

**ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
COMFORT INN, BISMARCK ND**

February 16, 2023  
9:00 AM

Meeting called to order at 9:00am by Chairman Murray Strom. Pledge of Allegiance and a Moment of Silence observed for POW/MIAs and those serving overseas.

ACOVA Roll Call:

Present:

Brian Bartlett	Lamar Kruckenberg	Tom Ryan (TEAMS)
Joseph Bialke	Vernon Laning	Murray Strom
Mamie Havelka (TEAMS)		Jim Verwey
Dave Hilleren	Gary Maddock (TEAMS)	Glenn Wahus
Trish Hodny	Dave Rice	Hal Weninger (TEAMS)

Absent:

Richard Belling - Excused

Guests:

Dean DePountis, Attorney General's Office  
Danelle Hopkins, Governor's Office

**MAJ Jay Sheldon, ND National Guard**

On behalf of the Adjutant General, we appreciate the opportunity to speak to this group.  
Legislation:

Tracking HCR 3012 – This is a national effort focused on requiring Congress to declare war to mobilize the National Guard. This measure is detrimental to the National Guard because of the risk to losing funding for missions and the loss of eligibility for federal training. HCR was filed in ND Legislature. Testimony has been given on the facts on the Resolution. No action taken in committee.

SB 2016: Guard Budget Bill: some items in the bill are: funding for a new armory in Dickinson – the Guard is presently leasing a building from Dickinson and is outgrowing the facility, received Federal funding and now needs state funding; upgrades to Camp Grafton including additional dorm rooms and building a new fitness facility.

Military Museum: Displays from pre-statehood to present day. The building would wrap around the parking lot to the south of the Heritage Center. \$40 million funding needed and fundraising is underway. The Guard needs Legislative authority to go forward with project.

SB 2094: State tuition assistance; offer benefit for guard members who attend school outside of ND. This would be similar to the reciprocity agreement Higher Ed has with schools in Minnesota.

HB 1069: Relating to state active duty. Emergency management compact – requested assistance from SD to help fight fires out in western North Dakota. This resulted in ND Guard having to pay SD crews more than ND crews; would like to have more parity in pay.

SB 2293: Tax exemption for military income. MN already has the exemption and SD doesn't have income tax. Passed in Senate.

HB 1182: State funded stipend for congressionally recognized service organizations that provide funeral honors. Army NG support only army funerals. State funding would allow for a stipend as long as all pertinent requirements are met.

**Mitch Erhardt, President, ND Assoc. of County & Tribal Veterans Service Officers; Morton and Oliver CVSO**

PACT Act is making a big impact in communities. It is a new law that expands VA healthcare and benefits for Veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances. ND Cares is advertising the PACT Act to get veterans in to see their county service officers.

Blue Water Navy claims are still being submitted by veterans since locations are being expanded.

The Vet Center in Bismarck has all new staff. Vet Centers providing counseling to veterans and help veterans with mental health claims.

Commissioner Wangen would like a letter from the Association to support the DD214 scanning project, that is part of the Department's budget, going through the Legislative.

Trish Hodny asked how information is being disseminated to veterans alerting them to services that are being added, i.e. chiropractic care. Fargo seems to get the services first.

**Jerome Billups, ND Job Service Veterans Employment Programs Administrator (TEAMS)**

172 veterans have received services in the last twelve months. Job Service ND has a 62% success rate for veterans securing employment. North Dakota is enjoying relatively low unemployment rates. Job Service ND will be partnering with UND on a statewide StandDown to work with Native American veterans. Vet Representative are going to the prison and talking with incarcerated veterans regarding their employment goals after they are released; identifying what is needed for resources. A veteran having a dishonorable discharge affects their ability to receive services.

**Dr. Breton Weintraub, Fargo VAHCS Director, (TEAMS)**

Due to PACT Act, Dr. Weintraub anticipates veterans will be getting higher disability ratings and more veterans will be coming into the VA for health services. Compact Act expands services for the treatment of veterans in suicidal crisis. Undersecretary priorities: “Hire right, hire fast.” Hiring at the VA is a lengthy process and they are looking at ways to speed it up; and implementation of the PACT Act and suicide prevention. The Fisher House project is currently in the land acquisition phase. Senator Hoeven visited the Fargo VA and is interested in helping with the Fisher House project. Omnibus budget passed in December and it isn’t projected to affect the coming year. VA projections for the next decade or two show a significant decline in veterans services.

