

MONTANA BOARD OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

-MEETING MINUTES-

MAY 26, 2021

At 2:00 p.m. May 26, 2021, Chairman Clancy Sivertsen called the teleconference meeting for the Montana Veterans' Affairs Board to order. The members all stand to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Chairman Sivertsen then asks Montana Veteran Affairs Division administrator, Kelly Ackerman, to call roll. Board member and agency staff present were:

Clancy Sivertsen- Chairman
Mike Stone- Vice-Chairman
Barb Skelton- Member
Richard Klose- Member
Ryan Luchau- Member
Klayton Carroll- Member
Jennifer Dalrymple- Member
Dean Rehbein- Member
Charlotte Snyder- Member
Duane Cunningham- Member

Thomas Finch- DLI Representative
MG John P. Hronek- Non-voting Member
Joren Underdahl- Non-voting Member
Anson Nygaard- Sen. Tester
Denny Lenoir- Sen. Daines
Kelly Ackerman- MVAD Administrator
Kelly Garber- Budget Analyst
Matthew Manning- Cemetery Bureau Chief
Taryn Phillips- Office Manager

After roll call, Administrator Ackerman announces that there is a quorum. Chairman Sivertsen then thanks everyone for being the Zoom call and announces that the next meeting will be in person. He then welcomed all new Board members.

Next, Chairman Sivertsen asks the members if they have reviewed the previous board minutes. Chairmen Sivertsen then announced if there were no questions or comments, he entertained a motion to approve. After assent from the group, Mike Stone moved to approve the minutes. Dean Rehbein seconded the motion. Chairman Sivertsen put the question to the present members, and the motion to approve the minutes for the previous meeting carried by voice vote.

Chairman Sivertsen turns the meeting over to Duane Cunningham to give an update on the VHA. The VHA hit 10,000 veterans in Montana vaccinated with one dose of the COVID vaccine. The final clinic in Kalispell was on May 24, 2021, moving forward the veteran will need to make an appointment to receive the vaccine. Dependents and caregivers can receive vaccines through the VA.

Mr. Cunningham proceeded to talk about co-pays for medications and doctor visits that were charged April 2020 – September 2021 will be waived or reimbursed. In October 2021, veterans will be billed for medications and appointments. Administrator Ackerman asked if veterans who had paid for co-pays or appointments in that time period had to apply for the reimbursement. Mr. Cunningham responded that it is an automated process that will issue a lump-sum payment back to the veteran. Jennifer Dalrymple confirmed that some veterans are already receiving the refund checks in the email. Chairman Siversten asked if there were any questions or comments on the VHA update. With no further questions Chairman Sivertsen turns the meeting over to Administrator Ackerman to discuss staffing Changes.

Administrator Ackerman welcomes all new members to the Board. She then continues to announce staffing changes. First, Kelly Garber is announced as the new Budget Analyst. Following new staff announcements Administrator Ackerman leads into program vacancies: Cemetery Manager at Fort Harrison, VSO vacancies in Helena and Havre. Administrator Ackerman acknowledges that it is miraculous there weren't more vacancies with the COVID-19 pandemic. Administrator Ackerman finishes by asking if there are any further questions. With no questions, Chairman Sivertsen introduces, welcomes, and turns the floor over to MG Hronek.

MG Hronek thanks Chairman Sivertsen for the brief introduction. MG Hronek announces that MG Quinn has moved on to be the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. MG Hronek continued into his background and how he can assist veterans as the TAG. MG Hronek then continued into a few notable changes that came with the Legislation.

HB491: revises access to military discharge records, DD214s, this revision helped align state and federal laws. This revision should make accessing discharge records easier for the state to obtain.

HB178: revises the County Veterans Service office grant clarifying the block grant.

HB2: gave \$1.5 Million for General Fund and \$840,000 for Special Revenue in appropriations for 2022, and \$1.5 Million for General Fund and \$850,000 for Special Revenue in appropriations for 2023.

HB701: revises marijuana laws, after the Heart fund is funded at \$6 Million, Montana Veteran Affairs will receive 3% not to exceed \$200,000.

