

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

September 15, 2022

Meeting called to order at 1:00 pm by Chairman Murray Strom. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited, and a Moment of Silence was observed for the POW/MIAs, those serving overseas, Mr. Lyle Schuchard and Queen Elizabeth.

ACOVA Roll Call:

Present:

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

Absent – Excused:

Dan Brown	Jim Verwey	Lamar Kruckenberg (Present on the 16 th)
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Guests:

Dean DePountis, ND Attorney General's Office

ND Association of County & Tribal Veteran Service Officers: Mitch Erhardt-President

Mr. Erhardt gave updates on Veteran Service Officers, Pact Act & VSO training Conference. The Fall VSO Training Conference is scheduled for 16-19 October in Bismarck, location TBD. He also discussed the recently passed PACT Act; all Gulf War veterans can now enroll in VAHC; there are 20 new presumptive conditions for Gulf War veterans and several locations were added. There are also new Agent Orange presumptives and new locations. He recommended submitting claims now as there is expected to be an influx of new claims.

VAHCS-Fargo: Dr. Breton Weintraub, Director (Teams)

There are low COVID numbers, and the VA has received and is administering inhalation vaccine boosters. Mask mandates are still in effect for medical facilities, but non-clinical facilities are optional.

The monkeypox vaccine is available. The VA is ramping up for flu vaccine drive but have not received vaccines yet.

Updated electronic health records are projected for early 2024. The VA is preparing infrastructure and increasing IT capability and personnel.

ACOVA Meeting
September 15-16, 2022

Construction updates include the new boilers are installed and running; electrical is being upgraded; received approval to remodel kitchen and administrative areas; received approval for the mental health and whole health clinics; Fisher House has been approved but we are waiting on land acquisition.

Dr. Weintraub does not see any issues with the upcoming re-accreditation; Fargo VA is in the top 10 for nationwide contest.

He stated that community care approvals are taking about 8 weeks to process due to a high turnover of personnel. He says this is unacceptable, and they are working to improve it.

The Fargo VA is gearing up for expansion of eligibility due to PACT Act and it includes additional flexibilities to assist with hiring of staff.

Reproductive health care for veterans is available to include abortions in case of rape and incest, regardless of state law noting federal law supremacy. There will be reasonable accommodation for staff with conscious-based objections however, the Fargo VA is currently unable to provide abortion care.

ND Cares: Michelle Gauvin-Panos-Director (Teams)

Ms. Gauvin-Panos provided updates on ND Cares. They are providing advertising for staffing and residency at the ND Veterans Home.

She also discussed Bridges for the Fallen, Hidden Wounds Memorial Bridge in honor of those fallen due to PTSD, TBI, etc. Legislation is being introduced to get the bridge over I94 in Jamestown named. There are several other states that have this program.

ND Cares has made several requests to Tricare to change policies that create barriers to mental health. Discovered that the requests must go to the Department of Defense for approval.

She will discuss takeaways from the Governor's Challenge at the next ACOVA meeting.

ND Veterans Home: Mark Johnson-Director

Mr. Johnson gave updates on the budget and other items. He gave a history and updates on the facilities. They are currently replacing some heat pumps. They hoped to build a memorial garden but had to shelf it due to cost. An addition for VA telehealth is being constructed. It is not just for veterans in the home but all veterans. They have upgraded nurses' stations and administrative offices.

He also discussed hiring difficulties. They have lost 158 employees since 2019 but have only hired 140. They are struggling to maintain staffing which has led to veterans waiting for admission.

The home is still under full COVID protocols (mask mandates, etc.) which is also creating difficulties in maintaining staffing levels.

ACOVA Meeting
September 15-16, 2022

ND DVA Report: Lonnie Wangen – Commissioner, ND Department of Veterans Affairs

Commissioner Wangen gave updates on Legislation, Budget, and Activities. He mentioned the new hire, John Biby, for the temporary position and a work study that should be starting soon. He discussed operations for the State Service Officers and work completed in the last quarter to include number of appeals and current success rates compared to national numbers.

New VSO training was conducted in March and twice in May, training 5 new service officers. Upcoming training will be conducted for the Wells County VSO and our new hire.

A new order of funeral coins will need to be made, we will need to update the coins with the Space Force logo and bid out for production. We would still like to use volunteers or work studies to update the Fallen Heroes project.

The State Approving Agency has completed several school surveys and conducted several training sessions along with outreach activities. FY23 surveys will be risk-based surveys. 102 approval action were completed the last quarter.

There were 5 veterans preference appeals. All were properly awarded. A widow of a disabled veteran inquired about entrepreneur benefits.

