

# **IDAHO VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES**

April 9, 2009

Pursuant to agreement, a meeting of the Idaho Veterans Affairs Commission was held in the conference room at the Idaho State Veterans Home – Boise, Idaho State Veterans Home – Lewiston and Idaho State Veterans Home - Pocatello on Thursday, April 9, 2009, via tele-conference, for the purpose of reviewing program reports and other items of business.

**PRESENT:** Commissioner, Donald Riegel, Chairman  
Commissioner Art Gimpel  
Commissioner Mel Napier  
Commissioner Ken Pitcher  
Commissioner John Spurny  
David Brasuell, Administrator, IDVS  
Susan Lowman-Thomas, Human Resource Officer, IDVS  
Debbie Spence, Financial Manager, IDVS  
Jim Adams, Administrative Support Manager, IDVS  
James Roberts, Administrator, IDVH – Boise  
Sarah Yoder, Administrative Support Manager, IDVH-Boise  
Brent Schneider, Administrator, IDVH-Pocatello  
Tom Ressler, Supervisor, Office of Veterans Advocacy  
Zach Rodriguez, Director, Veterans Cemetery  
Tammy Hebdon, Administrative Assistant II, IDVS

Chairman Don Riegel called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. Pacific Time.

## **INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS:**

Sheila Shoemaker, Army One Source. Sheila provided the Commission with a video about the services provided by Army One Source, which will be available for viewing from the Division office. [www.armyonesource.com](http://www.armyonesource.com) is the national army web page that provides information and service links. [www.myarmylifetoo.com](http://www.myarmylifetoo.com) is the local website, and should be used to obtain information for the local areas. Sheila left brochures outlining the services available through the program, and these will be disbursed to all of the Veterans Home, the OVA and the Cemetery.

## **APPROVAL OF THE JANUARY 2009 IDAHO VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES:**

Commissioner Pitcher made a motion to dispense with the reading of the minutes. Commissioner Gimple seconded; vote was taken and motion passed.

## **IDAHO DIVISION OF VETERANS SERVICES HUMAN RESOURCES:**

Susan Lowman-Thomas began by addressing the economic issues with payroll and how it affects the Division. Susan pointed out that the Governor is very supportive and willing to let Directors decide how to make the budget adjustment for their agencies.

One of the budget holdback issues has been a mandated hiring freeze. This does not mean that IDVS has not been able to hire; we have been. However, it does require more documentation and justification,

so only in those positions critical to maintain services are being approved. Overtime is another area that has been affected. Currently there is no overtime allowed, unless it is necessary and mandatory for the Division to continue the necessary services. This too requires approval from Division of Financial Management, so it is being closely monitored.

With the uncertainty of the economy, as well as the commitment of our employees, the Division has seen a dramatic decrease in turnover due to the budget challenges.

With the economic downturn, John Spurny wanted to know if there was anything being done for employee appreciation. Susan reported that “yes” the State has Employee Appreciation Month in May, and that the Homes also do employee appreciation. In addition, the American Legion Women’s Auxiliary holds an appreciation of staff event in the month of December.

It is time to update the Division Strategic Plan. Susan has been meeting with staff, residents, and residents families (the Division shareholders) for their input. This is the same method that has been used in past revisions, and has always resulted in a very simple, meaningful, stakeholder input driven Plan. Our plan has been well received and supported by the auditors.

The Division is dedicated to serving Idaho’s Veterans and their families, by providing superior advocacy, excellent assistance with benefits and education, high quality long term care and dignified final resting places. In keeping with those missions, Susan asked each responder what they thought the Division values should be. This resulted in the following:

**Compassion** for all  
Unending Accountability  
Absolute **Integrity**  
Outstanding **Communication**  
**Dignity** for Everyone  
Unconditional **Honesty**

These values have now been incorporated into the six goals for the Division:

1. Provide high quality **advocacy** and benefit assistance for all Idaho veterans and their families.
2. Provide superior **long-term care** and enhanced quality of life for all Idaho State Veterans Home residents.
3. Attract and retain excellent, compassionate **staff and volunteers**.
4. Operate with the efficiency, innovation and adaptability of a **well-managed business**.
5. Honor Idaho veterans and their families with **dignified interment services and final resting places**.
6. Ensure high quality, well managed **education and training programs** for Idaho Veterans.