ARPA: the department is working to get up to \$300,000 for equipment for the cemeteries.

MG Hronek announces that he is very pleased with the numbers for outreach and the outreach program in general. He continues to talk about the cemetery program, the new leadership with

Matt Manning, and bringing key people on through a transition program to properly staff the cemetery so that it is maintained properly. MG Hronek then opens the floor for questions. Vice-Chairman Stone asks whether the \$300,000 ARPA money will be spent based on a prioritized list. MG Hronek answered that the Department will absolutely allocate the funds based on priority. Chairman Sivertsen asks if there are any further questions for MG Hronek, with no further questions Chairman Sivertsen transitions the meeting to Administrator Ackerman speak about the Legislative outcomes.

Administrator Ackerman states that MG Hronek covered all legislative updates, however, she further elaborated that with the \$300,000 ARPA money Matt Manning will send a list to all Board members with a list of what equipment is needed prior to purchasing to ensure that the Board is informed of the vision for the division and receive feedback. MG Hronek mentions that there was an increase in DPHHS budget that helps fund the veteran nursing homes throughout the state. Administrator Ackerman adds that Joren Underdahl will speak later in the meeting to give an update on the Columbia Falls Veterans Home.

Chairman Sivertsen lost connection with his microphone; Administrator Ackerman transitions the meeting to Taryn Phillips to discuss the new Montana Veteran Affairs website. Administrator Ackerman explained that since becoming the Administrator for MVAD it was her first goal to get a new website developed. Taryn Phillips explains that the website redesign started in 2019. Initially, there was research done to ensure that the Division was choosing the most cost-effective method for the redesign. It was decided that creating the website internally instead of through a contractor was the most cost efficient. Due to working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic there was more time to sit and work on developing the website and the website was launched at the end of March 2021. The website will reflect information on current events for Montana Veteran Affairs, Veteran Service Offices, cemeteries, and Board information. The new website is: dma.mt.gov. Taryn continued to inform the Board that the Division has created general emails, this will decrease the disconnect between the veterans and reaching our cemeteries or service offices if staff have left the agency or moved to a new position. Chairman Sivertsen was able to join back into the meeting and asked if there were any further questions. Matt Manning added that the new website has been beneficial for the cemetery, as all forms needed for registration, headstones, etc. are located on the website. Chairman Sivertsen asks if anyone else has questions or comments. There were no further questions.

Chairman Sivertsen turns the meeting over to Administrator Ackerman for an update on the Eastern Montana Cemetery Expansion. Administrator Ackerman informs the board and new board members that there was a \$2 million dollar grant awarded to the State of Montana to expand the state cemetery in Miles City. The construction at the cemetery is approximately 90% complete. There will be a final walk through on June 8, 2021, with the Nation Cemetery Administration director. Administrator Ackerman informs the Board that although the cemetery

is updated and now has pre-placed crypts, the grant does not cover the equipment needed utilize the pre-placed crypts. With the \$300,000 from ARPA new equipment will be purchased for the Eastern Montana Veteran Cemetery. Administrator Ackerman concludes by stating that the Fort Harrison and Missoula cemeteries will be going through a similar grant process in the upcoming years. The floor is opened for questions.

Administrator Ackerman moves to discuss budget overview. The budget is in good standing. Administrator Ackerman informs the board that at the end of the fiscal year the budget office is very busy. Since there are many new Board members, Administrator Ackerman explains that all funds for the cemeteries are generated through State Special Revenue. However, this past legislative session the division was able to acquire some funds from House Bill 2. The Bureau Chiefs are responsible for tracking their programs budget with the assistance of the Budget Analyst. MVADs Biennial Report is from 2020, and the next one will be published in 2022. The board members can expect that to be emailed once it is ready for publishing. Once SAVA hearings are scheduled, Administrator Ackerman will inform the board members so if anyone wants to attend, they can. There were no questions or comments about the budget. Joren Underdahl was then announced to speak about the veterans' homes.

There was one small COVID-19 outbreak last year in a state veterans' home that infected five veterans and resulted in one death. Glendive has open rooms in their facility and are accepting applications. The Butte veterans' home is waiting on certifications, surveys, and inspection from the VA for finalization.

