

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission
3839 N. 3rd Street, Phoenix, AZ 85012

July 11, 2019

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

Peter Kloeber, Chairman
Arlenthe Rios, Vice Chairman
Gene Crego
Chris Gibbs
Joan McDermott
Carolyn Smith
Rebecca Villalpando

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Colonel Wanda Wright, Director
Tera Scherer, Executive Assistant
Jennifer Harris, Legislative Liaison

Guests

Dr. Isabel Kozak, DNP-ANP-C, Phoenix VA Health
Care System

Absent

Joseph Brophy
Matthew Randle

Call to Order – The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission meeting was held at the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services headquarters, Phoenix, AZ. Chairman Kloeber called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – Chairman Kloeber called for a motion to approve the May 1, 2019, Arizona Veterans' Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. There being no changes to the minutes, Commissioner Rios moved to accept the meeting minutes. The motion carried.

Presentation of Invited Guests – Dr. Isabel Kozak, Assistant Chief of Staff for Community Medicine at the Phoenix VA Health Care System and the Mission Act Champion for the hospital, presented information on the new Mission Act. The word Mission is an acronym for Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks.

The Choice Act reached its sunset and was replaced with the Mission Act on June 6, 2019. In Arizona (region four), Triwest is the current third-party agency used for scheduling appointments. The contract is currently open for bidding and once the contract is completed, the VA's Community Care Department will begin scheduling veteran's appointments. The Veteran Resource Center inside the Phoenix VA hospital is providing education and assistance to veterans on the Mission Act.

Nothing has changed with veteran eligibility. All veterans still go to one of eight priority groups. If a veteran goes to the emergency room, the veteran still needs to inform the VA within 72 hours for payment of those services. All consultation appointments need to go through Triwest. In the past, there used to be a separate funding stream, but now there is only one funding source. The Mayo Clinic, for example, does not contract as a provider with Triwest. If a medical provider is

not in the Triwest network, the veteran will need to have a Veteran Care Agreement (VCA) established to continue receiving care from provider, but a VCA will only be granted if Triwest does not have the same type of services the veteran is receiving within their network. If a veteran is with Mayo Clinic, they have been given until September 3, 2019, to choose another option. The options are: 1) come over to Triwest; 2) stay with Mayo and pay out of pocket; 3) coordinate their care through the VA's Community Care department. Again, if specialty care is offered within the local VA clinic, the veteran will be scheduled for care there. Community Care provides referral service to outside resources. Triwest has 86,000 providers in their network so it is unlikely services are not available for veteran.

Commissioner Villalpando asked how a veteran would get connected with a specialty service. Dr Kozak advised that the veteran would need to first schedule an appointment with their Primary Care Physician and discuss a plan for services.

Dr. Kozak stated that veterans in the Choice 40 program now must have a VA provider. Choice 40 was an umbrella service supplying healthcare to veterans in mostly rural areas (about 1,600 Arizona veterans on this program) and would call Triwest for consultations in their community. With the sunset of Choice, VA providers must be in contact with those rural veterans to set up VA primary care provider to make those referrals.

Dr. Kozak verified that a veteran should make one appointment per year with their primary care physician (PCP) to maintain veteran care eligibility.

Dr. Kozak went over access standards with the group. For Choice 30, if a veteran could not be seen within 30 days it was okay to make an appointment out in the community, but that is no longer the standard. For primary care and mental health appointments, a veteran needs to be seen within 20 days. These appointments need to be set up within a 30-minute drive time for the veteran. Their system calculates "wait time eligibility" and "drive time eligibility" using a Decision Support Tool (DST) and if the times are exceeded, the referral automatically goes to community care.

Dr. Kozak further explained that eligibility criteria has changed for community care. The criteria is: 1) service provided by the VA; 2) if a veterans lives in an area that does not provide full service (such as Alaska and Hawaii); 3) Choice 40 (those in rural areas) and veterans were in program prior to June 6, 2019, they were grandfathered in and can remain in the Choice 40 plan, but will still need a referral from a VA medical provider; 4) DST rated; 5) best medical interest of the veteran; 6) if VA not up to medical standards.

