

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

January 9, 2019

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

Peter Kloeber, Chairperson
Gene Crego
Chris Gibbs
Joan McDermott
Arlethe Morrison
Matt Randle

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Colonel Wanda Wright, Director
Tera Scherer, Executive Assistant
Scott Kurish, OCI Administrator
Gary Ochoa, Southern Region Manager, VSD
Robert Tunila, Administrator

Absent

Carolyn Smith
Rebecca Villalpando, Vice Chairperson

Call to Order – The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission meeting was held at the Arizona State Veteran Home, Tucson, AZ. Chairman Kloeber called the meeting to order at 11:18AM.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – Chairman Kloeber called for a motion to approve the October 10, 2019, The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. There being no changes to the minutes, Commissioner Gibbs moved to accept the meeting minutes. The motion carried.

Robert Tunila, Administrator, Arizona State Veterans Home - Tucson – Mr. Tunila provided updates to the Commissioners. The Arizona State Veteran Home – Tucson (ASVH-T) is rated in the top 19 percent nationwide in a report by *US News & World Report*. The ASVH-T is made up of five buildings: an administrative building and four other buildings, referred to as “houses,” for veteran residents. Each house is a 10-bed unit, all with private rooms, a kitchen and an activity room. The Home also has a chapel, cinema room, barbershop and sundry shop. The facility boasts a 30-bed memory care unit. Today’s meeting was held in the game room, where beer and pizza is served once a week.

Chairman Kloeber let the group know that the two new Veteran Homes being built will be similar in design to ASVH-T.

Commissioner Randle asked if there was a waiting list for veterans to reside at ASVH-T. Mr. Tunila stated there is a small waiting list, but it does get busy and backed up for long-term care, as most veterans are referred for residency by the VA hospital, located on the campus. Mr. Tunila further stated that ASVH-T is licensed as a skilled nursing facility; veterans need to meet certain criteria to qualify for residency such as IV, wound care, etcetera, and for veterans needing long-term care, residency qualifications are based off of ADLs (activities of daily living). For Veterans that are rated at least 70 percent service connected, the VA covers costs and anything under that rating the VA pays a portion, with Medicare services or individuals self-paying for the remainder of costs.

Scott Kurish, ADVS Office of Continuing Improvement, added that the Arizona State Veterans Home – Phoenix is also in the top 19 percent in the same study by *US News and World Report* and has raised their star rating from a 1-star to a 4-star facility.

Commissioner Crego asked if Tricare for Life or Triwest assists with covering costs for residents of the facility. Mr. Tunila responded that the facility is only contracted with the VA and Medicare/Medicaid and unable to accept payment/coverage from personal insurers. Further, Medicare is only for a veteran's short stay of 100 days or less, but a need must first be established by a medical provider. Mr. Tunila stated that personal insurance could be used at that point as a secondary source of payment.

ADVS Veterans Services Division Southern Region Manager Gary Ochoa added that a Veteran Benefits Counselor (VBC) works in the facility. The VBC is Gary Parker, and he works directly with the veteran residents and their families to assist with veterans' benefits.

Department Announcements and Updates – Colonel Wanda Wright, Director, updated the Commission. Col Wright and staff continue to provide updates throughout the state of the Department's mission and priorities. She was invited to present to the Unified Arizona Veterans (UAV) meeting yesterday and has realized the community wants information about Arizona's veterans and she is going to make sure staff continues to give updates.

The construction of the state's two new Veteran Homes will be completed in the spring of 2021, with the VA certifying process taking around 30-60 days. Each facility will boast 80 beds. ADVS staff have begun working with each town to fill 127 positions being created in each home.

The Department's AMS (Arizona Management System) process continues. Executive staff meets monthly to do operational updates on all business practices from within the Department. ADVS has to send what is referred to as a "scorecard" to the governor's office each month detailing metrics of various areas of focus such as the veteran homes' census and quality of care scores. Another such example is grave marker alignment at each of the three cemeteries. The monthly meeting, called the "Business Review" also includes discussions of best practices and division and work unit metrics. Col Wright invited the Commissioners to attend the monthly meeting for a first-hand look at the operations side of the state agency they represent.

