WHATCOM COUNTY
Health and Community Services

Champ Thomaskutty, MPH, Director
Amy Harley, MD, MPH, Co-Health Officer
Meghan Lelonek, MD, Co-Health Officer

Veterans Advisory Board
Meeting Minutes

Meeting Date/Time/Location: February 9, 2026 – 10:00 a.m.
Hybrid Zoom Meeting – WCHCS, Girard St & Zoom

Committee Members Present: Lynne Graham, Paul Pelot, Andrea Vance, Richard Conoboy, Bob Wilson

Committee Members Absent: Brent Waggoner, David Swanson

Staff/Guests:
Liz Witowski, Whatcom County Health & Community Services
Amanda Burnett, Whatcom County Health and Community Services
Beth Decker, Whatcom County Health & Community Services
Cori Bryant, Opportunity Council
Doug Bestle, Community Member
Steven Monroe, Community Member, VFW Commander
Justine Pike, Community Member

Agenda Item	Discussion
1. Call to order	Meeting called to order by Paul Pelot at 10:00 am
2. Roll Call	A quorum was present
3. New Business	**I. Open Public Comment** a. No public comment **II. Approve December 8, 2025 minutes** a. December 8, 2025 meeting minutes were approved **i.** Aye: 4, Nay: 0, Abstain: 0
4. Reports & Discussion	**I. Board Member Updates** a. Liz shared that Wes Weston's term on the board ended on January 31, 2026. i. A certificate of appreciation will be mailed to him ii. Liz thanked him for his contributions to the community through Toys for Tots and veteran transition classes b. Dave Swanson was approved by council, his term officially started on January 31, 2026 c. Andrea Vance has been approved for a second four-year term d. There is a vacancy on the board and Liz would like create a one-time nomination committee to review current applicants e. Liz also advised that they needed to elect a chair and co-chair for the year. They could wait until the April meeting to vote when all the vacancies would be filled. i. Liz asked if anyone was interested in being the chair or vice chair. 1. Lynne and Dick declined. ii. Andrea said she would volunteer for the Chair position. iii. Paul said he would take the Vice Chair position.

iv. Andrea made a motion to vote for the Chair and Vice Chair at today's meeting.
    1. Dick seconded the motion to vote for the Chair and Vice Chair at today's meeting.
    2. Motion passes unanimously.
        a. Aye: 4, Nay: 0, Abstain: 0
v. Paul made a motion to nominate Andrea as Chair for 2026.
    1. Dick seconded the motion to nominate Andrea as the Chair for 2026.
    2. Motion passes unanimously.
        a. Aye: 4, Nay: 0, Abstain: 0
vi. Andrea made a motion to nominate Paul as Vice Chair for 2026.
    1. Dick seconded the motion to nominate Andrea as the Chair for 2026.
    2. Motion passes unanimously.
        a. Aye: 4, Nay: 0, Abstain: 0

II. Nomination Committee Selection

a. Liz wanted a nomination committee to review the current applications for the current board vacancy
b. Group could meet after the board meeting to review the applications
c. Andrea motioned to create a nomination committee. Paul seconded the motion.
d. Nomination committee would be Andrea, Paul and Dick.
    i. Motion passes unanimously
        1. Aye: 4, Nay: 0, Abstain: 0

III. Program Updates and What are you seeing in the Veteran's community.

a. Liz shared an update on the VAF there has been an increased demand for temporary financial assistance due to overloaded systems at Opportunity Council and other community partners
    i. VAF funds are being used to cover eviction notices and back rent, which is not typically how the fund is used
    ii. They are emphasizing that this is temporary assistance and not ongoing
    iii. Due to under spending in 2025 they are able to be more flexible with the funds
b. Cori gave an update on the Stand-Down event and the Opportunity Council
    i. Planning is progressing on the event with the potential of medical services providers and dental providers on site.
    ii. There will also be a mini job fair at the Stand-Down
    iii. Rental support budget will be exhausted by May, with no new clients able to be taken until July when budget cycle begins.
    iv. The Homeless Prevention Team may be an alternative source but it depends on their availability
    v. There is an updated resource list regarding nation wide grants that are available
        1. Cori will send the list to Liz who will send it out to the board
c. Paul gave an update on employment services
    i. Challenges are arising with the Vocational Readiness and Employment Program due to a shortage of Veteran Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs)

	ii. There is a Maritime Job Fair on February 25th at the Squalicum Boathouse. 20 employers that are hiring will be in attendance. Veterans get in a half hour early iii. There is also a job fair February 12th at NAS Whidbey, Chief's Club 1. There is a seasonal hiring increase expected in February – March d. Andrea gave an update on the VA i. Significant staffing shortages across VA Puget Sound. 1. Which is causing difficulty in accessing mental health services, particularly in the Seattle area and Mount Vernon. 2. Andrea suggested Vets should utilize secure messaging via MyHealtheVet; it's recommended to use this method over calling over the phone 3. Can also use the 988 Veterans Crisis Line as it is not limited to suicidal crisis 4. Patient Advocate office severely understaffed; response delays expected. 5. Primary care social workers recommended as alternative escalation path. e. Sean gave an update on his VSO work at the Vet Center i. He has a steady caseload; approximately four clients per day. ii. Seeing a high volume of DIC/survivor pensions and Vietnam-era cases. iii. Paul asked if Sean helps with convalescence claims 1. He does and encourages his client's to be proactive and to file the claim day of their surgery **2.** He also suggests explore options to achieve a permanent 100% disability rating rather than relying on TDIU.
5. Good of the Order	I. Paul shared veterans can be converted to 100% disability rating during physical therapy following surgery. a. Temporary 100% rating typically lasts until the doctor deems the veteran ready to return to work
6. Next Meeting	Liz announced that there was an error on the agenda regarding the next meeting which will be held Monday, April 13, 2026 – hybrid.
7. Adjourned	The meeting was adjourned at 10:39 am.