The board members received a briefing about acquiring a veterans' cemetery in Columbia Falls from American Legion Post 72. The cemetery would be on current state property next to the Columbia Falls State Veterans Home. There is a state cemetery currently located on the property, but to qualify for burial the veteran must reside in the veteran's home. Veterans have called asking about being buried in the cemetery under the impression it is a state veterans' cemetery open to all veterans. Joren had a brief conversation with Kelly Ackerman to discuss if building a State Veterans Cemetery at that location is feasible. The unused land contains 12 acres.

Vice-Chairman Stone asked if the land is located on lot 2-C, upon review of the map the board members were provided, the lot is a triangle. He asked if only a portion of that lot is being considered, or if the entire lot is being considered for a state veterans cemetery. Joren said the original proposal from the American Legion is a portion of the lot, but his recommendation would be to use the entire lot. Vice-Chairman Stone offered support and assistance to gain support of other organizations in that area to potentially establish the cemetery.

Administrator Ackerman commented she will work with Matt Manning and National Cemetery Administration to acquire more information on starting a state veterans cemetery. There were no further questions or comments.

Following the update on the Veterans Homes, Administrator Ackerman briefed the board headquarters' office updates. Headquarters' office in Fort Harrison next to the American Legion and VFW office has a moisture problem affecting the carpets. MVAD had to temporarily relocate to the Deputy Directors Office on the second floor. There is a sign on the door directing to the temporary office. There are mold tests being performed and returning to the office is not anticipated until Fall 2021. Following the Headquarters' briefing, the floor was turned over to Ryan Keeler, the Veteran Services Bureau Chief.

All nine veteran service offices have reopened for walk-ins and appointments. Seven of the nine offices are performing outreach to local counties, and Ryan plans on having all outreach services back to normal by end of July 2021. We currently have 21 Veteran Service Officers and 2 vacancies. As of April 2021, MVAD has written 2,925 coded claims. Coded claims are the claims that bring in federal dollars to the state of Montana. Of those coded claims, only 219 were written on outreach but the outreach program was suspended due to the pandemic. Federal dollars of \$184 million was brought into the state of Montana by those coded claims. The floor was opened for questions and comments. With no questions the meeting was turned over to Matt Manning, the cemetery program Bureau Chief.

Matt Manning started with MVAD November 2020. He has been meeting with other state veteran cemetery programs to learn about their programs and see how Montana's program can grow. Some of Matt's goals are to implement a volunteer program, obtain more employees for the cemetery program, and find ways to bring more money to the cemetery program. The cemetery program currently gets a small portion of special revenue from license plate sales, and sustains itself by collecting money from plot reimbursements from the federal VA.

Fort Harrison only has one full time employee. MVAD is attempting to utilize the DOD Skillbridge Program. That program is for active-duty retiree or someone separating to work for a few months as a civilian and still receive pay through DOD. The program is great for transitioning from active duty to civilian. MVAD would like to find someone using this program to work at Fort Harrison for about six months. Because the Missoula cemetery only has one full time groundskeeper, Matt assists with groundskeeping to be OSHA compliant. The Miles City cemetery only has one permanent employee who is the Cemetery Manager who does all groundskeeping for the cemetery. To be OSHA compliant, the cemetery program needs to hire more employees. There were no questions or comments.

The floor was then opened for any additional comments, questions, or issues. Vice-Chairman Stone gave a quick update on the suicide prevention program he is a Board member of. They have exceeded 400 trained in the last two months and are receiving support from outside the

Flathead area, such as Bozeman, VFW in Helena, and Great Falls to provide suicide prevention trainings.

Anson Nygaard commented on the “Cost of War Act” press release that was emailed; Senator Tester’s expansive Toxic Exposure bill was passed unanimously in house and will be up for debate on the Senate floor on May 26th.

The final discussion item was that the next Board meeting will be held on August 11, 2021, at 2:00 p.m. in Fort Harrison, MT. Chairman Sivertsen then adjourned the meeting at 3:20 p.m.

Clancy Sivertsen, Chairman

Kelly Garber, Recorder