

**ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
EXPRESSWAY SUITES, FARGO ND**

February 8 & 9, 2024
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 Marlene Smith who recently passed.

ACOVA Roll Call:

Present:

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

Absent:

Joseph Bialke - Excused

Guests:

Jim Hapala, VFW

Chairman Strom welcomed new member Joseph Best. Since Mr. Best has not received the paperwork from the Governor's Office, he will not be a voting member at this meeting.

Motion to approve Agenda by Vern Laning, 2nd by Jim Verwey. Motion carried.

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

- Requested two 100% funded interns. These positions were combined and 1 position approved and will be advertised. The intern will work on our agency's website and social media outlets.

- Update on State Service Officers claims activity for the 2nd quarter of the 2023 Biennium. John Biby introduced to committee. He divides his time working in the Claims Division and on projects as designated by the Commissioner.

- Calie Lindseth and Summer Kristianson, American Legion VSO, did outreach work in Adams, Bowman, Emmons, McKenzie, and Slope counties. They also met with veterans and helped file claims, along with doing public presentations.
- Ongoing VSO Training with MHA (Three Affiliated Tribes), Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, Sheridan and Cass Counties.
- Update on naming bridges project.
- Vietnam Veterans coins are being handed out throughout the State and are very much appreciated.
- SAA Officer, Chris Kratochvil, attending training at the National Conference. He is working on getting surveys and site visits completed. All catalogs are completed for FFY24.
- Updates on NDDVA Loan Program, Fund 410 (PWTF Clearing Account), and NDDVA Grant Programs.
- 988 is designated as the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, for veterans dial 988 then press 1. Governor is encouraging State Agencies/Higher Education to put the 988 icons on their websites. Governor's Proclamation "Veteran and Military Suicide Prevention and Awareness Year 2024" distributed to committee members.
- Federal Grant awarded to ND Legal Services They will provide legal services for homeless or at-risk veterans. Commissioner Wangen and Trish Hodny met with ND Legal Services and will now partner with them to help veterans. Trish Hodny gave additional information on what types of services can be given to veterans.
- Document Scanning Project to date: 297,283 documents scanned, collected from 41 of the 43 counties participating and tribes plus the state cemetery, completed and returned 5 counties and 1 tribal.

Gracia Sanchez-Dekarske, Executive Assistant to Dr. Breton Weintraub, Fargo VAHCS Director

- Minimal COVID activity among inpatients and VA staff
- Community Care is a necessary and vital part of what we do. However, it is important to right-size it:
 - Some Veterans prefer to get their care with us despite distance
 - In many cases, we can get the Veterans in sooner than the private sector
 - Seeing the Veteran within our healthcare system keeps all their medical records in one place, which is helpful to prevent fragmentation of their care
 - Even though we can in most cases retrieve records electronically from other healthcare systems, the process is cumbersome and impedes our clinical staff when trying to do their work
- We continue to face budgetary pressures this fiscal year
 - Higher than anticipated growth in Pharmacy expenses
 - Continuing growth in Community Care expenditures
 - Wage growth across the federal sector and overall growth in our staffing

- We continue to participate and assist with the COMPACT Act. Activity has been steady but not excessive.
- Fisher House Project: No update. Both potential parcels on Elm St have fallen through. Back to square one with realtor
- We had a CARF survey of our Homeless and RANGE programs. We achieved the full three-year accreditation and had exactly zero citations!!! We are told that only 3% of facilities pass without any citations at all.
- Designated an Age-Friendly Health Care System at Level 2
- Won Guardians of Excellence award in our ED for the third year in a row!
- We continue to have high Veteran and Employee satisfaction scores. Our Quality metrics remain very high as well.

