

Montana Board of Veteran Affairs

Meeting Minutes

December 2024 Board Meeting	
Date	December 18, 2024
Time	2:00 p.m.
Location	HAFRC Conference Room #113, Fort Harrison, MT 59636

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

Meeting Minutes	
Discussion Topic	Speaker
Pledge of Allegiance, roll call, introductions, and welcome	Vice-Chairman Hagan
Approval of Minutes	Vice-Chairman Hagan
<p>All board members were sent the minutes from the September 2024 meeting before today for review. Matt Manning and Vice-Chairman Hagan requested a modification to the September minutes. On page 5, under the Cemetery Expansion and Program Updates, line 4 reads, "Missoula has 400 niche covers that...". Kurt Nelson motioned to approve the minutes of the September 4, 2024 meeting as corrected; Jen Dalrymple seconded. Motion carried by unanimous consent.</p>	
VHA Update	Duane Cunningham
<p>As the holiday season continues, the VA is trying to boost the morale of people in hospitals. Efforts include kids coming to sing Christmas carols and setting up the giving tree. The biggest challenge the VA is facing is the change to signing in to any government website which is effective 1 Feb. All people signing into government websites such as IRS, MyHealthVet, etc, now need an IDMe account. It's a big push to enroll as many veterans as possible before the effective date to avoid any service lag. Duane is currently working on setting up a kiosk at the Ft Harrison hospital which will have the ability to make appointments, enroll in IDMe, and other features. The kiosk is at the hospital, and the service should start within the next week. There were no further discussion or questions.</p>	

VBA Updates	Janine Mahn
<p>MVAD has hired the following positions since the last board meeting; VSO in Missoula, VSO Supervisor in Billings, VSO in Billings, and VSO Supervisor in Helena. The current vacant positions are an Administrative Assistant and VSO in Helena. The Administrative Assistant position was originally located in Butte, but MVAD is in the process of transferring the position to Helena. Looking at the last quarter compared to last year, MVAD has exceeding last years statistics in both federal dollars to Montana veterans and claims completed. MVAD has also increased outreach efforts and presence at VA outreach events by 28% from the previous fiscal year. MVAD will be attending several PACT events with the VBA in the upcoming year – locations include Pablo, Browning, Crow Agency, Fort Peck, and Rocky Boy.</p> <p>MVAD PACT Act claims year-to-date (12/9) are 8,424 claims completed, with an 81.2% grant rate. This is 47.4 million dollars in retroactive payments to veterans in the State of Montana. MVAD has also tracked PACT Act survivor spouse with 81 claims completed, and a 56.8% grant rate, resulting in 1 million dollars in retroactive payments.</p> <p>Duane Cunningham question – In the Helena office, we send a lot of veterans to the Helena office. They have reported back that there's a sign on the VSO door stating to call for an appointment. Should we be giving out the VSO phone number instead of sending people to the office? Janine – Due to the short staff in the Helena office, the 1 VSO saw an influx of walk-ins and had to establish an appointment only schedule until the VSO vacancy is filled. We are hopeful this will be in the next month. No further discussion or questions</p>	
Veteran Home Updates	Joren Underdahl
<p>MVH Columbia Falls occupancy is 74%, and qualifying admissions are currently accepted. The annual State/CMS inspection/survey results were received in October, with no clinical/health concerns cited. MVH continues to have about 17 total open positions, 15 of which are Certified Nurse Aides. We are currently using agency travel staff to supplement so we can continue to accept admissions and provide high-quality care. The Special Care Unit (memory/dementia care) courtyard improvement project is complete. The roofing placement project is also complete, just waiting on the final walkthrough to close out with the contractor. The Wreaths Across America ceremony at the MVH cemetery on 12/14/24 was successful with enough donations for all 862 gravesites.</p> <p>EMVH Glendive occupancy remains at around 60% capacity and accepts admissions. The annual VA inspection/survey was completed in September, and no deficiencies were cited. They are due next for a State/CMS survey around February 2025. Insufficient funds exist to complete phases 4 -7 of the planned remodel project. However, funds have been identified to complete a few smaller projects such as painting in the memory care unit and carpet repair at the nursing stations. The EMVH Foundation has offered to pay for a remodel of the residents' barber shop. The facility is working with a local architect and interior design team to complete the project in the Spring of 2025. The facility remains under management by contract with Eduro Healthcare.</p> <p>SWMVH 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 recognition survey has been moved to February 2025 due to construction delays. However, these cottages are used for patient stays when other funding sources are available. Cottage 4 is at 80 – 100% occupancy, and Cottage 5 is currently unoccupied, but admissions into that cottage are planned to begin by the end of the month. Connectors have been built between the cottages to improve residents and staff experience, especially during inclement weather. All three connectors are complete. Construction had to redo some areas because the work completed was unacceptable. SWMVH is awaiting a response from DPHHS Life Safety on an inspection date of the connectors. The state has applied for a VA Construction Grant to fund the building of the 6th and final cottage, and it is now awaiting approval from the VA. The facility remains under management by contract with Eduro Healthcare.</p>	
Cemetery Expansion	Matt Manning
<p>The current interment rate is at 51% compared to last year. There are three grants on the National Cemetery Administration grants list for MVAD. The first is the Fort Harrison expansion, which was awarded \$2.7 million and is expected to break ground in spring 2025. The second is the Missoula</p>	