There have been 20 loan applications with 8 being approved, 1 denial has been appealed. The status of Fund 410 was also discussed.

A total of 42 Post-War Trust Fund grants have been processed with 28 being approved. Over \$68,000 has been paid out. 15 Impact grants have been processed with 8 being approved, 1 denial was appealed. Over \$21,000 has been paid out with 2 grants still open.

The department continues to modernize its software and processes. A grant solution was found with the help of ITD and is being implemented. We are still waiting on a hosting waiver for the loan servicing software, but it should not be an issue as it is also used by numerous banks and other lenders. Our claims management software is antiquated and needs to be replaced. We researched other options, but none met all our needs. We are working on a solution with ITD.

The Fisher House has been approved; we are now waiting on land acquisition.

Veterans Court is behind schedule due to some conflicts in getting necessary training. It should be available starting in October.

Discussed upcoming legislative issues with 8-9 bills from NDDVA possible.

Commission Wangen talked about veteran transportation and the need for another DAV van that may or may not be approved for purchase at the next legislative session. Also mentioned that Highly Rural Transportation Grant funding decreased about \$60,000, effects from more states enrolling in the program. He also provided information on the number of veterans transported, miles, etc.

He provided updates on the website and social media sites.

ACOVA Meeting
September 15-16, 2022

ND National Guard: LTC Bohlman

LTC Bohlman provided updates on NDNG. The NG celebrated the 30th anniversary of the ND Veterans Cemetery. There have been over 10,000 interments.

The NDNG also recognized 21 years of the Global War on Terrorism and sent-off unit for deployment.

He mentioned that Gate City Bank won an award recognizing them as a military friendly business that supports guard and reserve members.

Recruiting is challenging. They are at 96% filled, trying to get to 100% strength. Over 400 soldiers are mobilized/mobilizing. The NDNG continues force restructuring moving a unit from Bismarck to Williston; building a new armory in Dickinson; and finished an operations center in Fargo.

They are engaging in legislative actions, talking to various communities throughout October to ascertain the needs with a legislative kick-off in December.

They now have the capability to conduct bridge training on every bridge in Army inventory at Camp Grafton. They will train NG, reserves, and active-duty soldiers.

They continue to fundraise and work toward a NDNG museum.

The local responses so far this year have been relatively low. The NDNG assisted in a couple of fires and some flooding.

They will conduct a Gold Star Family ceremony on September 25th.

National Cemetery Updates

Chairman Strom requested an update on the Fargo National Cemetery and some of the issues he has heard of. Mr. Dave Rice and Commissioner Wangen provided the following updates. A windwall was installed for family members. Sen. Hoven was able to secure heat and water for the proposed vault toilet. Still looking at providing flushing facilities dependent on sewage options. There will also be heated storage. The VA looking to purchase 30 additional acres for future expansion. The Memorial Guard is looking to build additional parking, chapel, Native American ceremonial area. The mayor of Fargo has pledged to assist. Misinformation led to bad press and arguing between the VA and representatives of veteran organizations.

Job Service ND: Jerome Billups State Veterans Program Administrator

Not present, no updates provided.

Subcommittee appointments

Chairman Strom asked if there were any members who wanted to switch their committee assignments. There were none.

Subcommittee meetings held.

September 16, 2022

ACOVA Meeting
September 15-16, 2022

Committee reconvened at 9:00 am.
Guests: Danelle Hopkins, Governor's Office

Motion by Brian Bartlett to approve May 2022 minutes, second by Dean Overby. Motion carried unanimously.

Time & Place: *Next ACOVA meeting*

Discussion: Hal Weninger recommended November 17-18, 2022, at Bismarck Comfort Inn; Glenn Wahus reported a scheduling conflict. Dean Overby recommended December 1-2, 2022.

Motion by Gary Maddock to approve the meeting for December 1-2, 2022, second by Dave Hilleren. Motion carried unanimously. Location TBD.

Subcommittee Reports

NDDVA Committee. Report by Hal Weninger

#4 Fund 410 PWTF: Discussed grant usage and funds per commissioner's report. Grant usage and funds are in order.

#5a Policy 435: Committee will approve \$5000 funding limit motion for HBOT therapy. Motion for approval by Glenn Wahus, second by Brian Bartlett. Motion carried unanimously.

#5b Policy 440: Committee approves commissioner "may request documentation and application" change. Motion for approval by Brian Bartlett, second by Richard Belling. Motion carried unanimously. Add: "Grant funds will not be used to pay child support". Motion for approval by Brian Bartlett, second by Glenn Wahus. Motion carried unanimously

#5c Policy 600: NEW. Reviewed. Motion for approval by Brian Bartlett, second by Richard Belling. Motion carried unanimously.

