

**ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
AMERICAN LEGION CLUB, WATFORD CITY, ND**

November 16 & 17, 2023  
1:00 PM

Meeting called to order at 1:00pm by Chairman Murray Strom. Pledge of Allegiance and a Moment of Silence observed for POW/MIAs and for Richard “Whopper” Belling. Mr. Belling had been a member of ACOVA since 2011 and also served on the ND Veterans Home Foundation Board. He passed away October 24, 2023.

ACOVA Roll Call:

Present:

Steven Anderson	Trish Hodny (TEAMS)	Dave Rice (TEAMS)
Brian Bartlett	Lamar Kruckenberg (TEAMS)	Murray Strom
Joseph Bialke (TEAMS)	Vernon Laning	Glenn Wahus
Ed Ennis	Gary Maddock	Hal Weninger
Dave Hilleren		

Absent:

Jim Verwey - Excused

Chairman Strom welcomed new member Ed Ennis.

***Motion by Ed Ennis to approve September minutes, second by Glenn Wahus. Motion passed unanimously.***

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

-Update on Department staff. We were able to hire a temporary worker for the Highly Rural Transportation Grant.

-Update on Department programs and activities

-Held Service Officer Training Conference in October with 52 attendees. New VSO training has been ongoing.

- Vietnam Veterans “Welcome Home” coins are being well received by those receiving one. The first 4,000 coins were paid for by donations; waiting for more donations to place another order.
- Two veterans preference appeals were received; in both situations the agency followed the law.
- Update on Veterans Aid Loan Program, Fund 410, and NDDVA Grants – PWTF and Impact
- ARPA Funding was appropriated for veteran’s transportation, Fisher House and Document Scanning Project.
- Funeral Honor Stipends, five organizations have registered and submitted applications for payment. For the 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter FY24, a total of \$700 in payments have been mailed out.
- 2023 Audit, No Recommendations.

Commissioner Wangen stated that the ND Governing Board will have two members coming off the Board as of June 2024. ACOVA should be considering people for Board appointment at their next meeting.

**Dr. Breton Weintraub, Fargo VAHCS Director**

- Fargo VA started a new Fiscal Year budget and it’s not as generous as the previous year. The budget is determined by enrollment and purchased care.
- Travel reimbursements are routinely less than 10 days for payment.
- Hired Oncologist, very difficult to recruit. Still recruiting in specialty areas but making progress.
- Fisher House: there is a land parcel that National is looking at, but permission is needed from the Homeowners Associations. Service Dog policy, a letter of warning is sent out and if necessary, the animal can be banned.

Question from Brian Bartlett regarding WWII veterans receiving care waived co-pays. Clarification was given on the new law.

**NDCares: Michelle Gauvin-Panos, Director [POWER POINT PRESENTATION]**

- Governor’s Challenge: applied to get assistance from other States. Military-affiliated suicides for ND is 16; other statistical information provided.
- Compact Act Video
- Peer Support Specialists information

**ND Governing Board:** Vernon Laning

-Mark Johnson plans to retire next spring. Notices will go out early next year to start the hiring process.

-Staff were told not to bring their dogs to the Veterans Home during working hours. Residents liked having the dogs being in the facility and have written a letter in support of the dogs. This is an issue that Board will need to discuss at their upcoming meeting.

**Steve Anderson, Vice-President, ND Assoc. of County & Tribal Veterans Service Officers; Cavalier County VSO**

-Transportation for veterans throughout the State is an important issue for County/Tribal Service Officers.

-The Association believes in being transparent and bringing everyone to the table to help North Dakota veterans.

Subcommittee meetings held.

**November 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, and Richard Belling.

**ACOVA Roll Call:**

**Present:**

Steven Anderson	Dave Hilleren	Dave Rice (TEAMS)
Brian Bartlett	Trish Hodny (TEAMS)	Murray Strom
Joseph Bialke (TEAMS)	Vernon Laning	Glenn Wahun
Ed Ennis	Gary Maddock	Hal Weninger

**Absent:**

Jim Verwey - Excused	Lamar Kruckenberg
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Guests: none

Chairman Strom posed the two Questions for the Round Table:

What are your memories of “Whopper” Belling?