expansion, which is currently at \$2.5 million, and we are hoping to break ground in spring 2026. The final is the establishment of Columbia Falls, which was submitted for \$21 million. Columbia Falls is listed as a priority 2, and we do not know the timeframe for that grant. MVAD hired a groundskeeper in Fort Harrison and now has 3 groundskeepers in Fort Harrison. All cemetery staff is doing great. The First Special Service Forces (FSSF) monument will have an unveiling on Aug 16th, 2025, at 9:30 am at Fort Harrison. The FSSF annual reunion will be the same day, and we are expecting 200-250 family members and FSSF-related personnel to attend. Wreath Across America went well across all three sites.

No further discussions or questions.

Budget Overview	Taryn Phillips
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MVAD is at the 6-month mark for FY25 and is currently on track for spending and revenue. The Cemetery fund is currently -\$27k cash, which is expected at this time of year. The cemetery fund also has \$19k pending deposits, so the cash is not terrible. The VSO state special revenue (SSR) has been building cash since the start of the fiscal year and now has sufficient funding to use SSR accounts. Since the last meeting, there have been no budgetary concerns. MVAD has been focusing on preparing for the legislative session.

The current governor's proposed budget was provided in the emailed packet. Taryn explained the meaning of the different line items and advised people to review the budget on budgets.mt.gov. MVAD has two decision packages (DP) within the Governor's budget. The first decision package provides the budget for 11 modified positions converting to permanent, VSO budget needs, and cemetery budget needs. In the second DP, we requested additional appropriation to spend the marijuana cash that has been sitting this biennium due to no appropriation. Vice-Chairman Hagan asked – is the \$200k annual or bi-annual SSR. Taryn answered – we receive \$200k per fiscal year. Vice Hagan asked – Is the first fiscal year the one we are in right now? Taryn – the first fiscal year was last year, 2024, and we are in the second fiscal year. There were no further questions.

MVAD Updates	Taryn Phillips
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The MVAD updates are focused on the Governor's budget, as discussed in the previous discussion topic. MVAD was advised to collect names and contact information for anyone who wants to be informed of MVAD's legislation updates and hearings as the session proceeds. Vice-Chairman Hagan commented on adding all board members to the contact list and keeping board members up to date with all hearings and progress. There were no further discussions or questions.

