**ND Cares Coalition Meeting Minutes**

**February 20, 2024**

Shelly Sizer opened the meeting at 1:00 PM.

Mary Anderson from Protection and Advocacy talked about the legislative bills they are paying attention to and some concerning the educational rights of children with disabilities. Michelle mentioned that the PsychArmor video 15 Things Veteran and Military Kids Want You to Know may be a good introduction for school administrators or teachers to what military kids go through. Mary may be able to connect us with the right people.

Rodney Gellner of the Fargo VA Healthcare System reported there is a hiring freeze, but they were able to get through exemptions for clinical positions. Only three people took advantage of the early retirement opportunity. They are also getting ready for people to return to the office for work. February 24th for returning supervisors and April 28th for returning non bargaining unit employees. Regarding the Fisher house, they identified pieces of land that are in the negotiation phase.

Jeremy Harrison of the VA Benefits Administration stated that with the new administration there are still a lot of things up in the air. Currently their outreach efforts remain local where no per diem or overnights are required. For instance, he can come to Bismarck from Fargo if he can return to Fargo within his 8-hour workday. No overtime allowed.

Jeffery Diemert from Legal Services of North Dakota reported that they have been busy across the state. He spoke during the Grand Forks Best Source podcast about the veterans grant and stating this it is fully funded until the end of the year. He talked about a veteran he helped stop a foreclosure on his home just weeks before a sheriff’s auction. He’s also helped a few with bankruptcies. He is always looking for events to participate in to get the word out.

David Becker, ND Army Reserve Ambassador, reported they are trying to expand the program to add more ambassadors by at least two to allow for easier coverage of the entire state. He will get me information on any new programs for the headquarters level.

Kelli Weiand from Military Outreach talked about the Vietnam Veterans Day program on March 29th and the upcoming Honor Flight in April, a Career Day at the Armed Forces Reserve Center April 10th and that the April is the Month of the Military Child. Both Cindy Whitesell and Kelli attended the Minot Military Affairs Committee meeting where they learned of the positive economic impact the base on the local region.

Sarah Kemp Tabbut with the Fargo VA stated there is an upcoming S.A.V.E training coming up, and the collaboration with American Foundation for Suicide Prevention to get out a letter to federal firearms licensees providing suicide prevention materials and providing gun locks safe storage at their facilities. Governors Challenge priority group #3 will be following up with phone calls and hoping for at least five of them to agree to participate.

Laurel Grams, Integrated Resilience Office at Minot AFB reported that a new suicide prevention management strategy for new airmen that promotes connectedness to each other. Classes are about 40 people, 40 to 50 airmen. There will be group challenges. When they leave the class, they will be followed periodically in different time periods. Another program is Pause to Protect which partners with local firearm dealers with the goal of providing education, outreach and firearms secure storage options. They have 3 retailers in Minot.

LTC Ann Willougby of the NDNG talked about a few civilian employees that took the “fork in the road” deferred retirement option and they are watching the budgets very closely keeping an eye out for changes coming from the new administration. About 50 people in the 142nd Engineer Battalion are still on the southwest border. There are also Big Army active duties units there too. Some in the Guard are taking the opportunity to complete their military and civilian educations in their down time while on the border. They are doing well, and moral is good. They should return sometime in Sept or Oct. At Camp Grafton there will be suicide prevention programing like ACE plus and then Ace's Ask Care, Escort along with Mid-Deployment resiliency programing to support families. They are noticing some young children struggling to adjust to the parent being gone. April 4th the governor will be signing the proclamation for Month of the Military Child, at the Capitol. Lastly, she talked about the other upcoming youth activities.

Kora Dockter from the ND Suicide Prevention Coalition talked about the planning for their annual conference at the Bismarck Career Academy, Sept 24th. The theme is “providing hope to all generations through coordination”. There will also be resource booth opportunities. Their biggest hurdle is the cost to stream the conference online. One of the legislative bills they are watching closely is the one relating to shared custody of children after a divorce, so the child does not lose access to one entire half of their family including grandparent.

Nikki Frohlich of Military Outreach talked about the Vietnam veteran's day lunch at the AMVETS post in Bismarck, March 29th, and the NDNG Retiree weekend in Fargo April 25-26. She also relayed her conversation with Bendan Nagel of the Bismark/Mandan Chamber about reinstituting a Military Affairs Committee or MAC. Shelly Size stated that she also reached out to the chamber to ask to be kept on a list to help reinstitute the MAC.

Kodi Pinks of the NDHHS reported that the state’s suicide dashboard has been updated with 2024 data so far there have been 22 military-related deaths in 2024, but that number could change. LTC Willoughby mentioned that the NDNG had one suicide and one attempt last month.

Ron Murray, with the NDNG Integrated Primary Prevention program talked about how a recent climate survey produced some interesting data about trends that are affecting service members and commanders created prevention action plans accordingly. There a several prevention training courses that he plans to attend. The Guard plans work on a holistic health campaign this year, H2F, which stands for holistic health fitness and encompasses mental health, sleep, nutrition, physical and spiritual readiness, which is very similar to the Air Force Comprehensive Airman Fitness model.

Bryan Watters of the ND Dept. of Veterans Affairs reported that the data project identifying veterans is still not complete. He also talked about their concern over HB 1169, the bill that removes the requirement for veteran service officers to be accredited and paves the way for private firms to charge veterans fees or a percentage of their benefits. Veterans service officers charge no fee for their services. The property tax bill will bring exemptions for veterans in line with Minnesota and neighboring states. HB 1504 would allow half of the gaming taxes from veterans’ organizations to go into the Post-War trust fund which funds grant and loan programs. The other half would go toward homeless veterans. Senate Bill will allow veterans organizations to use up to 20% of their gaming proceeds for club operations. is for There are bills for Grand Forks is adding a veterans treatment court.

Jeff Diemert from Legal Services of North Dakota talked about the ways his grant is helping several veterans with homelessness, debt relief and disability upgrades. He also commended VSO Bratton for his work to connect with those deployed with 817th after their last deployment.

Danette Wolfe of the NDNG Suicide Prevention Program talked teaching the SSI Tier 2 course this weekend up at Camp Grafton, the Deployment Resiliency training course, the Substance Abuse Prevention Skills Training Seminar, and about getting resource materials bags ready for the Understanding Veterans and the Military event in Bismarck.

Shelly Sizer commended Secretary of the Army Christine Warmoth, who recently stepped down due to the change in administration, for her work and reminded us that many of the programs we are talking about were approved by, or started, by the stroke of her pen when she started her position four years ago. She also improved barracks for active-duty soldiers and worked to improve veterans’ benefits.

Michelle Panos reported on data that is located on the Governor’s Challenge Dashboard. She reported that veterans’ home, COMPACT Act and the legal services media spots are still running. There are military culture trainings coming up including the one in Bismarck on April 23 and talked about the topic that will be presented. For peer support, 8 veterans have gone through the training and there will be more with the Vets for Vets training in Minot. There will be a new partnership with the Peer Support Association of ND which, this year, has a goal of learning how to help veterans. They request military culture training for their members and will recruit veterans to become peer support professionals. There are more CALM and Safety Planning training opportunities in the works for providers and the public. Michelle also talked about the 988 and NDHOPES media campaigns and the difference between the two. LTC Willougby suggested that we make stickers for service members to pick on their computers, cars, etc.

The next Coalition meeting is set for May 8, 2025.

The meeting ended at 2:31 pm.