Dr. Kozak next spoke to Urgent Care requirements under the Mission Act. Previously, veterans had to use the CVS Minute Clinic and the veteran called and received pre-authorization to go. The Mission Act allows qualified veterans to go to TriWest urgent care clinics and the ailment must be an urgent care necessity such as sprained ankle, ear infection, etc. The authorized Urgent Care locations can be found [online here](#).

Dr. Kozak further stated that with the Mission Act any retail pharmacy can be used to have prescriptions filled within 14 days.

Dr. Kozak spoke to caregiver eligibility program available through the Mission Act. The Mission Act allows all generations to receive caregiver assistance. Veterans' caregivers from 1975 and prior will be eligible first, then 1975-2001 will rollout second. The veteran would be paid the compensation for caregiver services. All applications for the caregiver program must first be reviewed by a VA social worker.

Veterans should phone the Phoenix VA at 602-277-5551 option 6 to learn about the Mission Act and for a live person, dial extension 2254 to be connected with the call center for Community Care resolutions to such things as billing.

The VA has been recruiting for good quality doctors by having programs such as the reduction of debts using increased salaries and starting programs for veterans to attend medical school to become doctors themselves.

The telehealth programs are seeing a lot of success, with 56 percent of the clinics connecting with eligible veterans via telehealth services. The question of whether a veteran's first primary care appointment can be made through the telehealth service and Dr. Kozak stated that it absolutely can and that home visits are also available, depending on circumstances. In Chandler and Tempe, firefighters visit veterans at their homes and connect the veteran with a nurse practitioner online. Mental health services are also available via telehealth.

Department Announcements and Updates – Colonel Wanda Wright, Director, updated the Commission. The groundbreaking for the Arizona State Veteran Home in Flagstaff was on June 1. Col Wright stated that the veteran home will create approximately 130 new jobs for the Flagstaff Community. The groundbreaking ceremony for the Arizona State Veteran Home in Yuma was held on June 22.

On June 15 the Department held the Veteran and Military Women's Summit in which there were over 300 participants. Director Wright is happy to report that it was better attended than any other women veteran-specific events hosted by other organizations throughout the state.

The Be Connected suicide prevention initiative received \$1.2 million from the legislature last session. Lots of attention has been brought to the program over the last several months. Close to 900 calls were made to the Be Connected line in June, which is showing proven concepts. The actual launch date will be August 19 and all commissioners will be invited to the event.

Unfortunately, no additional VBCs (Veteran Benefits Counselors) were funded last legislative session. Director Wright gave kudos to the veteran service organizations for advocating for this. Director Wright stated that the Veterans Services Division is 100 percent filled (employment) and provides approximately 3,500 direct service appointments to veterans, dependents and survivors per month.

The Veteran Toolkit program had a goal of 20 awarded each month, but had been struggling to reach that number. The Veteran Toolkit, created to help unemployed veterans get the supplies they need to start a job, provides up to \$750 per participant. The ADVS Programs Department, as well as DES (Department of Economic Security) employees worked together to establish a better process to assist veterans in getting them what they needed to secure employment. In June, 32 veterans received assistance from the program.

Col Wright stated that most of the Department's staff are employed by the state's two veteran homes, leaving few employees to provide outreach services to veterans. ADVS partners with outside organizations to assist Arizona's veterans. Contractors such as the Arizona Coalition for Military Families, who heads up the state's Be Connected program, and the Arizona Housing Coalition that organizes stand downs throughout the state are examples of partnerships with other organizations. Recent reports from both of those organizations shows very little affordable housing for veterans. Director Wright stated she is working with the governor's Goal Council for Health on affordable housing issues for Arizona's citizens, with a subset for veteran-specific housing.

ADVS now has 33 Veteran Supportive Campuses at this time. The VSC program is a certification process for post-secondary institutions that are in compliance with the State Approving Agency and the VA and eligible to receive GI Bill Education Benefits. Per statute, the institution is required to focus on criteria listed and apply to become a certified VSC through the Department. The purpose of becoming a certified VSC is to better understand the needs of military students and become continually responsive to those needs. A VSC needs to stay current on community resources applicable to the various needs of their military students and their families, as well as completed military sensitivity and awareness trainings.

