

**ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
VETERANS CLUB, STEELE ND**

February 10, 2022
1:00 PM

Meeting called to order at 1:00 PM by Chairman Murray Strom. Pledge of Allegiance and a Moment of Silence observed for POW/MIAs, those serving overseas.

ACOVA Roll Call:

Present:

Brian Bartlett	Dave Hilleren	Tom Ryan (remote)
Richard Belling	Vernon Laning	Murray Strom
Joseph Bialke	Gary Maddock (remote)	Jim Verwey
Dan Brown	Dean Overby	Glenn Wahus
Mamie Havelka (remote)	Dave Rice (remote)	

Absent - Excused:

Hal Weninger

Guests:

Danelle Hopkins

ND DVA Report – Commissioner Lonnie Wangen

PowerPoint presentation

Update on State Service Officers: being poached by different entities to work for them, totals on claims and communications (phone, email, fax), and tracking Board of Veterans Appeals cases. With NDDVA staff training funds back in NDDVA budget and COVID travel restrictions lifted, plan to send staff to more training including National Association of State Directors Veterans Affairs. NASDVA training has top-level VA leaders presenting, many states bring staff to this training and NDDVA has not been able to in several years.

CVSO upcoming training conferences: April 12-14 and October 4-6; training for new CVSO's ongoing.

Updates on financial programs: Veterans Aid Loan Program and Fund 410, clearing account for postwar trust fund interest earnings. Updates on NDDVA Hardship Grants and Impact Grants Programs.

Department received American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding for veterans' transportation purposes (\$147,000) and Fisher House (\$500,000). If ARPA funding is still available, Commissioner would like to request additional funds for CVSO Training, DD214 scanning in the counties, and for the claims management system to be available to all counties.

Updates on Transportation Programs: Highly Rural Transportation Grant and DAV Vans.

Update on Department website, the new website is live. There are still some website updates going on at this time.

Mark Johnson, Veterans Home Administrator

Marketing three different ads for tv and two ads for radio for recruiting employees. Any employee who doesn't have any exemption or vaccination shot will be terminated. Developing policies due to Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services mandates. Construction – remodeling nurses station, office managers stations and other work stations. Staff retention – bonuses of all sorts being given to try and retain employees.

Lost five staff due to COVID mandate. 25-30 received religious exemption.

Dr. Breton Weintraub, Fargo VAHCS Director

Omicron swept through area and staffing has been a challenge. In one day, 80 staff were out. Vaccination and boosting are being encouraged. VA will be moving forward with processing exemptions – medical and/or religious reasons. New boiler plant should be in place by March. Remodeling the 2nd floor kitchen and administrative offices is ongoing along with a new outpatient mental health building. Lots of competition for workers, especially nurses. Dale DeKrey retired after 35 years, search going on for replacement.

Dan Brown: Are there any plans for mental health services outside of Fargo?

Dr. Weintraub: VA plans to expand when and where possible. Hiring is difficult in western ND.

Tom Ryan: Wondered about the availability of rapid testing for COVID at CBOCs.

Dr. Weintraub: VA doesn't offer that service for a variety of reasons.

MG Dohrmann, ND National Guard Adjutant General - Handout.

Last several legislative sessions have gone well due to the collaboration of working together with ACOVA and Legislative Council. Guard members are required to get vaccinated, rate is at 90%. The 10% contain some that outright refuse taking the COVID shot and some are seeking exemptions. This year over 400 soldiers from the Army NG have deployed along with 114 Airmen from the Air NG. Biggest State response the Guard has dealt with has been the COVID-19; support details: 693 days, federal funds of \$29M+ and 131,000 personnel days. Concerns about using the National Guard for purposes that shouldn't be considered under their mission, i.e. filling in for teachers (New Mexico).

Major Jay Sheldon:

Task Force MIND (Military Issues in North Dakota)

Working with public instruction on the Purple Star School Program – supporting children from military families. In-State Tuition: current members and dependents to qualify for in-state tuition rates.

Continue Working/Future Legislation: Advance Enrollment (K-12) children of active-duty families would allow them to register early or if leaving to be able to finish class/courses before starting at new school location. Working on Enhanced Military Spouse Licensure Portability, no more than 30 days to grant license or to grant provisional license or state why the spouse is being denied a license. Federal Initiatives: Burial Equity Bill – State Veterans Cemetery: ability to intern National Guard and Reserve members

ND Military Museum: a joint effort between the State Historical Society of ND and the NDNG. Museum would be an add on to the Historical Building on the State Capitol Grounds.

