

**Advisory Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACOVA)  
Meeting Minutes**

**Dates: November 14–15, 2025**

**Location: Holiday Inn Express, Fargo, North Dakota**

**Chair: Murray Strom**

**Recorder: Daniel Thorstad**

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**Day 1: Friday, November 14, 2025**

**1:00 PM – Call to Order**

- Meeting called to order by Chair Murray Strom.
- Pledge of Allegiance and Moment of Silence for POW/MIA observed.
- Roll Call conducted.
  - Present:
    - Steve Anderson, Brian Bartlett, Joe Best, Jim Hapala, Dave Hilleren, Nathan Huntington, Tom Newton, Rick Olek, Cynthia Schlosser, Murray Strom.
  - Present via TEAMS: Tom Ryan, Trish Hodny
  - Excused: Jacob Volk, Hal Weninger
  - Resigned: Jim Verwey

**Approval of Agenda**

- Motion made by Steve Anderson to approve the agenda, seconded by Dave Hilleren. Motion carried unanimously.

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**Presentations**

**ND Department of Veterans Affairs – Commissioner Lonnie Wangen**

- Made updates on staffing.
- Working on establishing a grave medallion for reservists and National Guard.
- Fox Grant application was disapproved.
- Introduced Bryan Watters who introduced staff members. Provided updates on
  - Outreach efforts, including Stand Downs and jail outreach.
  - VSO training conferences.
  - Employee performance.
- Provided updates on:
  - Loan and grant programs.
  - Burial and memorial programs.
  - Post War Trust Fund (PWTF) status and CD investments.
  - Legislative updates and future proposals.
  - Fisher House progress and veteran homelessness initiatives.

**VAHCS Fargo – Director Harold “Brent” Pharis**

- Introduced as newly appointed director.
- Shared vision for expanding services at CBOCs.
- Highlighted Fargo VA’s 5-star CMS rating and Joint Commission Gold Seal.
- Emphasized outreach, caregiver support, and infrastructure upgrades.

**ND Governor’s Office – COO Al Dohrmann**

- Outlined Governor Armstrong’s six key initiatives:
  1. Workforce

2. Housing
  3. Childcare
  4. Public Safety
  5. Recovery & Reentry
  6. Efficiency & Innovation
- Encouraged alignment between ACOVA, ND Military Commission, and legislative efforts.

**ND National Guard – BG Mitch Johnson (via LTC Jay Sheldon)**

- Provided updates on:
  - Force structure and deployments.
  - Infrastructure projects in Dickinson, Jamestown, and Williston.
  - Counter-UAS training and testing at Camp Grafton.
  - State Partnership Program and emergency response support.

**ND Cares – Director Michelle Gauvin-Panos**

- Reported on:
  - Suicide prevention campaigns and peer support training.
  - Lethal means safety initiatives.
  - Compact Act outreach and collaboration with state agencies.

**Job Service ND – Jerome Billups**

- Not present

**ND Association of County & Tribal VSOs – President Chris Deery**

- Not present

**ND Veterans Home Governing Board – Tom Ryan**

- Nothing to report.

**ND Veterans Home – Director Dane Grebel**

- Provided updates on:
  - Census and staffing.
  - Veterans Week events.
  - Garage project completion.
  - Marketing campaign and upcoming board appointments.

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**Subcommittee Meetings**

- Committees met in breakout sessions.
- Dan Thorstad participated in person for NDDVA committee.

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**Day 2: Saturday, November 15, 2025**

**8:00 AM – Subcommittees Continued as Needed**

**9:00 AM – Full Committee Reconvened**

- Meeting called to order by Chair Murray Strom.
- Pledge of Allegiance and Moment of Silence for POW/MIA observed.
- Roll Call conducted.
  - Present:

- Steve Anderson, Brian Bartlett, Joe Best, Jim Hapala, Dave Hilleren, Nathan Huntington, Tom Newton, Rick Olek, Cynthia Schlosser, Murray Strom, Trish Hodny.
- Present via TEAMS: Tom Ryan
- Excused: Jacob Volk, Hal Weninger
- Resigned: Jim Verwey

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### **Approval of Minutes**

- Motion by Jim Hapala, seconded by Cynthia Schlosser. Minutes from September 18, 2025, unanimously approved.