Susan also spoke with residents and families, which provided her with an amazing picture of how the Homes are doing and are perceived. Some of the comments she heard over and over were: excellent care; feel safe and secure; different programs; love the food; love it; met and got married here; wonderful place; you don’t feel left out; find things for you to do; best staff. These comments indicate that the staff at Idaho Division of Veterans Services is doing a good job of upholding the values expected from them, and obtaining the goals set.

## **IDAHO DIVISION OF VETERANS SERVICES FINANCIAL REPORT:**

It is the time of year when Rate Updates for each Home must be addressed. Debbie provided the Commissioners with the proposal for rate changes for the Homes, as well as a comparison with the general market. The proposed updates are:

Private Pay, Nursing Care Admitted On or After July 1, 2000:

From \$137.00/day To \$158.00/day

Private Pay, Nursing Care, Admitted Prior to July 1, 2000:

From \$146.00/day To \$167.00/day

Private Pay, Nursing Care, Non Veteran Spouses:

From \$137.00/day To \$158.00/day plus Ancillaries and current VA Per Diem rate

These rates will go into affect June 1, 2009.

Commissioner Napier moved that the proposed increase be accepted; Commissioner Pitcher seconded. A vote was held and the proposals passed.

Debbie proceeded with an update on the Divisions fiscal position. The FY10 Budget Proposal contains the following:

\$24,016,900 appropriation

\$87,200 benefit cost increase

\$67,200 inflationary adjustment increase

\$300,400 replacement item increase

\$80,900 additional capital outlay increase

\$161,400 for the Veterans Education Program that is being transferred to the Division

<\$1,300> decrease for statewide allocation

<\$858,300> 5% personnel cost reduction

The current budget is at \$35,428,900, which includes the 4% general fund holdback.

The average Year to Date PerDiem costs are:

Nursing Care \$251.44

Domiciliary \$78.52

Average Year to Date Occupancy rate

Dom/Res 97.2%

IDVS Nursing 84.8 %

Statewide 83%

Medicare Percentage

Boise 7.3% (8 residents)

Pocatello 0% (no residents)

Lewiston 0% (no residents)

The average is 3.7% of total residents

## **QUESTION/ANSWER PERIOD ON THE VETERANS HOMES, THE OFFICE OF VETERANS ADVOCACY AND THE STATE VETERANS CEMETERY FY07 THIRD QUARTER OPERATIONS REPORTS:**

### **POCATELLO VETERANS HOME OPERATIONS REPORT:**

Brent Schneider, Pocatello Home Administrator, reported that the Pocatello Home is very pleased with the billing and collecting of Medicare money. Collections for Part A have been collected through February 2009 and Part B through September 2008. In addition, Brent informed the Commission that the occupancy rate at the Pocatello Home is slowly increasing; indicating that all of the marketing work is beginning to pay off. Brent will continue to meet with the hospital discharge planners and encourage

them to refer to the Pocatello Home, as well as with outside agencies and businesses to let them know the Home is there, spouses can be admitted, and that the Home is now Rehab and are Medicare certified.

The Pocatello Home has always been a clinical site for the ISU programs. This relationship has continued over the past few months with the addition of a couple of dietary interns, which has been very beneficial to the Home. This working relationship will continue, as ISU is very pleased with the outcome of this program.

The hiring freeze implemented by the budget holdbacks has made filling positions a bit more difficult, but still obtainable. Thanks to the flexibility and willingness of existing staff to fill in, the Pocatello Home was able to avoid using Agency this past quarter. Overtime hours have been closely monitored and kept to a minimum, while still maintaining the 3.3 nursing hours/per patient hour.