It is always a challenge to reach veterans with changes happening at the VA. It is obviously easier if they are enrolled in VA healthcare. Some ways the VA is trying to reach veterans is through a social media presence, Standdowns, de-mobilizing events, and presentations at different entities.

Glenn Wahus asked about ways that will help veterans who are committed for a crisis; otherwise after 72 hours the veteran can leave on their own accord. Dr. Weintraub said that is a problem and the VA is working on making the treatment more appealing. One idea is a facility that would provide daily out-patient treatment and gives the veteran the ability to live there while undergoing treatment.

Tom Ryan asked about veterans who travel, i.e. veterans who live in ND but travel to AZ for a few months. At one time, Tom had a problem getting his records transferred to the facility where he was getting treatment. Dr. Weintraub stated veterans should be receiving the same benefits no matter where they are located and it shouldn’t create a hardship for veterans.

High Reliability Organization (HRO) started in private sector. In a high reliability healthcare organization, the workforce becomes more mindful of risks and systems become more reliable. VA is trying to implement HRO in its facilities. One important piece is to empower staff to feel confident to go to management when they see a problem while administering care. It is important to identify preventative errors.

Trish Hodny complimented services she receives from the VA. Some of her care does come from the private sector since she lives in Grand Forks.

Lamar Kruckenberg stated the Pharmacy and Community Services does an excellent service. He would like Dr. Weintraub to pass that on to those areas.

Murray Strom asked about statistics regarding veterans’ suicide rates. Dr. Weintraub stated they are seeing decreases in suicides for the first time in years.

**Michelle Gauvin-Panos, ND Cares Director (TEAMS)**

Acknowledged Mitch for mentioning he has heard advertising for the PACT Act that NDCares is doing. The StandDown for Native Americans will also be promoted. She will be attending a meeting in Washington, DC to find out what type of activities states are doing under SAMHSA (Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration). ND Protection and Advocacy Project advocates for people with disabilities. There is an open position on the Protection and Advocacy Project Board. She is asking organizations for assistance in finding a disabled veteran to serve' it's important to make sure veterans are included. She also shared a chart with the breakdown of veteran's suicides from 2017 to 2022 in North Dakota; a total of 141 veterans have died. Michelle's contact phone number is 701-333-2012.

**ND DVA Report – Commissioner Lonnie Wangen [POWER POINT PRESENTATION]**

Spoke about different groups he has served on throughout the years. This is one of the reasons he would like to increase the Department's staff. It would be nice to have someone to serve on boards such as Protection and Advocacy. He also at one point worked with The Forum on including a Veterans' Forum, which would be similar to the Farmer's Forum section which comes out on Friday. The Veterans' Forum would have articles from the service organizations and VA news to help keep veterans informed of benefits and other news.

Commissioner gave update on Department staff and programs. Lamar Kruckenberg asked about the Vietnam Veteran Book. Commissioner Wangen explained that a book has been done for Korean Conflict and it would be good to have one for Vietnam Veterans.

Commissioner assisted ND HOPES in applying for a federal grant. He reported they have been awarded a \$5 million grant for 5 years to work on suicide prevention for veterans.

Legal: Veterans Treatment Docket: as of 2/9/2022, the first ND veteran graduated from Phase 1 and moved into Phase 2. The phases are to help get the veteran to be a functioning member of society and then have the criminal charges removed from their record. Mentors are in place to help veterans through the program.

Discussion on American Rescue Plan Act Funding for transportation and the Fisher House. It is hoped that the ARPA funding will show the VA that expanding the areas that the HRTG program serves will not be that costly for North Dakota. The Fisher House is for veterans and their families to stay when the veterans has to undergo medical treatment in Fargo.