#6a Veteran Aid Loan Program: Committee reviewed and agrees with commissioner's report.

#6b Reviewed CD investments

#7a 2021-2023 reviewed by committee. No issues.

#7b 2023-2025 proposed budget. Information with commissioner.

#8 2017 Audit updates – Ongoing

#8i Hosting waivers, started over in 2022.

#8ii Grant database program completed, needs to be implemented.

#8iii 2021-2023 budget supplanting reduced to \$68,000. Manageable.

#9 No other business

#10 Motion by Brian Bartlett to adjourn, second by Glenn Wahus. Adjourned at 4:15 pm.

Motion by Hal Weninger to approve changes to Policies 435 and 440, second by Richard Belling. Motion carried unanimously.

Motion by Hal Weninger to approve new Policy 600, second by Brian Bartlett. Motion carried unanimously.

ACOVA Meeting
September 15-16, 2022

Motion by Hal Weninger to table discussion on other 600-series policies until the Attorney General has reviewed them, second by Richard Belling. Motion carried unanimously.

Motion by Hal Weninger to accept subcommittee minutes, second by Richard Belling. Motion carried unanimously.

Legislative & Strategic Planning. Report by Mamie Havelka

#2 Budget NDDVA. Committee recommends supporting.

#3 Burial & Memorial. Committee recommends supporting

#4 Education. Committee recommends supporting all items.

#5a Employment/Entrepreneur. Committee recommends supporting, in-line with federal guidelines.

#5b Committee recommends supporting.

#5c Committee recommends supporting.

#6a Financial. Committee recommends supporting.

#6b Committee recommends supporting.

#7 Committee recommends supporting as needed.

#8 Housing. Committee recommends supporting.

#9 Law/Policy Change. Committee recommends supporting all items.

#12 National Guard Specific. Committee recommends supporting.

#13 Other Misc. Committee recommends supporting.

#14 Services and outreach. Committee recommends supporting.

Motion to adjourn by Dean Overby, second by Mamie Havelka. Adjourned at 4:17 pm.

Motion to accept subcommittee minutes by Mamie Havelka, second by Dean Overby. Motion carried unanimously.

Motion to support Property Tax legislation by Dean Overby, second by Glenn Wahus. Motion carried unanimously.

PWTF & Appeals. Report by Vernon Laning.

#4, #5 Reviewed the PWTF and 410 accounts. No issues noted.

#6 Patriotic Licenses. Reviewed by the committee. No issues noted.

Vernon Laning moved to reelect Jim Verwy chair for the subcommittee, Dave Rice seconded. Motion carried.

Vernon Laning moved to adjourn the PWTF subcommittee, second by J.P. Bialke. Adjourned at 3:47 pm.

Appeals subcommittee called to order at 3:47 pm by acting chair Dave Hilleren. A hardship grant and loan appeal were heard. One via Teams and the other via phone. Both denials were unanimously upheld by the committee.

Vernon Laning moved to adjourn, second by Dave Rice. Adjourned at 5:00 pm.

ACOVA Meeting
September 15-16, 2022

Motion to accept subcommittee minutes by Vernon Laning, second by Dave Rice. Motion carried unanimously.

Chairman's Report. Report by Murray Strom
He discussed attending the ND Veterans Legislative Committee meeting via Teams.

Motion to accept chairman's report by Dean Overby, second by Glen Wahus. Motion carried unanimously.

Round Table Discussion

- Brian, appreciated the hard work completed
- Gary, discussed upcoming legislative session
- Mamie, great meeting, looking forward to tracking legislation
- Dave, appreciated the hard work
- Richard, VFW mid-winter meeting,
- Dave H, discussed 40th anniversary of Vietnam Wall
- Dean, discussed National American Legion convention and theme of Be the One, supporting suicide prevention
- Dutch, discussed laying in state the last WWII MOH awardee. Thinks it should be authorized for the Korean War and other conflicts. Discussed PACT Act and getting the word out to the state.
- Lonnie discussed Name the Bridge; suicide prevention, 988 working; participated in the Governor's Challenge, NASDVA conference, potential software to track demographic info and do analytics of electronic trail
- Tom, supports getting a sponsor for the property tax legislation.

Adjourn

Motion to adjourn by Hal Weninger, second by Dean Overby. Motion carried unanimously; meeting adjourned at 10:20 am.

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Verwey
Secretary