Pocatello has been very busy with activities and has received wonderful support from the community. In January they held the annual employee appreciation day, had a "SOUP-ER" bowl party. In February two volunteers (relatives of a resident) came in and started a pool program and held a pool tournament, which was very well received by the residents. Other activities included the annual USO show sponsored by the American Legion Auxiliary, a BBQ lunch sponsored by the ELKS lodge in Blackfoot, and a St. Patrick's Day party which was also sponsored by the American Legion Auxiliary, featuring O'Douls "Beer".

The much anticipated new Chapel dedication also took place this past quarter, and was very well attended. Thanks to the wonderful donations and kindness of Hilda Hudson (former volunteer), Blackfoot Elks and the POW/MIA additional seating, a new sound system, a 42" flat screen TV, a new piano and many other items were also added. Chapel attendance has greatly increased, including additional family members.

#### **LEWISTON VETERANS HOME OPERATIONS REPORT:**

Clark Graebel, Lewiston Home Administrator informed the Commission that due to the loss of the Physical Therapist, the Lewiston Home is not currently able to accept Medicare A patients. As soon as this issue is resolved, Medicare A patients will begin being admitted.

The past quarter has seen the loss of several long-term residents in the Lewiston Home. As a result, census has dropped. The Admissions team is working to fill these openings as soon as possible, and with 19 inquiries in March and two new admits, Clark feels the census should be back up soon.

Pharmacy receipts are improving, but much slower than in Pocatello and Boise. For example, the receipts showing in January are actually November's billings. Clark continues to work with the VA system to improve the turn around time.

In an effort to reduce costs, the Lewiston Home has transferred their electricity and gas to a "comfort" billing, which provides a steady, consistent monthly payment. This move averages the year out and keeps the billing amount constant, without the month-to-month fluctuations.

Although the Lewiston Home likes to keep an average of 3.1 nursing hours/patient hour, the average the past quarter has ran between 2.9 and 3.2. Clark assured the Commission that he is keeping an eye on this area and working to keep it closer to the targeted 3.1 hours. For years the Lewiston Home has been able to operate without the assistance of agency, but recently that has not been the case. However, with several recent hires, Clark believes that the use of agency should decline once again.

Thanks to thousands of volunteer hours the Lewiston Home has also had many wonderful activities and parties this past quarter.

## **BOISE VETERANS HOME OPERATIONS REPORT:**

James Roberts, Boise Home Administrator, announced that Sarah Yoder, AIT, recently passed her national testing and is now a licensed Nursing Home Administrator.

Sarah Yoder provided the Commission on updates on the two major areas she has been working on:

**Pharmacy Receipts:** The quarterly report indicates that during the month of March Pharmacy D monies were not received, when in actuality they were. As a result of a programming glitch the money was not received on time. This glitch has now been corrected, billings are being completed correctly and monies are being received. In fact, the Boise Home is currently in negotiations with the contract providers to rebill for 2008 claims and recoup some of the monies that were lost; it appears that might actually happen.

The Care and Charge Tracker programs are all up and running at the Homes. Sarah and a group of C.N.A.'s went down to the Pocatello Home to help train and to see how the other Homes are using the program. The Boise Home is planning to try the Residential Center module, with a trail/test group. Results from this trail will be forwarded to the other Homes for input and evaluation.

James reported on the activities taking place in the Boise Home this past quarter, including all of the Division of Public Works projects. Although these projects have at times been a bit disruptive, they have been well worth it, and the staff, residents and visitors have been very understanding and patient. James encouraged the Commission members to stop by the Boise Home and see the improvements.

One of the DPW projects completed is the installment of the back Arctic Entrance. This addition is providing better security as the doors automatically lock at 10pm, and the residents are able to access the smoking area without having to go outside through these doors.