DMA Updates	MG Hronek
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Within HB 5, MVAD is requesting \$1.9 million for an Interment Processing Center at Fort Harrison. This was originally \$9.8 million to build administrative and maintenance buildings. This was reduced to \$1.9 million and planned as a phased approach where the administrative building is a priority, and we will do the maintenance of the building over the next couple of bienniums. MG Hronek attended the interim sub-committee with Section A, the Chairman is Terry Falk and the meeting seemed to go well. The most significant DP is for MVAD; due to the large general fund ask. MVAD has received ARPA interest funding to replace the funding lost in the last session. Now, we are attempting to replace the ARPA interest funding with the General Fund and establish permanent funding. This also includes the modified positions converted to permanent. We did not grow any other FTE due to our significant request in General Fund. We did not ask for additional admin assistants or VSOs; however, they can be requested outside of the agency by legislatures. The most urgent need is a VSO in Great Falls, so we will see how legislatures come forward. The other bill MVAD supports is the revision to the board statute that adds the Adjutant General as the supervisor of the Administrator to match the HR procedures with the state. MG Hronek is asking the board to support this bill. MT National Guard is working on improving outreach so that when people separate, they communicate with their VSOs and don't have a lapse of benefits. DMA is working with tribal nations to enhance communication and outreach efforts to provide better assistance to tribes. Vice-Chairman Hagan mentioned that all members should read HB 81, the bill to change the supervision of the MVAD Administrator. Vice-Chairman Hagan suggested that the board vote on whether the board will support or oppose HB 81. MG Hronek asked the board to inform him of their decision when the vote takes place. MG Hronek also provided information on a potential

legislation bill known as the Defend the Guard. MG Hronek's narrative will be that he appreciates the intent and support of the National Guard. However, this bill would create many issues for equipment and appropriations, so DMA will not support the bill. No further questions or comments.

Issues/ Comments/ Questions

Matt Manning commented that there is an event at Buffalo Wild Wings in Helena on January 13, 2025. This event helps support funding for the POW/MIA monument fund in Fort Harrison Cemetery. Chair Stone commented that January 25th will be the Winter VFW conference in Great Falls. Vice-Chairman Hagan stated that the MT Governors Challenge is hosting a Protectors Summit in Billings on February 14, 2025. Representative Mike Yakawich plans to bring forward two bills in the upcoming legislative session. One is for DPHHS to oversee a program for a resource navigator network for healthcare, including mental health services, benefits enrollment, access to healthcare, and more. Vice-Chairman Hagan clarified this is not intended for veteran benefits but will be a referral source to VSOs. The second bill, transportation in rural areas to include all veterans, not only veterans who are VA healthcare.

Vice-Chairman Hagan also stated that three public members from Lewistown attended a SAVA interim committee hearing and were displeased with the lack of VSOs in their area. MVAD used to have an office in Lewistown, but it closed due to budget cuts. A group called Veterans Guardian was then contacted and asked to present at a SAVA hearing. This group is not an accredited representative and charges veterans their benefits, unlike MVAD VSOs, which are free to use. Support for the MVAD budget can help expand our services so we can continue to provide free services and prevent veterans from feeling like they need to go to unaccredited representatives.

Public Comment / Questions / Issues

Shannon Wilson, VFW, requested the updated Long-Term Care Needs Study status in HB 264. Vice-Chairman Hagan stated the study was finished and presented to the State Admin and Veteran Affairs interim committee in September 2024. There was little effort for the link or hard copies of the study to be published wide. MG Hronek asked if the board reviewed the After-Action Report. Not all board members have seen the After-Action Report; Taryn will share it with all board members. Vice-Chairman Hagan stated Rep Bertoglio requested a house bill draft to follow the recommendations stated in the After-Action Report.

Executive Action

The Board of Veteran Affairs will take executive action on whether they will be proponents or opponents of HB 81 in the 2025 Legislative Session.

Roll call vote to take executive action on supporting HB 81.

Chairman Stone – aye

Vice-Chairman Hagan – aye

Jen Dalrymple – aye

Richard Klose – aye

Kurt Nelson – aye

Chauncey Parker - absent

Vice-Chairman Hagan entertained a motion to support HB 81 in the 2025 legislative session, moved by Jen Dalrymple and seconded by Richard Klose. No discussion. Motion carried by unanimous consent.

Next Meeting Date and Location

The next meeting will be on April 9th, 2025, at 2:00 p.m. at Fort Harrison.

Meeting Adjournment

Vice-Chairman Hagan adjourned the meeting at 15:35.



Mike Stone, Chairman



Taryn Phillips, Recorder