ND National Guard, LTC Sheldon, Adjutant General's Office [POWER POINT PRESENTATION]

- will send link for NDNG Year in Review Video
- Governor announced "A Cross-Agency Military Group" to make North Dakota the most military friendly state in the nation.
- Recruit to 100% End Strength – 94% currently; 92% reenlistment rate in FY23
- Dickinson Armory Construction Groundbreaking Ceremony on July 28, 2023, with an estimated ribbon cutting ceremony in 2025
- Listing of dates in 2024 for Guard to connect with stakeholders in communities throughout the State
- Information given on the Military Museum being planned
- Retirement Events Weekend on April 26 & 27, 2024 (Friday and Saturday), Bismarck Register at www.ndguard.nd.gov

ND Cares Director, Michelle Gauvin-Panos, [POWER POINT PRESENTATION]

- Statistics on ND military suicides starting in 2020 to 2023
- Updates on initiatives and training opportunities
- Information on upcoming events pertaining to veterans

Job Service ND – Jerome Billups, Director DVOP & LVRS

- 14,859 job openings on Job Service ND website
- Top five occupations looking for workers: Healthcare, Sales, Administration, Transportation, and Farming Fishing & Forestry
- Unemployment rate was 1.7% in December 2023. One year ago, it was a 2% unemployment rate.
- Job Service also help employers find employees by hosting events and working with veterans to get the skills needed for positions.

ND Assoc. of County & Tribal Veterans Service Officers; Chris Deery, President, Cass County VSO

- Attended a Leadership Summit in Washington, DC.
- Trying to get member counties to promote the 988 number
- Suicide Summit at the Fargo Dome, Cass County will be there in attendance
- Cass County Veterans Service Office using social media to get word out about helping veterans
- Region V statistic showed 347 veterans in transitional, un-sheltered or sheltered housing
- Goals as Association President: Fellowship program in CVSO offices, re-establish a mentorship program, apply for emergency housing grants and hyperbaric grants.
- Try to rebuild communications and be transparent with counties

ND Governing Board: Vernon Laning

- Looking for new Administrator, received nine applications. Selection committee will be doing interviews with five of the nine.
- skilled care is full, with a waiting list
- rooms are available in basic care

Subcommittee meetings held.

February 9, 2024

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, and those serving overseas.

ACOVA Roll Call:

Present:

Steven Anderson	Trish Hodny (TEAMS)	Murray Strom
Brian Bartlett	Vernon Laning	Jim Verwey
Joseph Best	Gary Maddock (TEAMS)	Glenn Wahus
Ed Ennis	Dave Rice	Hal Weninger (TEAMS)

Dave Hilleren

Absent:

Joseph Bialke – Excused

Lamar Kruckenberg

Guests: Jim Hapala, VFW

Motion by Vern Laning to accept November 2023 minutes, second by Jim Verwey. Ed Ennis recommended the Roll Call vote on the Commissioner's Salary have the names listed. Vern Laning accepted that language as an amendment to his motion, Jim Verwey seconded. Amended motion passed unanimously.

Discussion on next meeting:

Motion by Ed Ennis for the next ACOVA meeting to be held May 16 & 17, 2024 in Jamestown, second by Glenn Wahus. Motion passed unanimously.

Chairman Strom spoke on appointments for the North Dakota Veterans Home Governing Board. Kenny Wiederholt name was submitted by Dean Overby for consideration. Jim Verwey reported that Mr. Wiederholt is also the chairman of the Veterans Home Foundation Board. Commissioner Wangen spoke on a conversation he had about having a legislator serve on the Governing Board. There has been a legislator, Judy Lee, who has served in the past. Commissioner Wangen will check with our attorney, Dean DePountis, in the Attorney General's Office to find out if there is a conflict of interest for legislators to serve on the Governing Board.

Veterans Affairs Subcommittee – report by Glenn Wahus
Glenn Wahus served as Acting Chairman.

Discussed Policies #404, #412, #413, #604, #612, and #613. Recommend accepting proposed changes for policies #404, #412, #413, #604, and #612. Policy #613 will be discussed at a later meeting.

