

**ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
CAMP GRAFTON, DEVILS LAKE ND**

May 11, 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	Trish Hodny	Dave Rice
Richard Belling	Lamar Kruckenberg (TEAMS)	Tom Ryan (TEAMS)
Joseph Bialke	Vernon Laning	Murray Strom
Mamie Havelka	Gary Maddock	Hal Weninger
Dave Hilleren		

Absent:

Jim Verwey - Excused	Glenn Wahus - Excused
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Guests: none

***Motion by Vern Laning to approve Agenda, second by Dave Rice. Passed unanimously.***

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

We have a retired Navy veteran on board as intern, he is working on a federal grant for suicide prevention. He is attending a conference with Michelle Gauvin-Panos, ND CARES on suicide prevention.

Update on claims cases and contacts. Veterans Benefits Specialists are keeping busy with new claims and appeals cases.

Spring Conference training held April 3-6. Even with a snowstorm, there were 45 attendees from throughout the State. Fall Conference is set for Oct 2-5, 2023, at the Baymont Inn, Mandan

The Department is no longer selling Funeral Honor Coins from our office. We are working with the Heritage Center since they have online selling capability. At this time, it is cost prohibited for us to use online services for purchasing coins.

The Vietnam Books are proving too difficult to get. Other States use coins to commemorate Vietnam Veteran. Commissioner Wangen recommended replacing books for coins. Dave Hilleren and Hal Weninger were asked to assist in creating a coin.

The Attorney General's Office gave approval for the Department to request donations for programs. Letters were sent out to service organizations for gaming funds.

Update on State Approving Agency given: 2022-2023 catalog reviews were completed, provided assistance to veterans and schools, and has 4 survey completed for FFY23.

Updates on Veterans Aid Loan Program and Hardship Grant Program.  
Grant available \$750,000 a year for a few years.

ND HOPES is a \$5 million – 5-year suicide prevention federal grant that the Department is looking to participate in, along with other entities in the State.

Veterans Treatment Docket - Opening ceremony set for 5/12/2023 in Grand Forks. The first ND veteran is set to graduate from Phase 1 to Phase 2.

2023 items in Department Budget Bill that passed:

- Equity Funding provided in budget
- Temp position made into a full-time FTE
- Scanning Grant approved for \$100,836 (ARPA funding)
- Took PTSD Dog out of budget. Department authorized to carry-over funding from last two biennia.
- Second DAV van funding will come from the ARPA Transportation carryover amount
- Status of Audit Recommendation (previous) – new grant system for online submissions has been implemented.

WebGrant Software is replacing the Access database used to track Hardship Grant. It is going live to the Service Officers this summer. It will also be used for the Highly Rural Transportation Grant and any other federal grants the Department secures.

Commissioner Wangen is hoping to put together a Veterans Legislative Caucus to help with bills submitted in future legislative sessions. It would be great to have Legislators who really understand the bills and can speak on them during session.

***Motion by Hal Weninger to accept Commissioner's Report, second by Richard Belling. Passed unanimously.***

Chairman Strom received a topic for the round table from Dutch Bialke, “What was your scariest moment in the military”. Members are encouraged to think about this and we’ll talk about it at the Round Table at the end of the meeting.

**MAJ Jay Sheldon, ND National Guard** [Slide presentation]

Hopefully everything at Camp Grafton is going well for the ACOVA meeting.

Chairman Strom asked if the Guard has talked about the ND Veterans Home Governing Board. Maj Sheldon said due to the legislative session, they haven’t had a chance to discuss having on a Guard member serve on the Governing Board.

Updated Committee on ND Guard Capabilities and Economic Impact to State. Talked about 2022 Guard Missions that took place – fire support, flood operations and cyber training to name a few. There are some mobilizations going on this year also. Discussed legislation for the Guard, they did have a good session, such as receiving funding for various projects, state tuition assistance expanded, and state active-duty enhanced pay, incentive pay, and authorized rest and recover.

ND Guard deployment to southern border didn’t go as well as expected. Soldiers weren’t given much authority which made their work difficult. They weren’t involved with deterring people crossing, just monitoring the situation. Concerns brought forward but no outcome.

Legislature: ARPA Funding used to fund projects.

Military Museum – did have \$20 million line of credit moved to State Historical Budget. Authority given for Guard to fund raise on project.

Dutch Bialke asked, “How is recruiting going for Guard? Are you meeting your goals? “. Sheldon: not meeting goals, there are issues with the Genesis software program which has the ability to go back in an applicant’s medical history. So, when an applicant goes to MEPS there are more questions or concerns with their physical ability. Genesis is not working very well with rural medical facilities.