What’s changed about Watford City?

He would like to have staff send a letter to American Legion Post #20 thanking them for their hospitality and dinner on Thursday night.

Discussion on next meeting:

***Motion by Brian Bartlett for the next ACOVA meeting to be held February 15 & 16, 2024 in Fargo, second by Vernon Laning. Motion passed unanimously.***

**Legislative Subcommittee** – report by Vernon Laning

The 2025 proposed legislation was reviewed. Item 9B – Compensation for assisting Veterans on Claims Benefits. States: it is an effort to restrict unscrupulous attorney fees by prohibiting or limiting attorney fees for advising or assisting veterans in filing claims. A veteran’s caucus has been formed for the next legislative session. It should be helpful in introducing and explaining bills regarding veterans’ issues. Strategic plan still being reviewed.

***Motion by Vernon Laning to accept minutes as presented, second by Brian Bartlett. Motion passed unanimously.***

**PWTF & Appeals Subcommittee**

**PWTF Subcommittee** – report by Dave Hilleren

Account 410 reviewed and discussed. Discussion on Veterans Aid Loan limit, the loan is currently set at a \$5,000 maximum. Subcommittee will need analysis and possible legislative action to change amount if warranted.

**Appeals Subcommittee** – report by Dave Hilleren

No appeals pending.

***Motion by Dave Hilleren to accept minutes as presented, second by Trish Hodny. Motion carried unanimously.***

**Veterans Affairs Subcommittee** – report by Glenn Wahus  
Dutch Bialke voted in as Chair, Glenn Wahus appointed Secretary.

Policy#204 Veterans Aid Loan - Underwriting

1. Loan applicant wanted to count seasonal income. Policy states all income will be considered. Proposed change would count seasonal income but average it over 12 months.
2. FICO Credit Score Ranges have changed since the Policy was accepted. Change in Policy would reflect new credit scores: minimum score would be 580 and credit scores between 300 and 579 may be considered. Medical expenses could lead to a lower credit score and previous loan history with the Department could be reviewed. Dan reported that of the seven loans denied, as many as five that were disapproved could have been approved under the new FICO Range.

Subcommittee recommends approval on both changes.

***Motion by Gary Maddock to approve proposed changes, second by Glenn Wahus.  
Motion passed unanimously.***

Policy #210 Veterans Aid Loan – Applicant Eligibility

Administrative change so policy reflects law adding National Guard loan eligibility.  
Subcommittee recommends approval.

***Motion by Ed Ennis to approve proposed changes, Trish second. Motion passed  
unanimously.***

Policy #406 Hardship Assistance Grant - Payment

Policy is to allow applicant to use vendor of their choice. Some vendors want payment directly then we must reimburse the applicant. This is not a good way for reimbursement. The change would have the applicant make sure the vendor will bill the Department and not make the applicant pay upfront.

Subcommittee recommends approval.

***Motion by Vernon Laning to approve proposed change, second by Dave Hilleren.  
Motion passed unanimously.***

***Policy #606 IMPACT Hardship Assistance Grant - Payment***

Subcommittee recommends approval

Impact requests for rent or mortgage payments. Many entities won't accept credit card payment, so to get a check we need a W-9, which many won't provide. There can be considerable length of time between the approval and payment. Some applications come in with eviction notices and have three days for payment.

The changes would be the vendor must accept the approval letter as promise of payment and IRS W-9, SFN 53656 or written confirmation they will accept payment via credit card.

***Motion by Hal Weninger to approve proposed changes, second by Ed Ennis. Motion  
passed unanimously.***

#9 Commissioner's Compensation  
Set aside for full committee deliberation.