Discussed upcoming legislation on veterans Aid Loan to increase amount to \$7,500 from \$5,000.

Reviewed budget and that is going well.

Discussion on HRTG funding for increasing staff salaries for additional duties worked on the grant. This would be a flat wage increase.

Motion to accept report by Glen Wahus, second by Hal Weninger. Motion carried.

Policy #413 Hardship Assistance Grant - Income

Motion by Glenn Wahus to approve raising the Hardship Grant Monthly Net Income Limit to match the VA Monthly Pension rates based on household size, second by Jim Verwey. Motion passed unanimously.

Policy #412 Hardship Assistance Grant - Assets

Motion by Ed Ennis to increase the irrevocable burial fund amount to \$8,500, second by Trish Hodny. Motion passed unanimously.

Policy #612

Motion by Trish Hodny to increase the irrevocable burial fund to \$8,500 second by Ed Ennis. Motion passed unanimously.

Policy #404 Hardship Assistance Grant – Cancellation

Motion by Glenn Wahus to accept the proposed changes, seconded by Ed Ennis. Motion carried unanimously.

Policy #604 IMPACT Grant - Cancellation

Motion by Glenn Wahus to accept proposed changes, second by Trish Hodny. Motion passed unanimously.

Discussion on compensating Commissioner for additional workload on Highly Rural Transportation Grant (HRTG). The Department was awarded the HRTG eleven years ago (2013) but staff hasn't been compensated for the additional workload of administering the grant. The Commissioner and Chief Administrator have had duties since the grant was awarded. A temporary position was created to administer the program but unfortunately, this position was cut along with two permanent positions by the legislature in 2017. The duties of the temporary worker were shifted back to the Commissioner and staff. The current HRTG included salary funding for a temporary employee and Department staff to receive compensation. The temp works minimal hours and is ineligible for health insurance. One staff member supervises the temp and does additional work on the grant, one staff member handles the administrative work, and the Commissioner oversees the grant funding to include procuring vans, applying for the grant and federal reimbursements. Department employees are aware the additional pay is only available until the yearly grant ends on September 14, 2024. They are also aware that if the temp is able to increase his hours even to the point of getting health insurance, their HRTG pay will be reduced or taken away. The staff pay will be tracked by using coding for temporary salaries and does not affect their regular salary. Commissioner Wangen will be determining the staff increases and it is up the Administrative Committee to determine if Commissioner Wangen should get additional temporary pay.

Motion by Glenn Wahus to authorize NDDVA to expend available Highly Rural Transportation Grant salary funds for temporary salary increase for the Commissioner for work on HRTG program, second by Steve Anderson. Motion carried, with one abstained – Trish Hodny.

Legislative Subcommittee – report by Vernon Laning

Discussion on additional items for consideration for the 2025 Legislation Session were discussed with Commissioner Wangen. Reviewed proposals to the Governor’s Strategic Plan and recommendations from Department employees for future consideration. Any comments on the Strategic plan or Department recommendations will be forwarded to the Commissioner prior to his March 14, 2024 meeting with the Governor.

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

PWTF & Appeals Subcommittee

Appeals Subcommittee – report by Dave Hilleren

An Appeal hearing was held on Thursday, February 8 at 4:00pm. The Commissioner denied an Impact Grant because assistance with prepaid funeral expenses does not meet Impact Hardship Assistance Grant criteria 5a. “Must be for an immediate need such as unexpected or emergency expenses which would create an undue hardship or payment of living expenses that are past due because of extenuating circumstances.” The Appeals Committee voted to uphold the Commissioner’s denial.

Motion by Dave Hilleren to accept minutes as presented, second by Dave Rice. Motion carried unanimously.

PWTF Subcommittee – report by Trish Hodny

Subcommittee recommends Veterans Aid Fund amount to be put into CD’s.

Motion by Trish Hodny to allow Commissioner’s discretion in determining an amount from the Veterans Aid Loan fund to be put into CDs, second by Steve Anderson. Motion carried unanimously.