VA is implementing a new Veterans Transportation Service (VTS) in every CBOC to address transportation issues for veterans. A committee is being formed to work on

coordinating the various transportation programs to ensure all needs are being met in getting veterans to their medical appointments. The VTS program will be a three year grant used to purchase vans and pay for someone to coordinate it. After three years, the VA needs to run the program using their own budget funds. It's hoped that the savings from not paying veterans travel pay will be able to fund this program.

Commissioner Wangen went through the Department Budget submission and changes made so far by the House. It hasn't been voted on yet.

Legislative bills being monitored by the Commissioner were discussed.

Committee recessed for lunch.

1:07pm

Committee reconvened.

**Mark Johnson, Director ND Veterans Home**

Nine residents have passed from COVID. The Home has spent \$1.3 million combatting COVID; went to hands free toilets, soap dispensers, masks, etc. Federal funding helped to pay COVID related issues. Veterans Home Budget passed the House and will move to the Senate. Mr. Johnson talked about additional items requested that were not funded. Still need to hire twelve employees. The Veterans Home Foundation Golf Tournament is scheduled for June 2<sup>nd</sup>, made \$13,000 from last year's tournament after expenses. NDCares has been helping with advertising the Veterans Home and they are now doing advertising for staffing.

Currently there are three staff members with COVID so staff are now required to wear masks. Anytime there are active case, masks are needed. Residents aren't required to wear masks; it is their decision if they want to or not.

On the Basic side, there are 65 residents and 48 residents on the Skilled side. The Home can have a maximum number of 52 residents in skilled and 98 residents in basic.

Chairman Strom talked about "Mail Call" for the Veterans Home. "Mail Call" is an individual or group that sends hand written cards or letters to veterans recognizing their service. Mark will have Susie, Veterans Home, get ahold of Dave Rice for more information on the program.

**Danelle Hopkins, Governor's Office**

The Legislative Session seems to be going well. There is still time to work on budgets, crossover is February 24<sup>th</sup>.

Chairman Strom recess the committee until tomorrow at 9:00am.

Members sat in on the Legislative Council meeting.

**Subcommittee meetings held.**

**February 17, 2023**

**Committee reconvened at: 9:00am**

Meeting called to order at 9:00am 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	Vernon Laning	Tom Ryan (TEAMS)
Mamie Havelka (TEAMS)		Murray Strom
Dave Hilleren	Jim Verwey	Glenn Wahus
Trish Hodny	Gary Maddock (TEAMS)	Hal Weninger (TEAMS)
Lamar Kruckenberg	Dave Rice	

Absent:

Richard Belling – excused	Joseph Bialke - excused
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***Motion by Vernon Laning to accept the December 2022 minutes, Jim Verwey second.  
Motion carried.***

Discussion on next quarter meeting. Members expressed an interest in meeting at Camp Grafton. Commissioner Wangen can check into the availability and notify Chairman Strom if it's not doable.

***Motion to meet May 11 & 12 at Camp Grafton, second. Motion carried.***

Veterans Home Governing Board Appointees.

Cathy Keogh would serve another term and Dean Overby would stay for one more year if needed. Others have expressed interest: Roy Fillion, Tom Ryan

Trish Hodny spoke on diversifying the backgrounds of those serving on the Board. Perhaps codify a process that would guide ACOVA when making appointments, i.e. should all members be veterans or at least a majority; should there always be at least one ACOVA member; should there be an application for those interested.

The Veterans Home expressed they would like someone with an accounting background. Also having someone from the Guard to serve would be helpful.

Chairman Strom would like to nominate Tom Ryan to fill a position on the Governing Board. He has a strong mental health background.

***Motion by Gary Maddock for Tom Ryan to serve on the Veterans Home Governing Board, second. Motion carried.***

Tom Ryan currently serves on ACOVA with his term ending June 30, 2023.

**Veterans Affairs Subcommittee** – report by Brian Bartlett

Discussion on Fund 410 and to cash in CDs to ensure there is adequate funding for the rest of the biennium.

Committee reviewed Grant Policy 412 – Assets and Grant 413 – Income and recommended the grant income limits should coincide with the VA pension limits. The Department budget looks good for the end of the fiscal year. Reviewed the 2023-25 Budget, still hoping to get equity funding. Reviewed the audit recommendations, the new Grants software will be up and running by the end of the month.