***Motion by Glenn Wahus to accept subcommittee minutes, seconded by Hal Weninger. Motion carried unanimously.***

Dutch Bialke spoke on the Veterans' Affairs subcommittee discussion regarding the Commissioner's salary. The Commissioner is appointed by ACOVA and serves at the pleasure of ACOVA. ACOVA sets the Commissioner's salary within the confines of the Department's budget. The subcommittee reviewed a list of containing 21 state agencies that are similar in size to the Department; the Commissioner's salary is down at the bottom. They also reviewed a list containing the salaries of other State Directors of Veterans Affairs; again North Dakota is at the bottom. The Commissioner's monthly compensation is \$7,834.42 per month; the director of an agency like the Department receives \$12,000 per month. The subcommittee looked at his duties, exemplary work ethic and length of employment (he was appointed in 2008). Commissioner Wangen holds two master's degrees and a bachelor's degree. They took into consideration that there is no Deputy Commissioner to help with the workload. The networking and contacts the Commissioner has made from serving on over 20 committees has helped him be more effective in serving the veterans of North Dakota.

The Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee recommends to the full committee that the Commissioner be compensated more consistent with his duties and responsibilities. They recommend his salary be increased by \$3,525.55 to an amount of \$11,359.97 per month. This places the Commissioner just below mid-point of the amount agency directors receive and that of other State Directors. The increase is long overdue, and the subcommittee believes it's the right thing to do.

***Motion by Dutch Bialke to increase Commissioner Wangen's salary by an additional \$3,525.55 for a monthly salary of \$11,359.97, second by Vernon Laning. Motion amended by Dutch Bialke that the effective date be 1 December 2023, second by Hal Weninger. Amendment passed.***

***Roll Call vote on Amended motion Yeas: Steve Anderson, Brian Bartlett, Joseph Bialke, Dave Hilleren, Trish Hodny, Vernon Laning, Gary Maddock, Dave Rice, Glenn Wahus, Hal Weninger, Murray Strom; Abstain: Ed Ennis. Motion passed.***

Appointments to the Veterans Home Governing Board.  
Chairman Strom asked Dean Overby and Steve Frojen if they would like to continue serving on the Board. Both Dean and Steve do not wish to serve after their term has ended. Dean suggested adding a banker or accountant, for their financial background, and possibly getting a National Guard member.

## Chairman Report

### **Roundtable Discussion:**

Committee members shared their memories of “Whopper” Belling.

Other items mentioned:

Dutch Bialke: Lots has changed, more fast food. Small town atmosphere has diminished, tanker trucks all the time. Good infrastructure, end of day it’s still the beginning of the wild west.

Trish Hodny: Regarding Watford city, when she has worked with students from Watford City, she notices they still have small town manner.

Dave Rice: He had wanted to see new American Legion facility and Veterans Memorial but couldn’t make the trip this time.

Dan Thorstad : There is a Teddy Roosevelt feeling in Watford city.

Lonnie Wangen: Urged committee members to check out the Veterans Memorial in Watford City. The traffic is better with the newer roads.

Hal Weninger: Watford City has changed a lot in the oil years.

Gary Maddock: Lots of changes in Watford City.

Steve Anderson: Seems like there is always something new going on in Watford City.

Ed Ennis: His first meeting went ok. Watford City is amazing. There is a great community center and a very nice legion facility. Watford City is doing a lot better than Williston handling the influx of people and traffic.

Dave Hilleren: Watford City vitality remained in the downtown area. The growth in services is tremendous.

Vernon Laning: Remembers as a kid driving thru Watford City, thinking it was just small town. With the oil boom, many changes taken place. The city has done a very good job in controlling the development in an organized way.

Glenn Wahus: It was a team effort getting the legion facility. Could speak half a day on the changes.

Brian Bartlett: After retiring from the military, he got a job delivering propane but never made it past the gas station down the road. So, I really don’t know how it has changed.

Murray Strom: Watford City – remembered going paddle fishing in the area, so it’s been quite a while since he been back. Mayor talked a lot about what’s been happening.

***Motion by Dave Hiller to adjourn, second by Glenn Wahus .  
Motion passed.***

Respectfully submitted:

Jim Verwey  
Secretary