Jim Verwey: what type of discharge will be given to those being discharged because of non-compliance of COVID vaccination?

MG Dohrmann: Either honorable or general discharge

Mark Johnson: Would it be possible for the Guard to do some bridge building at the Veterans Home?

MG Dohrmann: If the Guard considers the project and it would provide valuable training, it could be accomplished. There would need to be an 18-24 months lead time.

Michelle Gauvin-Panos, ND Cares Director (remote)

Broadcasting contract – running Steve Anderson video regarding veteran suicide. This year they will be working with the Veterans Home and First Link to air ads. Tri-Care had issues with some of the substance abuse providers (outpatient services had be connected with inpatient facility and to have a physician on staff, that has now been resolved) and a

credentialing issue. Looking into an opportunity to work with the Guard and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSA) on veteran suicides.

Jerome Billups, ND Job Service Veterans Employment Programs Administrator
Unavailable

**Mitch Erhardt, ND Association of County & Tribal Veteran Service Officers
President**

He is the Morton and Oliver County Veterans Service Officer. As President of the Association, he represents 52 of the 53 Counties and all of the Tribal Service Offices. Retired Nov 2015 as an E9 from the Navy after 30 years. Originally from New Salem, ND. Hired Jan 2018 as CVSO. Elected President at last Conference, also on NDNG Retiree Advisory Board. NDDVA does two conferences every year, one in the Spring and one in the Fall. VA Healthcare – veterans get great care out of the Fargo facility, no service has been stopped because of COVID. VA Benefits – Blue Water claims are still being followed. VA added three new presumptive diseases; Parkinsonism, Hyperthyroidism, and Bladder Cancer as being caused by Agent Orange.

Danelle Hopkins talked about the Governor’s Challenge and the upcoming legislative session. Next week will be the State of the State Address by the Governor. There is reserve seating and it will also be live streamed.

Chairman Strom asked which ACOVA members terms will be up June 2022: Glenn Wahus, Gary Maddock, Dean Overby, Dan Brown, and Jim Verwey. The Governor’s website page is used for submitting application on-line. There is a link on the Department’s website.

3:04PM Subcommittee meetings held.

February 11, 2022
Committee reconvened at: 9:00am

Bill Rindy – Presentation

Thanked committee members for their service.

Mr. Rindy talked about legislation submitted in US Senate and US House to allow the last World War II Medal of Honor recipient to lie in state at Capitol. He is spearheading the effort in North Dakota to help get support for the legislation. He has written letters to North Dakota's Governor, U.S. Senators and U.S. Representative regarding Senate Concurrent Resolution 3 and House Concurrent Resolution 7 – Authorizing the Use of the Rotunda of the Capitol for the Lying in State of the Remains of the Last Medal of Honor Recipient of World War II.

The last living Medal of Honor recipient of World War II is Hershel W. “Woody” Williams. He is 95 years old. There were 473 Americans who were awarded the Medal of Honor in WWII for the acts of extraordinary heroism.

Mr. Rindy has served as Chaplain on the same Honor Flight that his father was on. At the WWII Memorial, after ceremonies held for those on the Honor Flight families thanked them for their service. His Dad is still active in veterans' organizations; he is 105 years old.

Mr. Rindy hopes there would be legislation passed that would honor the last living Medal of Honor recipient of all wars (conflicts).

Dutch Bialke asked Bill if he is requesting the committee to take some type of action.

Motion by Dean Overby to have Dutch Bialke write a letter in support of the proposed legislation, Jim Verwey second. Motion carried unanimously.

Motion by Jim Verwey to approve September 2021 ACOVA minutes, 2nd by Dave Hilleren. Motion carried unanimously.

Time and Place of next week. May 19 & 20, 2022. Veterans Club, Steele ND.

ND Veterans Home Governing Board Appointments – Chairman Strom

Discussion on appointment of open positions on the board.

Dean Overby stated Gary Skarphol expressed a willingness to stay on the Governing Board.

Motion Jim Verwey to appoint Vern Laning to replace Roy Fillion on the Governing Board and to re-appoint Gary Skarphol and Dean Overby (one year), second by Dave Hilleren. Motion carried unanimously.

Motion carried unanimously.