The Nursing Station areas have also been redone and are now much brighter and cheerful. The Res/Dom area has had new carpeting installed, which has provided a "new" feel to that area as well.

The Kitchen has new stainless steel cabinets and a new dishwasher, and the Dining Area has a new open juice bar.

The census at the Boise Home has continued to trend up, even with all the restrictions and confinements of the DPW projects. The past three months have seen the census go from 112 to 120.

The past quarter has seen a rise in food costs, a direct reflection on the current economy. Dan Chandler, Dietary Services Manger, is doing everything he can to keep these costs down and contained. The installation of the new freezer will help reduce these costs in the future as it will provide more storage space, allowing the annual food convoy to bring more food, including frozen items.

Thanks to the dedication of Scott Houde, Staffing Coordinator, to be more efficient, there has been a downward trend in the nursing hours. Scott is aware of the concern for quality of service and is careful to not let that be compromised. At the same time, there has been a decrease in the use of Agency, which is direct result of the willingness of current employees to cover shifts, which is cheaper than using agency.

James reported that Amanda Stewart, previously the Staff Development Coordinator, has been promoted to the Nurse Management position on 2West. This position was open for about six months. Amanda has been very well received by all she works with, and is having very positive impact.

When Boise decided to become Medicare certified they budgeted for an average of three Medicare days. Currently, the average is 7.4. Although this can be a strain on the staff, this does have a very positive impact on the financial position of the Home.

Tom Ressler commented that he was in the 2West elevator and it was creaking and popping, and he wanted to know if this was an issue to be concerned about. James assured the Commission that this issue has been addressed and they maintenance staff are working to see what they can do to fix the issue, including the possibility of for a federal grant to replace the elevator.

## **IDAHO STATE VETERANS CEMETERY OPERATIONS REPORT:**

Zach Rodriguez, Cemetery Director, reported that the past three months have all been very busy and above average months; normally 30-32, with the last three months ranging between 35-27. There has also been a dramatic increase in casket services. Zach commented that this may be a direct reflection on the current economic conditions, as interment for veterans at the Veterans Cemetery is considerably cheaper than the same services at private cemeteries. This increase, coupled with the budget holdbacks, has provided a challenge in scheduling employee hours, but Susan Lowman-Thomas and Debbie Spence have both helped get the necessary paperwork for DFM waivers. This is essential to meeting the mission and goals of providing respectful services to veterans and their families.

With the increase in services there has also been an increase in the need for volunteers. Volunteer hours have increased to accommodate the increase in services. One of the Cemetery volunteers, Ken Smith, has received the Citizen of the Year award from the Elks, and he has also been nominated for a National award.

Zach and Darin Sorenson, Grounds Foreman, have been providing safety training to the Cemetery employees. They are also working to incorporate more training on a daily basis in an effort to improve safety awareness and reduce on-the-job injuries and workers compensation claims.

In an effort to better educate the public on the services provided by the Veterans Cemetery, Zach has been meeting with the Boy Scouts and other organizations looking to do service projects. In addition, Zach has been meeting with funeral homes letting them know what they can do to help accelerate the burial process, including pre-registration and a general knowledge of what the Cemetery provides.

Commissioner Riegel wanted to know if there was any update on the increase in fees being charged for vault burials on the upper level. Jim Adams responded that the Division changed the Administrative Rules covering this fee, and as soon as the legislature adjourns the new rules will go in to affect, which include the fee for vaults on the upper level going to \$500.

## **OFFICE OF VETERANS ADVOCACY OPERATIONS REPORT:**

Tom Ressler, Supervisor of the Office of Veterans Advocacy informed the Commission that office interviews have increased by about 200 this past quarter. This increase is most likely in relation to the economic times, as more veterans look to increase in their current disabilities or file for new disabilities

to increase their monthly income and make ends meet. The dollar amounts of these claims have also increased. In the past, the national trend has been one or two issues per claim; currently these same claims are seeing 20+ issues, resulting in more 70%+ disability classifications.