Grant income limit comparisons 2023 graph presented to full committee. Department grant program income limit is behind the VA Pension Income Limits.

***Motion by Brian Bartlett to increase Grant Policy 413 to match VA Pension Income Limit, second by Glenn Wahus. Motion passed.***

***Motion by Brian Bartlett to accept subcommittee minutes, second by Glenn Wahus.  
Motion carried unanimously.***

**Legislative Subcommittee** – report by Mamie Havelka

Met with Legislative Council; kudos were given for the work done. Discussion on benefits of reviewing legislative bills and the legislative process. Talked about inviting some legislators to participate in the process. Discussed creating a policy manual for selecting members to the ND Veterans Home Governing Board. Continued working on the strategic plan, revising goals.

***Motion by Mamie Havelka to accept subcommittee report, second by Trish Hodny.  
Motion carried unanimously.***

**PWTF & Appeals Subcommittee**

**PWTF Subcommittee** – report by Vern Laning

The PWTF and Fund 410 were reviewed with no issues noted. The subcommittee wanted to know if there was a PWTF check-off for businesses. No one was sure of the answer.

***Motion by Vern Laning to accept minutes, Jim Verwey second. Motion carried unanimously.***

**Appeals Subcommittee** – report by Vern Laning

No new appeals

***Motion by Vern Laning to accept subcommittee report, Dave Rice second. Motion carried unanimously.***

**Chairman Report**

Talk to Cathy Keogh to make sure she would like to remain on the Governing Board. Things are going well.



***Motion to accept Chairman's report, Brian Bartlett second. Motion carried unanimously.***

**Roundtable Discussion:**

Jim Verwey – another good meeting.

Brian Bartlett – good to meet with Legislative Council and go through the bills.

Recommends getting people to testify at the Legislature.

Glenn Wahus – good meeting, lots of good questions to the speakers.

Dan Brown – enjoys being on Legislative Council to help committee with legislation.

Dave Rice – good session. Impressed with Legislative Council. Vets Hour on February 25 with feature Jim Nelson. Honor Flight Apr 30-May 2<sup>nd</sup>. Honor Flight received \$100,000 dollars from Giving Hearts Day.

Dave Hilleren – agrees that Jim Nelson is doing excellent job with legislation. President of VVA, Dan Stenvold, having some medical issues – hoping for the best. VVA picnic – Mayville – third week in July.

Trish Hodny – nice having a whole day focusing on issues. Legislative Council doing incredible work representing all of us at the Capitol. Possible Camp Grafton meeting and get Adj, Commander, Past Commander for Veterans Caucus for team building activities. Time to talk about their organizations and their goals at the National and State level.

Lamar Kruckenberg – another good meeting, information overload at times. Thanks to the veterans' organizations. Interesting political information.

Vernon Laning – going to DC end of month for annual Legion Conference. He will try to visit with North Dakota Congressional members. Complimented Lonnie on emails giving information on the bills, it makes it easier to track them. Good visit with Legislative Council.

Hal Weninger – Unfortunately had to miss the morning meeting. He did attend the afternoon session with the Legislative Council.

Gary Maddock – another good meeting. Lot better sound this meeting. Complimented Lonnie and the Legislative Council, this has been the best session for veterans. Everyone is working well together.

Tom Ryan – Very informative meeting with Legislative Council, especially the gaming bills. Thanked Lonnie, Dan and Cathy for work in between meetings. Good to hear the updates from the VA Hospital. Learned a lot.

Mamie Havelka – Great session. Legislation looks good, especially Veterans tax relief. Thank you with the legislative bills. Phone meeting isn't the same as meeting in person.

Lonnie Wangen – Fisher House funding of \$500,000 included in budget. Gaming tax still being discussed. Scanning project will go to the Senate with the full cost, one more FTE needed in Department.

Dan Thorstad – Thanks for being patient with the IT.

Jim Verwey reported there are 9.5 veterans in Senate and 9 veterans in House. The .5 veteran is the son of a veteran.

***Motion to adjourn by Brian Bartlett second by Jim Verwey, second by Richard Belling.  
Motion passed.***

Respectfully submitted:

Jim Verwey  
Secretary