



Veterans Advisory Board Meeting Minutes

- Meeting Date/Time/Location:** June 10, 2024 – 10:00 a.m.
Hybrid Zoom Meeting – WCHD, Girard St & Zoom
- Committee Members Present:** Lynne Graham, Christopher Brown, Dick Conoboy, Joe Shepherd, Andrea Vance, Wes Weston, Brent Waggoner, Allan Jensen
- Committee Members Absent:** Robert Wilson
- Staff/Guests:** Liz Witowski, Whatcom County Health & Community Services
Sean Dalgarn, Whatcom County Health & Community Services
Ann Beck, Whatcom County Health & Community Services
Amanda Burnett, Whatcom County Health & Community Services
Paul Pelot, Worksource
Jessica Silver
Ana Clark, Opportunity Council
Cori Bryant, Opportunity Council
Melissa Nyberg, Opportunity Council
Lara Welker, Aging Well Whatcom

Agenda Item	Discussion
1. Call to order	Meeting called to order by Lynn Graham at 10:05 am
2. Roll Call	A quorum was present.
3. New Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Open Public Comment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Former spouse of a veteran introduced herself and stated the challenges she and her family are facing. II. Approve April 8, 2024 minutes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Andrea motioned to approve the April minutes as presented. Chris seconded the motion. b. April meeting minutes were approved <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Aye: 8, Nay: 0, Abstain: 0</p>
4. Reports & Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. VAF Strategic Planning and Budget Discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Ann introduced herself and expressed her admiration for the program, praising the growth it has seen over the years and the work done by Liz and Shawn. b. The program was created to provide ongoing support for veterans who wouldn't necessarily need to be tied to the Veterans Assistance Fund due to having more income.

- c. The program has benefited from the addition of Shawn, who is located at the Vet Center, making it easier for veterans to meet with him.
- d. Ann discussed the funding of the program, particularly the property taxes that support it. She mentioned the balance of the Veterans Fund and shared a spreadsheet to provide a clearer picture of where the money is going.
- e. Ann explained that personnel costs are expected to grow by about 12% over the years, including COLA and anticipated increases in health insurance costs.
- f. The program currently has contracts with the Opportunity Council for case management and financial assistance. There is also a transportation contract, but there have been issues with getting it sent out.
- g. Ann explained the Veterans Assistance line item is for direct assistance, such as rent, mortgages, and work-related expenses.
- h. There are also additional operational costs needed to keep things going, such as cell phones and office chairs.
- i. The indirect transfer out funding supports all the folks who don't have direct funding attached to them, such as colleagues in finance, the business office, human resources, and some of Ann's time.
- j. Ann discussed future projections for the program, mentioning a new financial system that will allow for better tracking of specific contracts and the amounts coming out of them. This will allow for a consistent 15% indirect rate from 2025 onwards.
- k. Ann opened up the floor for discussion about how the funding should be spent, what the concerns are, and where the attendees see successes.
 - i. Liz asked about the new indirect cost of \$151,000 for the year, which Ann confirmed
 - 1. Ann explained that this cost supports all the staff who don't have direct funding attached to them, such as colleagues in finance, the business office, human resources, and some of Ann's time.
 - 2. Ann clarified that each division within Health and Community services has a different indirect rate. Their division, Community Health and Human Services, has a higher rate due to the large number of staff and contracts.
 - ii. Liz asked if they are still planning to take the ASR to the County Council to ask for increased direct assistance funding, despite the new indirect fee.
 - 1. Ann confirmed that they are still planning to do so, as there is an increased need from the veterans and their families in the community due to rising costs.
 - iii. Ann mentioned that the veteran's assistance funds budgeted for this year are already almost spent out due to the increased cost of living. They plan to ask for more money to continue to pay for rent and other expenses.
 - iv. Ann emphasized the importance of having all the information as they move forward and making sure everyone knows where they stand with things.
 - v. Chris raised concerns about the personnel costs, which are increasing at a higher rate than the direct assistance budget.
 - vi. Amanda clarified that the personnel costs are determined by County Government, HR, the Exec's office, County Council, and Union negotiations.
 - vii. Liz reiterated that the indirect costs are out of their control and expressed her desire to have more money going to veterans.
 - viii. Amanda suggested that if the fund were administered elsewhere, it could circumvent the cost of county staffing.
 - ix. Liz emphasized that the work they do, particularly the VSO work, brings revenue back to the veterans in the county.



