Member Vacancies/Ending Terms
--

Chairman Stone

14:55

Currently, the board has 3 terms which have ended in July and August respectively, Richard Klose, Dean Rehbein, and Ryan Luchau. These board member terms will continue until new members are appointed by the Governor. Board member participation will be expected until such members are reappointed or replaced by the Governor. However, the Governor is not expected to appoint or replace board members until the end of the legislative session.

Terms will also be ending for Chairman Stone, Barb Skelton, Ryan Beston, and Jennifer Dalrymple in the calendar year 2023.

There were no questions or comments.

Issues / Comments / Questions

Online virtual Women's Veterans Town Hall held on Feb. 2nd, from 5:00-6:00 pm.

Chairman Stone to Taryn, requesting a copy of the MVAD statistics for the fiscal year 2022. Taryn will follow up with Chairman Stone.

Public Comment

None.

Next Meeting

June 07, 2023, at 2:00 pm, in person at the Fort Harrison DMA Conference Room 112. Fort Harrison, MT.

Adjournment

Chairman Stone adjourned the meeting at 15:01.

Karen Grindstaff, Recorder

Michael Stone
Mike Stone, Chairman