

Administrative Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACOVA)
Meeting Minutes
Dates: February 5–6, 2026
Location: Ramada Inn, Grand Forks, North Dakota

Chair: Murray Strom

Recorder: Jonathan Ross, Dan Thorstad

Day 1: Thursday, February 5, 2026

1:31 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: Brian Bartlett, Jim Hapala, Nathan Huntington, Rick Olek, Cynthia Schlosser, Jacob Volk, Todd Roth, Joe Best, Trish Hodny, Murray Strom, Dave Hilleren
 - Present via TEAMS: Tom Ryan, Tom Newton, Hal Weninger
 - Excused: Steve Anderson

A quorum was confirmed.

Approval of Agenda

- Motion by **Jacob Volk** to approve the agenda; second by **Todd Roth**. **Motion carried.**
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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.
- Provided updates on:
 - Outreach efforts, including Stand Downs and jail outreach.
 - VSO training conferences.
 - Employee performance.
 - State Approving Agency.
 - 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

Key updates:

- National VA restructuring underway.

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- Electronic Health Record go-live scheduled for **May 2027**.
 - Major construction projects include Mental Health & Wellness Building, Whole Health expansion, inpatient psych remodel, parking structure, and new Bismarck CBOC.
 - Enrollment outreach campaign ongoing.
 - Stated that the VA was waiting for the Office of Healthcare Engineering and Office of Asset Enterprise Management (OAEM) to notify them when acquisition of the land for the Fisher House is complete.
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North Dakota National Guard Report – Lt. Col. Alan Roehrich.

Highlights:

- Current strength: **4,121 soldiers/airmen**.
 - Limited federal mobilizations; significant state activations.
 - \$283M economic impact to ND in FY2025.
 - New Dickinson Readiness Center completed.
 - Counterdrug program seized major quantities of fentanyl, meth, firearms, and illicit currency.
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County Veterans Service Officer Reports – NDACTVSO – Chris Deery

- Homeless veteran outreach during cold weather.
 - NACVSO training in March.
 - Stand Down scheduled for **September 10, 2026**.
 - Ongoing community outreach.
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Veterans Home Report – Administrator Dane Grebel

- Skilled Care census: **49/52**.
 - Basic Care census: **60/98**.
 - VA compliance issues resolved for domiciliary; skilled care corrections ongoing.
 - Staffing shortages persist.
 - New TV and radio commercials launched.
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Governor's Office Update – Al Dohrmann

- Emphasized importance of ACOVA's advisory role.
 - Budget planning for 2027–29 underway.
 - Encouraged continued communication.
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Subcommittee Meetings

- Committees met in breakout sessions.
 - Dan Thorstad participated in person for NDDVA committee.
 - Jonathan Ross participated in person for the PWTF committee.
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Day 2: Friday, February 6, 2026

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

Approval of Previous Minutes

- Minutes from the previous meeting were reviewed. Motion to approve made by **Jim Hapala** and seconded by **Todd Roth**. Motion carried.

Department of Veterans Affairs Committee

PWTF Grant Program

- Income limits updated to match current VA pension rates.
- Asset limit increased from **\$5,500** → **\$7,000**.
- Motion by **Nathan Huntington** to accept changes, seconded by **Trish Hodny**. Motion carried unanimously.

Impact Grant Program

- No changes recommended.
- Motion by **Nathan Huntington** to accept decision, seconded by **Trish Hodny**. Motion carried unanimously.

Housing Assistance Program

- Program too new for adjustments; no changes recommended.
- Motion by **Nathan Huntington** to accept decision, seconded by **Trish Hodny**. Motion carried unanimously.

NDDVA Budget Review

- Reviewed; maintaining within budget, no action required.
- Motion by **Nathan Huntington** to approve the minutes, seconded by **Joe Best**. Motion carried unanimously.

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Legislative & Strategic Planning Committee

- Reviewed possible 2027 bills and legislative priorities.
- Motion by **Dave Hilleren** to purchase sample NG and Reserve burial medallions, seconded by **Todd Roth**. Motion carried unanimously.
- Motion by **Brian Bartlett** to approve the minutes, seconded by **Nathan Huntington**. Motion carried unanimously.

Postwar Trust Fund Committee

- Reviewed Fund 410 and PWTF balances.
- Recommended to commissioner that the interest on the Fisher House CD continues to be reinvested.
- No additional appropriations needed.

Appeals Committee

- One appeal reviewed; **denial upheld**.
- Motion by **Trish Hodny** to approve the PWTF and Appeals Committee minutes, seconded by **Joe Best**. Motion carried unanimously.

Governing Board Appointments

- **Reappointments:** Motion by **Trish Hodny** to reappoint Cathy Keogh and Tom Ryan to the Veterans Home Governing Board, seconded by **Jim Hapala**. Motion carried unanimously.
- **New Appointment:** Motion by **Trish Hodny** to appoint Trent Barkus to the Veterans Home Governing Board, seconded by **Joe Best**. Motion carried unanimously.

Next Meeting

Scheduled for **May 7–8, 2026**, in **Minot, ND**.

Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at **11:10 AM on February 6, 2026**.

 **CHarman**