Trish Hodny asked about mental health issues or anxiety issues a recruit received medication or treatment for at some time in their life. An applicant needs to display stability for 36 months. A waiver won’t be given unless they have been off medication for twelve months. Do standards need to be reviewed and perhaps updated, this is something the Guard needs to be reviewing.

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

There are dual role positions that are able to provide more services to veterans. JSND, I am working on increasing Tribal Outreach to veterans and eliminating barriers that are specific to veterans. Unemployment rate at 2.3% for veterans, lower than national average. At Minot Air Force Base, various entities working together to assist transitioning veterans leaving the military. Fargo and Bismarck are on a rotational basis in working with veterans in prison. Monthly outreaches have been including other agencies to better assist veterans.

Vern Laning asked about the percentage of veterans that haven't been placed yet. Jerome: employers aren't sharing information on how many veterans apply and aren't hired.

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

Claims submitted up 22%, phone calls up 24%, getting more veterans information on benefits. Compact Act – mental health care of veterans. National Association of County Veterans Service Officers Conference is being held in June. There are usually 4-5 VSOs that attend. Starting April 1<sup>st</sup>, a health assessment needs to be done before being discharged. A Stand Down in Bismarck is being planned for this summer.

Dave Rice mentioned that he will be interviewing someone from VA regarding the Compact Act on his radio show May 20<sup>th</sup>.

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

No word on going mask free yet for the VA. They can still test for COVID but are no longer giving vaccinations to spouses or caregivers.

The Fisher House project is at the Land Acquisition phase. FY25 is set for construction phase.

Beneficiary Travel has had backlogs. More people are doing electronic submission and the turn around time is much quicker. Paper submission is a longer wait and the VA is working on that.

Prosthetic services received a mobile van that will start travelling around the state.

As a federal facility they honor the Disability Act regarding service dogs. There has a lot of misuse by veterans bringing in non-service dogs. The VA can't ask for papers proving the dog is a true service dog. There have been problems with dogs growling and lunging at people and each other. Owners that have an animal misbehave may be asked to remove the animal and possibly have the animal banned from the facility.

**Veterans Home Governing Board Appointees.**

Cathy Keogh would like to serve another term and Dean Overby would stay for one more year if needed. Trish Hodny reported that the Governing Board is discontinuing using Zoom for members to attend meeting. They feel members need to be at the Home to understand the issues. Tom Ryan said he would be able to attend the meetings in person.

***Motion by Trish Hodny for Cathy Keogh to serve a three-year term and for Dean Overby to serve a one-year term on the Veterans Home Governing Board, second by Mamie Havelka and Tom Ryan. Motion carried unanimously.***

Dave Hilleren noted that the date for the VVA Picnic listed on the Meeting Agenda is incorrect. The correct date is the July 14 & 15<sup>th</sup> at Mayville.

Discussion by the committee on the ramifications of kids being placed on medications and years later trying to sign up to serve in the military.

Committee recessed for lunch.

1:00pm

Committee reconvened.

Subcommittee meetings held.

**May 12, 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	Trish Hodny	Dave Rice
Richard Belling	Lamar Kruckenberg (TEAMS)	Tom Ryan (TEAMS)
Joseph Bialke	Vernon Laning	Murray Strom
Mamie Havelka	Gary Maddock	Hal Weninger
Dave Hilleren		

Absent:

Jim Verwey - Excused	Glenn Wahus – Excused
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***Motion by Vernon Laning to accept the February 2023 minutes, Dave Hilleren second. Motion carried.***

Discussion on next meeting date.

***Motion by Richard Belling to meet September 14 & 15, 2023 at Steele, ND with the meeting start time at 1:00pm on Thursday (14<sup>th</sup>), second by Dave Rice. Motion carried.***

**Veterans Affairs Subcommittee** – report by Hal Weninger

Fund 410 is in good financial shape. Reviewed Veterans Aid Loan reports and CD's investments. Reviewed Department's 2021-2023 and 2023-2025 budgets. 2023 Audit completed; report should be ready by next meeting. Discussed Commissioner's legislative raise and equity funding.

***Motion by Hal Weninger for Commissioner to receive any equity funding or raises as authorized by the Legislature, second by Richard Belling. Motion carried unanimously.***

***Motion by Hal Weninger to accept subcommittee minutes, second by Brian Bartlett. Motion carried unanimously.***

Discussion on Hyperbaric Grant and how to pay for approved applications. All funding has been obligated at this time.