Hospital and Home visits remain constant, mainly due to the aging of the WWII and Korean War veterans and their inability to come in to the office for appointments. The number of Video Hearings has decreased, as have the number of local decision making hearings.

Plans are beginning for the upcoming County Service Officer Training, which will be held in Boise, at the DoubleTree Inn, August 26-28, 2009. A letter will be going out to the counties, reminding them to send their county support officers, as well as to support this valuable training. Following the Training will be the 2009 Idaho Women's Veterans Conference, which will be held on Saturday, August 29, 2009. This event will also be held at the DoubleTree Inn. Gina Stamper and her committee are working to get the event planned and organized. Tom reminded everyone to spread the word about the Conference. There is no cost, but everyone must register so an accurate count for lunch can be taken. There will also be a Female Veteran of the Year Award given, and nominations are due in to Gina by July 5, 2009.

The Army Guard sponsors a Yellow Ribbon program where they bring in army guard members and their spouses on a Friday/Saturday and provide them with information on education, benefits, etc. The goal of this program is to provide them with all the information they need to be successful, and where to go if they need assistance.

On June 27, 2009 the Boise VAMC will be hosting an All Veterans Welcome Home Day. This is a family oriented, carnival atmosphere with music and food and is designed to have hands-on information available about veteran's issues and organizations. This event is another opportunity to get information out to the local veterans about what services are available to them and how to access that assistance.

Tom updated the Commission on the construction at the new VA Regional Office, and reported that construction is moving forward and the target date for moving in is mid-October, 2009.

Commissioner Riegel wanted to know how the change to a call-center style service for the 1-800-827-1000 number was being received. Tom reported that the initial fear that there would be many unhappy veterans has not been realized. So far, so good.

Commissioner Riegel inquired as to if Tom and his staff had encountered any issues with the county service officers helping the veterans in their areas. Tom is not aware of any, but commented that the Post Falls area is working through a few issues they hope to have resolved soon. Commissioner Riegel wanted to know if there was any assistance that could be given to the Coeur d'Alene Service Officer, as he seems to be having some problems. Tom assured Commissioner Riegel that his office is aware of this and that Rocky Davis from the Lewiston OVA office is doing outreach at the Coeur d'Alene area CBOC to try and assist with the issues as well.

## **DIVISION OF VETERANS SERVICES OPERATIONS REPORT:**

### **DAVID BRASUELL, Administrator:**

Dave began by providing an update on all of the DPW projects. Jim Adams is in the process of compiling a list of these improvements and enhancements, which can be used for marketing to reiterate our commitment to our veterans and our facilities.

The Veterans Education group that will become part of the Division on July 1, 2009, has been in constant contact with the Division. Although they become Division members on July 1, they will not actually move over to the Division offices until the new Division office is completed. Debbie has been working with their budget people to make this transition smooth.

The budget has been the "hot topic" this past quarter, and there have been lengthy discussions about cuts and how they will take place. The final decision should be made in the next few days, and will hopefully include the provision that directors can use their own discretion to make the cuts. If we are allowed to do this, Dave believes the Division will be able to do so without pay cuts at this time.

The Divisions new building is on track, with plans to break ground this summer, and move in sometime early 2010. Bids have been coming in lower than expected, allowing for some enhancements.

Dave asked the Commissioners to please review the objectives and goals Susan handed out and to provide any input as soon as possible.

The two hunting tags for the Disable Veterans Hunting program have been approved by the legislature. Jim and the committee will be getting together to draft the application, and plans are to have the first trip in November 2009. Applications will be made available as soon as they are completed, and Dave and Jim will take them to the various Conventions this summer to hand out. The application will also be available on the IDVS web page.

As of the end of March, the Veterans Support Fund donations from Idaho State tax refunds has exceeded \$22,000, indicating the \$25,000 minimum should be easily met. This has been a very successful program, and will provide great assistance to our veterans.