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### **Time & Place of Next Meeting**

- Motion for February 6–7, 2026, in Grand Forks, ND at the airbase by Nathan Huntington, seconded by Rick Olek. Recommendation to keep dates and location flexible due to potential restrictions entering the base and lodging availability on base. Motion approved unanimously.

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### **Subcommittee Reports**

#### **NDDVA Subcommittee – Chair Nathan Huntington**

- Reviewed fund balances and revenue sources.
- Discussion on new policies for the Housing Assistance Grant. Motion by Nathan Huntington to approve policies as updated, seconded by Trish Hodny. Motion carried unanimously to approve policies 900–906, 910–913, 915, and 940.
- Motion to invest Fisher House CD interest into a new CD by Nathan Huntington, seconded by Rick Olek. Motion carried unanimously.
- Motion from Brian Bartlett to allow the commissioner to reinvest interest from all CDs at the commissioner's discretion for the betterment of their respective programs, seconded by Trish Hodny. Motion carried unanimously.
- Motion by Nathan Huntington to approve the report, seconded by Dave Hilleren. Motion carried unanimously.

#### **Legislative & Strategic Planning Subcommittee – Chair Brian Bartlett**

- Reviewed 2025 legislative outcomes and 2027 proposals.
- Motion by Trish Hodny to draft a letter to the Department of Interior supporting inclusion of Frank E. Evans on Vietnam Veterans Memorial, seconded by Cynthia Schlosser. Motion carried unanimously.
- Discussed headstone medallion design options and licensing. Recommended the commissioner continue researching.
- Motion to approve the report by Brian Bartlett, seconded by Steve Anderson. Motion carried unanimously.

#### **PWTF & Appeals Subcommittee – Chair Trish Hodny**

- Reviewed fund balances and revenue sources.
  - Motion by Trish Hodny to allocate \$10,000/year for transportation services, seconded by Dave Hilleren. Motion carried unanimously.
  - Subcommittee requests appeal procedures be submitted to subcommittee members.
  - Motion by Trish Hodny to approve the report, seconded by Tom Newton. Motion carried unanimously.
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**Other Business**

- Motion by Rick Olek to have the commissioner send letters to ND veteran service organizations to inform them that gaming funds can be used to donate to PWTF, seconded by Dave Hilleren, discussion to add that it's not just gaming funds, letter to be drafted by the commissioner for ACOVA Chairman signature. Motion carried unanimously.
- Motion to move remaining Vietnam Coins cash back to PWTF by Trish Hodny, seconded by Nathan Huntington, motion carried unanimously.

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**Upcoming Events**

- November 15, 2025: Cathy Halgunseth Retirement – Scheels Arena
- January 23–25, 2026: American Legion & VFW Winter Conferences
- February 14, 2026: Valentine's Day
- March 1–5, 2026: NASDVA Conference

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**Governing Board Appointments**

- Replacements needed for Dave Peterson (2025-28) and Curt Twete (2025-28).
  - Chris Deery was appointed in September. 1 remains.
  - Trish Hodny nominated Trent Barkus. Dane Grebel will send him the application.
- Cathy Keogh and Tom Ryan confirmed interest in continuing terms expiring in 2026.

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**Chairman's Report**

- Chairman Strom thanked members for their participation and collaboration.
- Emphasized importance of communication and preparation for legislative session.

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**Round Table Discussion**

- Members shared feedback and prefer Friday–Saturday meeting format.
- Discussed travel logistics, room bookings, and future meeting locations.
- Request to add a hotel room to future room blocks for ND Veterans Home representative.

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**Adjournment**

- Motion to adjourn passed unanimously.

   
C. Chairman