***Motion by Mamie Havelka to use the CD that matures in September for the Hyperbaric Program.***

***Motion by Dutch Bialke to table motion regarding the CD until the next meeting when the committee has more information on funding that may come in from donations, second by Hal Weninger. Motion carried unanimously.***

***Motion by Dutch Bialke to fund the Hyperbaric Grant from donated funds made to the Hardship Grant Program in the amount of \$10,600, second by Dave Hilleren. Motion carried unanimously.***

Committee discussion on eligibility and income guidelines for applications. Dan Thorstad reported applications submitted are first reviewed under the guidelines of the Hardship Grant Program. If the applicant qualifies under the Hardship Grant guidelines, postwar trust funds are used. If the applicant is not eligible under the Hardship Grant Program guidelines, then donated funds are obligated to the approved application.

Dan and Commissioner Wangen will review the data and make recommendations regarding the donated funds at the next committee meeting.

**Legislative Subcommittee** – report by Mamie Havelka

Reviewed the 2023 legislation. Great job to Jim Nelson, Lonnie Wangen and the National Guard for the successful legislative session. Reviewed possible 2025 Legislative items. Discussed Strategic Plan – need more details.

***Motion by Mamie Havelka to accept subcommittee report, second by Gary Maddock. Motion carried unanimously.***

Dutch Bialke asked about the study of the Veterans Home as stated in HB 1007. Commissioner Wangen reported there were lots of questions from the legislators why the Veterans Home isn't filled. The study will look at the administration of the Home, the Governing Board and the Administrative Committee on Veterans Affairs. They asked about using the Veterans Home for other purposes. Eide Bailly is looking into other purposes and the cost to implement any changes. There are federal and state laws that apply to the Veterans Home that will not allow any other use of the Veterans Home than to be a nursing home.

Trish Hodny stated that the committee has met at the Veterans Home and it's important to do that. It was suggested within the year, the committee work with the Veterans Home to schedule a meeting at the facility.

### **PWTF & Appeals Subcommittee**

#### **PWTF Subcommittee – report by Vern Laning**

Reviewed the PWTF and Fund 410 Reports. Discussed the reasons why the Veterans Gaming Tax Bill failed. Subcommittee's recommendation to the full committee: the ACOVA recommend to the North Dakota Veterans Legislative Council to develop a clearly worded bill regarding the veterans gaming tax to present to the next legislative session. Discussion on PWTF interest earnings for the 2023-2025 biennium.

Subcommittee's recommendation to the full committee: to authorize \$50,000 of the interest earnings available July 1 to be used for the Grant Program.

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

***Motion by Vernon Laning to authorize \$50,000 from the PWTF interest earnings available July 1, 2023, to be used for the Grant Program, second by Trish Hodny. Motion carried unanimously.***

#### **Appeals Subcommittee – report by Vern Laning**

No appeals hearings have been held. There is a pending appeal tentatively set for July 13, 2023.

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

#### **Chairman Report**

Email received from Robert Benson regarding an open records request. Commissioner received email while he was out of the country. Commissioner forwarded email to Bryan Watters for reply. An email was sent to various committee members including Chairman Strom that the request hadn't been complied with and it was going on six days. Bryan had been out of the office but is working on getting the information.

Chairman Strom brought up that the Commissioner's evaluation will need to be done by July 1, 2023.

#### **Roundtable Discussion:**

Topic was scariest moment in the military; members and Commissioner spoke on the topic. Other information provided:

Brian Bartlett: Meeting was good.



Dave Rice: no additional comments.

Hal Weninger: Excellent facility and glad to be at the meeting.

Dave Hilleren Meeting was great. Vietnam Veterans Annual Meeting is at Mapleton, July 14 & 15, 2023; everyone is welcome. Asked about contact information for Gold Star Families.

Lamar Kruckenberg – Thanked Dan for the assistance on getting him online.

Tom Ryan – His term is ending and thank you to everyone for what they do for the veterans across the State.

Gary Maddock –First time at Camp Grafton and enjoyed it very much. Participated on the shooting simulator. Learn something every time he attends a meeting.

Richard Belling –Talked about Honor Flight he was on recently, it was a great experience. Biggest crowd meet them at the airport. Good meeting.

Mamie Havelka –Camp Grafton was lovely, meeting was good.

Trish Hodny – liked coming to Camp Grafton. There is value in rotating members on the subcommittees, that would be her recommendation. Commend everyone in being able to put words to your scariest moment.

Vernon Laning –Impressed with Camp Grafton. Good meeting, lot of topics discussed.

Dutch Bialke –Liked Camp Grafton and enjoy the camaraderie. Should be coming here for a meeting every so often.

Dan Thorstad –Camp Grafton was good.

Lonnie Wangen – Facility is nice and plans to come back. Thanked committee for their work and support.

Murray Strom – no additional comments.

***Motion by Richard Belling to adjourn by second by Hal Weninger.***

***Motion passed.***

Respectfully submitted:

Jim Verwey  
Secretary