Veterans Affairs Subcommittee – report by Dan Brown

PWTF funds seem to be enough. Adequate funds in Veterans Aid Loan Fund. Department budget still looking good. Income limits change passed in committee. 2017 Performance Audit recommendations still ongoing: grant database at 95% complete, starting over on hosting waivers, 2021-23 budget reduced supplanting to \$60,000 Loan and Grant position. Highly Rural Transportation Grant out will be applied for again in 2023.

Motion by Dan Brown on Policy 413: To increase monthly net income limits for households of 2, 3 & 4 to closely match the VA pension income limits as of 2022; second by Vern Laning. Motion carried.

Motion by Glenn Wahus to accept subcommittee minutes, second by Richard Belling. Motion carried unanimously.

Legislative Subcommittee – report by Dean Overby.

Reviewed Veterans Legislative Council report and possible legislative items, recommended support for items as presented. OMB Strategic review tabled until paper copy for everybody.

Motion by Dean Overby to accept subcommittee report, second by Brian Bartlett. Motion carried unanimously.

PWTF & Appeals Subcommittee – report by Vern Laning.

PWTF – Clearing account and PWTF reviewed. Clarification asked where the license plates and income tax check-off revenue were deposited; Commissioner stated both were deposited into the PWTFS. Question regarding Veterans Book and financing it; Commissioner responded there is some confusion in the State Attorney General’s Office whether gaming funds or other solicited funds could be used to finance the book. Department can receive unsolicited funds. State Treasurer’s office still looking into veteran-friendly businesses, no investments have been made to date.

*Motion by Vernon Laning to accept subcommittee minutes, second by Dutch Bialke.
Motion carried unanimously.*

Appeals Subcommittee – no appeals have been received.

*Motion by Dave Hilleren to accept subcommittee report, second by Brian Bartlett.
Motion carried unanimously.*

Chairman Strom gave a report on his activities.

Roundtable Discussion:

Jim Verwey: Urged everyone to look at the Department’s new website, it has interesting information.

Dave Hilleren: Appreciated remembering Ken Hasby. Dave and Ken were friends since kindergarten. Vietnam Veterans Convention will be in July 15-17 in Casselton.

Richard Belling: another good meeting. Appreciate having Dan, NDDVA, on computer for subcommittee meeting. June 10th – annual golf tournament for the Veterans Home – Mapleton Golf Course.

Dan Brown: “Thank you” to everyone who comes and gives up their time to work on behalf of veterans. Pushing for mental health care in western North Dakota. There’s more effort being done in eastern ND and Bismarck than out west.

Glenn Wahus: Thank everyone who presents and ND Veterans Affairs for what they do for veterans. Plans to check out the new website. American Legion convention is scheduled for the end of June in Dickinson.

Vernon Laning: Appreciate opportunity to serve on this committee. Looking forward to being on the Veterans Home Governing Board.

Dutch Bialke: Thanked committee for its support on Resolution 3. Hershel Woodward “Woody” Williams received the Medal of Honor for taking out 3 Japanese pillbox bunkers. He wears it for the two people who were with him, they didn’t make it back. He

is happy to write letter for Chairman Strom's signature and will send a copy to Commissioner Wangen.

Dean Overby: Will go back to the American Legion and bring up this issue.

Commissioner should contact Legislative Council for action also. Recommended doing a buddy check to take care of fellow veterans.

Brian Bartlett: Thanked committee members for their work. Good to have Dan available. Getting information out is a struggle. Try to link organization websites to provide additional resources for veterans.

Tom Ryan: Thanked the Department staff to be able to attend the meeting remotely. Concur with comments on the mental health services in the western part of the State. On Jan 12th HR1836 passed but not with our congressman's support.

Gary Maddock: Thanked Tom and it's too bad there wasn't support for HR 1836 since ND has the most service members. All in all, pretty good meeting.

Mamie Havelka: WWII are heroes. Everyone had great comments. Injured Military Wildlife is out of meat for distribution. Thanks for being able to participate.

Commissioner Wangen: Telehealth may be another option rather than driving to Bismarck. Vet Centers aren't staffed adequately. Try promoting Telehealth to veterans. 211 number for veterans in distress. Maybe bring Dan to meetings to help handle IT and work with subcommittee. Talked about bringing staff to State Directors meetings, all top VA officials are there as speakers. Thanked committee members for all they do.

***Motion to adjourn by Jim Verwey, second by Glenn Wahus.
Motion passed.***

Respectfully submitted:

Jim Verwey
Secretary