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> x. Ann highlighted that county staff are able to be federally accredited VSO's, a privilege not available to everyone. She emphasized that without this provision within the county, VSO work couldn't happen unless it was through one of the other agencies that are able to do VSO work. xi. Chris questioned whether there is a choice between doing business with the county or directing the money some other way to get to the veterans. xii. Ann Beck expressed her interest in hearing other board members' thoughts about the matter. She mentioned that she wanted all advisory boards to be aware of the current budgeting situation, given the increasing costs of supporting people. xiii. Andrea acknowledged the shock at the numbers but wasn't surprised, given her experience with the high costs of benefits for employees. She emphasized the value of having accredited VSOs and the significant income they bring in for veterans, which reduces the need to use county funds. xiv. Sean empathized with the shock at the cost but argued that the greater good accomplished by the expenditure vastly outweighs the large number on paper. He shared positive feedback from community veterans and family members who have been accessing benefits for the Veterans Assistance Fund. xv. Wes Weston expressed concern about the escalating personnel costs and the potential of running out of funding. He felt like they were paying the county more instead of assisting the veterans. xvi. Amanda reminded the board members of their strong advisory and advocacy voice for veterans and for this fund. She suggested that they could advocate with other aspects of county governance to understand why the cost of doing business with the county is so high. xvii. Christopher Brown, LICSW shared a past conversation with Gary Linsey, who warned about the county completely taking over the fund if they weren't careful. He admitted that at the time, he thought Gary was crazy, but looking at the 2034 county line item, he wondered if Gary was onto something. Voiced concerns about the financial situation, acknowledging the benefits of partnering with the county but expressing worry about the potential financial strain in 2034. xviii. Wes expressed disturbance about the financial situation, questioning how the organization could stay in business with the current financial trajectory. Struggled to understand how additional funding would help if the percentage of costs continues to increase. xix. Ann suggested having several conversations over future board meetings to discuss potential options. Offered to bring in experts from the business office and finance department to provide more information on personnel costs and the indirect rate. Mentioned the possibility of increasing the community tax rate to bring in more revenue. Emphasized the importance of transparency and not wanting anyone to feel uninformed. xx. Dick expressed interest in learning more about the personnel side and overhead costs. Requested more detailed information on what constitutes the projected costs for 5 years out. <p>II. ASR to increase VAF Direct Assistance Amount for 2024</p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Liz discussed the issue of the direct assistance budget being depleted faster than expected due to higher cost of living. The original budget was \$100,000, but the actual costs for rent are about \$1,500 for a single and between \$2,500 and \$3,000 for a family. She proposed to increase the budgetary allowance for direct financial assistance from \$100,000 to \$200,000 for the rest of 2024. b. Andrea, a social worker at the VA, agreed with Liz's observations and had no issue with the proposal. c. Wes Weston asked about the impact of increasing the budget. Ann Beck showed that it would still be sustainable through 2030. d. Wes motioned to raise the limit to \$200,000 for direct assistance. Andrea seconds the motion. Motion passed. <p style="text-align: center;">Aye: 7, Nay: 0, Abstain: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> III. Opportunity Council Case Management Report IV. VAF Cash balance as of 5/31/2024: \$998,879.78 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Liz explained the difference between cash on hand and the budget, stating that the cash on hand in the fund as of May 31st was \$998,879. b. Liz asked if the attendees wanted her to continue reporting the cash on hand number, to which Christopher responded affirmatively.
5. Good of the Order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Paul announced that the VSO at WorkSource Whatcom, previously known as Melissa Logan, has changed their name to Rowan Meadows. II. Wes summarized everyone's thoughts and concerns regarding the personnel portion of the VAF. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Andrea suggested getting numbers on how much veterans are drawing in a year on adjudicated claims and to figure out why administrative costs are high.
6. Next Meeting	The next meeting will be held Monday, August 12, 2024 – hybrid.
7. Adjourned	The meeting was adjourned at 11:18 am.