Plans for the 2009 Memorial Day program at the Veterans Cemetery are continuing. Dave, Jim, Zach and their committee members have worked very hard to provide the necessary services, and assure everyone that this year's program will be kept to no more than one hour.

The Boise Cemetery project grant has finally been closed out. Thanks to Debbie and Zach for all of their work to achieve this important milestone. The next cemetery grant request is for the expansion of the columbarium wall and lower level casket area. Zach is meeting with architects to get estimates for these projects and will be working with the VA to get the grant process moving forward.

On June 10, 2009, the Office on Aging is hosting a Symposium on Aging. Dave and Susan, along with several other Division staff members will be participating in this event. The plan is to provide information to the aging community of what services are available and how to access them.

Dave recently met with Keith Holloway, Western Health Care, Medicare and Medicaid consultant, to discuss issues with the Homes. Dave is planning to have these meetings quarterly, allowing issues to be addressed more effectively. Keith also visits each of the Homes, and Dave has asked him to report back after each visit.

### **JIM ADAMS, Administrative Support Manager:**

Jim began by addressing upcoming Commission meeting dates. In order to avoid conflicts in the future, it has been suggested that the meetings be moved to the third Thursday in the month. This would also allow the Homes adequate time to prepare their quarterly reports. Commissioner Riegel commented that due to a prior commitment, the third Thursday would be very difficult. Jim suggested maybe the fourth

Thursday instead. Commissioner Riegel will contact each Commissioner and let Jim know their decision.

Jim reported that he is very disappointed in the Chairman of the Senate Transportation Cmte. As he has had the Gold Star licenses plate legislation for over four weeks. Jim has talked to him to see what can be done to move it forward, but has not received any feedback. As of today, the bill is still not scheduled for discussion. Jim commented that it would probably not be in the Chairman's best interest to "rat hole" this legislation, as that action would have significant negative feedback from his constituents.

Last week Jim was in Washington, D.C. where he was able to meet with the Idaho legislators. Unfortunately, they had all left town for Easter, but he was still able to meet two Chiefs of Staff and one Staffer. Due to Jim's past dealings in D.C., he knows all three very well and they have assured him they will try and get things done for us. Jim specifically asked the three to contact VA about the 30-70% issue and they indicated they would do so. Last year the plot allowance increase legislation never made it out of conference, meaning it died and has to be resubmitted. Jim asked Crapo and Simpson Chiefs Of Staff to reintroduce this legislation and they agreed. The confusion on the two year time limit on plot allowance and who can get it is another issue Jim asked them to address. Jim suggested they meet with the VA and ask them to clarify the verbiage as it is confusing.

The IT Department has both the ChargeTracker and CareTracker programs up and running. Fine tuning will continue each day, based on comments from end users. The programs are still new, but Trent and Sarah are both convinced that once everyone gets used to using the system they will see how beneficial it is to their jobs and any opposition will be gone.

The Division IT Department has been fortunate to acquire two IT Interns from Job Corps. The interns are very beneficial and helpful. By being interns, there is no cost to the Division for their services; the Job Corps funds this program.

In closing, Jim announced that Senator Jim Risch, who has been living in trailers in the parking lot, has finally been assigned an office space and he has moved in.

## **OLD BUSINESS:**

There has been a lot of email traffic concerning the new Post 9/11 GI Bill implementation, and Phil Wickliff is very aware of this. He will be attending a conference on this topic later this summer. This is a wonderful program, but the implementation needs work, which Phil is working on.

## **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next Commission meeting will be held July 15, 2009, in Pocatello.

As there was no further business, Commissioner Pitcher moved that the meeting be adjourned; Commissioner Spurny seconded the motion; all agreed.

Meeting was adjourned at 11:30 a.m.

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Don Riegel, Chairman

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David Brasuell, Executive Secretary