Legislative Update – Jennifer Harris, Legislative Liaison, Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, updated the Commission. The state's legislature adjourned sine die on May 28. All the Departments "general" bills passed and go into effect on August 1. Information on the 54th Legislature, First Regular Session can be found online [here](#). There are three additional veteran plates being designed now and will be available on October 1. Bill 2093 appropriations did not go into budget discussions, as it was not in the governor's budget.

Ms. Harris stated that the legislature was flooded with information about why more VBCs are needed for Arizona's veterans such as what exactly a VBC does and providing education to the legislature about the claims process and why there is such a need for more

Another issue is the veteran state home trust being capped at a certain dollar amount and the Department is working to remove that cap so the funding can be spent as needed for the veteran residents. Director Wright added that without the cap being removed, we are unable to reach the capacity (of residents) as we are unable to hire more staff to serve those additional veterans. The Department has been fiscally responsible for 10 years and has gone from \$10 million to \$20 million in that account.

Ms. Harris stated the Department is prioritizing for the upcoming session with the VBC funding and the veteran home trust making the top of her list. Additionally, she asked the commissioners to use her as a resource on any pertaining to and legislative veteran policy issues and pass along any thoughts or comments from the community they may hear.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order

Commissioner Crego stated that next week is the state veteran caucus meeting on July 18 and hopes to see the commissioners in attendance.

Commissioner Crego moved to update the Arizona Veterans Services Advisory Commission Operating Guidelines by adding dates of when the Commission should draft and mail a letter to the governor on veteran priorities: suicide prevention, affordable housing and funding for additional VBCs. The motion carried unanimously.

Commissioner Smith stated she would like to add aging veterans and their care as a priority for the commission and to include it in the letter to the governor. Commissioner Crego moved to add a statement on aging veterans to the letter. The motion carried unanimously.

Outreach Activities

Commissioner Crego attends Unified Arizona Veteran (UAV) and Purple Heart meetings, as well as Congressman Biggs' veteran commission meetings. He stated he is in touch with staff of all Arizona congressional leaders. He attended the Vietnam Veterans of America Arizona State Council meeting held recently.

Commissioner Rios attends the Greater United Veterans Council in Sierra Vista that meets on the first Saturday of each month. At the last meeting there was discussion of many Vietnam era veterans that choose not to be involved with the veteran service organizations. Many of these veterans are being told about Be Connected by their children, who have heard of the program through social media outlets and is happy to see the initiative working within her community.

Commissioner McDermott provided a [report](#) of her outreach activities. She remains very active in her community and sits on several boards of the Western Arizona Council of Governments. She is in contact with Senators Sinema and McSally's staff to update them on issues within the western Arizona region to gain support for veterans.

Commissioner Smith reported there seems to be no grief support available in her community and as a former military chaplain, was called upon by a VA chaplain to assist recently. Additionally, she reports that there are no accommodations available for families receiving services at the Northern Arizona VA Health Care System and would like Director Oemcke to look into one of the homes located at the former Fort Whipple to set aside for this purpose. On the 13-15 there is a stand down and there will be volunteer chaplains available to lend support at the event. The Disabled American Veterans chapter is working on an initiative to visit senior homes and update them on benefits available through the Veterans Administration with the first one being held tomorrow at Bradshaw House. Director Wright suggested the organizers get in touch with the VBCs in her region to provide assistance at those events.

Commissioner Gibbbs attended the Field of Honor weeklong veteran celebration for Graham County in Safford.