There is a request for \$20,000 for PWTF dollars for purchasing Vietnam Veteran Coins. The funding for the PWTF is from the Vietnam Veterans Adjusted Compensation. The coins purchased so far have come from donations. Commissioner Wangen would like to order enough coins to make sure every Vietnam Veteran in the State is given one.

If donated funding comes in, it will be used as pay back to the PWTF.
Subcommittee recommends approval for the amount requested.

Motion by Dave Hilleren to expend \$20,000 for Vietnam Veterans Welcome Home Coins, second by Trish Hodny. Motion carried unanimously.

Motion by Trish Hodny to accept the subcommittee report as read, second by Dave Rice. Motion carried unanimously.

Chairman Report

Chairman Strom has been attending meetings throughout the State. He talked about a stand-alone machine that will cash in gaming tickets rather than having a cashier handle the pay-outs.

Roundtable Discussion: Where would you like to see the ACOVA meeting held?

Jim Verwey: Good meeting. The armory in Jamestown might be available for a meeting room.

Brian Bartlett: Lots of good discussion and making sure wording is correct in motions. We should go to Medora sometime.

Glenn Wahus: Good meeting. Have had the VA come out to do meetings at their Post. Watford City is setting up ATLAS, it's a VA Telemedicine program, at their Post.

Dave Rice: A lot of detail work. Enjoyed the topics yesterday. Veterans' Hour from 4-5 on KFGO; some of the guests will be from Veterans Home in Fergus Falls and the Military Museum.

Vern Laning: Interesting meeting. Discussion was good. Jamestown is a good place.

Steve Anderson: Great meeting, good discussion. There were problems and the Committee worked through them. Steele is a good place to meet.

Joe Best: Thanks for the opportunity to learn.

Jim Hapala: Learning from the meeting.

Dean Overby: Everybody is still working hard for veterans.

Dave Hilleren: Good meeting. Lots of discussion, lots of detail came from PWTF and Appeals subcommittee meetings. In New Town, the Vietnam Veterans picnic and convention will be at Sandy Hook July 19-21, 2024. The business meeting starts at 10am on the 20th. Everybody is welcome. They are working on getting Four Bears Casino to have rooms available for those that attend.

Ed Ennis: Would like to go to New Town for ACOVA meeting. Meeting was great and he's not afraid to ask question. Like to see meetings rotated around the State. It would be nice for ACOVA to have a shirt with their logo. They could wear it to the bridge ceremony in Jamestown.

Motion by Ed Ennis to look into purchasing shirts with ACOVA logo using state funding, second by Dave Hilleren. Motion carried, Hal Weninger and Trish Hodny abstain.

John Biby: Great to be part of the meeting.

Commissioner Wangen: Likes having the meeting in Fargo. Maybe a meeting at the Veterans Home in Lisbon in the future. Discussion on presenters at the Jamestown meeting. Members whose ACOVA term expires June 30, 2024: Vern Laning, Brian Bartlett, Joseph Bialke, Dave Rice, and Hal Weninger.

Cathy Halgunseth: Good meeting. Wherever the committee goes, it's nice to get recommendations for hotels. Medora would be a good place.

Trish Hodny: Everything was good. Regarding the HRTG motion, she is not opposed to giving money to employees, it was the wording of the motion. Can we get training on how to word motions for better clarity? Wished she was there in person. Commissioner reported that open meeting, open records training has been done before and he will look into other training.

Hal Weninger: Every meeting is a learning meeting. Lot of discussion on Glenn's motion, the devil is in the details.

Gary Maddock: Interesting speakers and learned things as always. Sorry mic didn't work, hard to hear some of the people. As far as meetings, I like moving around the State but always enjoy Steele.

Murray Strom: Very good meeting.

Motion to adjourn by Ed Ennis, second by Dave Rice. Motion passed.

Respectfully submitted:

Jim Verwey
Secretary