Chairman Kloeber attended the MOAA (Military Officers Association of America) State Council meeting in which Col Wright delivered remarks. The stand down up north had a Be Connected outreach table as well as ADVS outreach table. He attended the Armed Forces Day parade that was held in May in Flagstaff as well as a Memorial Day ceremony at the Arizona Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Camp Navajo. He attended the groundbreaking ceremony for the veteran home being constructed in Flagstaff. On June 27 and 28 he participated in the Be Connected Roadshow planning session that was meant to have community representation and input in the development of the program. The program has helped over 18,000 veterans since April 2017. On August 2 the joint Northern Arizona Veteran Coalition will meet. The Coalition has 88 individuals representing 40 organizations. This meeting will be combined with the Be Connected Community Network (formerly Military Veteran Community Network) meeting.

Chairman Kloeber asked the commissioners to provide any roster changes. Commissioners Randle and McDermott have completed their applications to remain on the Advisory Commission, but until their applications are processed at the governor's office, they are in what is called "holdover" status with full voting rights. Commissioner Brophy's appointment expired on July 1, but will also remain in "holdover" status until an official written resignation is received.

Chairman Kloeber called for nominations for the position of chairman. Commissioner Villalpando moved to re-elect the current chairman of the Arizona Veterans Services Advisory Commission. The motion carried.

Chairman Kloeber called for nominations for the position of vice chairman. Commissioner Rios moved to elect Commissioner Villalpando. The motion carried.

Commissioner Gibbs moved for the adjournment of the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 12:07PM.

REPORT TO AVSAC

11 July 2019

*On May 14th, I attended the Western Arizona Council of Governments Board Meeting. I had a few minutes to talk about the Commission and what we are working to accomplish in Western Arizona. On May 27th, at the local Memorial Day Ceremony, I spoke with many veterans and presented them with my business cards to inform them of our mission.

*Since I was unable to attend the Be Connected meeting last month, I asked Russ Mascari, a Marine Corps League member who is very active in our community in Lake Havasu City, if he would like to take on the task of being their contact in the Mohave County area. Russ coordinated with our Veterans Resource Team to forward our 70-page contact list that our Veterans Resource Team here and in Kingman and Bullhead City have been using to incorporate into their database. He also agreed to be a spokesman for Be Connected out here with veterans' and other groups in the area.

*On June 6 and 7 June 20 of our 32 mentors attended a Boot Camp training provided by Justice for Vets. We were one of 6 or 7 sites chosen across the U.S. to receive the on-site training. Mentors from 3 Las Vegas Veterans Treatment Courts as well as the Courts in Bullhead City, Kingman, and Lake Havasu City attended – including me. I had the opportunity to talk about Be Connected with the people from Las Vegas and with the trainers.

*The sponsors of the Havasu Memorial Walkway held an extremely well-attended ceremony on June 8th, followed by the formal placement of 300 memorial bricks, including 33 honoring the Navajo Code Talkers. Dozens of their families were present with memorabilia and stories of their heroes. I attended the event and was able to talk with many of the veterans present regarding resources available to them.

*On June 18th and 20th, seminars were held in Lake Havasu City and Kingman to assist veterans to understand the changes wrought by The Mission Act. I attended the one in Lake Havasu. There were at least 125 attendees – by my count. The presenter from ADVS admirably held the roomful of veterans and family members' attention and stayed to answer individual questions.

*On June 22nd I attended the ground-breaking ceremony for the planned veterans' home in Yuma. The well-executed event was extremely well-attended. I submitted an article – at the request of the Arizona VFW Department Commander – about the event for the VFW newspaper (see attachment).

*On June 29th, I attended a ceremony was held in Kingman to rededicate the WW I memorial in front of the old courthouse. It had been damaged some years ago. The Marine Corps Devil Dogs did themselves proud with displays and a nicely orchestrated ceremony. Several hundred people attended to include a preponderance of veterans and many leading city, county, and state officials.

*Finally, I would like to add a word of praise for those who diligently provide assistance to our veterans in Western Arizona. There are people like the NADVS staff, the Arizona at Work representatives, the Veterans Benefits Counselors with ADVS, the Veterans Resource Centers of America, and so many charitable organizations who work together to provide help where it is needed in our rural corner of Arizona. They provide an amazing array of services and they often do it with little fanfare.

Joan McDermott, Commissioner

Arizona Veterans' Service Advisory Commission