ADVS continues its Sunset Audit with the state's Auditor General office. The Sunset Audit is a 2-year process with performance auditors reviewing processes and interviewing staff at ADVS. The Sunset Audit is about one year in and so far she is happy to report there have been minimal findings, with those findings immediately working correct by improving on existing processes.

The Arizona Veterans' Donation Fund large grant process is underway. The Request for Grant Proposal acceptance period ended in mid-December and the evaluation and scoring process begins tomorrow to award \$600,000 from that fund. Those monies have been collected from the veteran license plates and will be granted to Arizona not-for-profit organizations that provide programs, projects and events benefiting the veterans of the state.

The Department has begun planning for three women veteran expos this year: one in Mohave County; one in the Phoenix area; and one in the Tucson area. As of right now, the team has tentatively scheduled April 4 for the expo in Mohave County, but that date cannot be finalized until a location has been secured.

Col Wright reports several vacancies on ADVS committees. The Military Family Relief Fund (post and pre) have openings. Additionally, the Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy (HBOT) Committee that will be formed was awarded \$25,000 from the state to help with the treatment of PTSD and TBIs (traumatic brain injuries). Additionally, this Commission has one vacancy. Chairman Kloeber stated that he is working with the Governor's Office of Boards and Commissions (B&C) to get that position filled, as well as several others that will be opening up upon terms ending on July 1.

Col Wright stated that on January 13, Governor Ducey will be delivering the *State of the State* and she has been invited to view from the gallery with other cabinet members and guests.

The Department's 2020 objectives include work on gaps identified in transportation for the aging veteran population and believes this will be a heavily discussed point. She further stated that the DAV is struggling to provide service to veterans because of the rollout of the VA's MISSION Act, as many medical appointments are being completed by community care providers; the DAV is only contracted to drive veterans to medical appointments held at a VA facility.

Another objective ADVS would like to focus on is Affordable Housing. She stated that the state's elderly veteran population is being forced out of metropolitan areas around the state with the increased costs for housing. There is federal legislation underway that will provide tax credits for construction and development of affordable housing.

Director Wright stated another objective is to get more VBCs funded. Discussion was held regarding the need for more VBCs to service Arizona. There is currently a six week wait for a veteran to get an appointment with a VBC in the southern region of the state alone. ADVS Veteran Benefits Counselors are bringing in \$52 million each month from veteran pensions and disability claims processed.

Col Wright stated another objective of the Department is to get the state's Veteran Homes to 100 percent occupancy. Currently, Tucson is at 100 percent, but the Phoenix Home is at about 80 percent. Once ASVH-P is at 90 percent, they qualify for some additional funding.

Chairman Kloeber asked why occupancy is so low in Phoenix. Director Wright responded that the facility was built in the 90s using the old model, so each room has double occupancy. Each bathroom is located between two resident rooms, so four veterans to each bathroom.

Another objective of ADVS is to finalize the construction of the two new veteran homes, one in Yuma and one in Flagstaff. As of now everything is considered on-track with each project, but ADVS has experienced cost fluctuations in the cost of construction goods and contractors.

Chairman Kloeber asked if the 127 positions is a total number, or if that is at each home and wondered if ADVS will have difficulty getting those salaries added to our budget from the state's legislature. Director Wright believes that given the difficulty in getting more VBC positions funded over the last few years, it may prove difficult to get the budget increased to include those 127 positions at Yuma and another 127 positions at the Flagstaff home.

Chairman Kloeber asked about the state veterans survey for 2019 and Col Wright was happy to say they survey had over 10,000 responses. In 2017, the last time the survey was sent out, only 5,000 responses were received. She further stated that there is an epidemiologist compiling the data from the survey.

Governor Ducey's budget of \$1.2 million towards suicide prevention in Arizona for the Be Connected program and mandates for the Department of Health and ACCCS requiring metrics be reported on a monthly basis.

Gary Ochoa asked about the status of the [Military Family Relief Fund \(MFRF\)](#) for the pre-9/11 veterans. Director Wright responded that the first official meeting for the pre-9/11 MFRF Committee is happening this month. Unfortunately, the committee is limited in how many veterans they can assist, as fund balance is only around \$150,000 in the pre-9/11 account. Legally, we are unable to transfer money from the post-9/11 MFRF account containing over \$6 million to the pre-9/11, so would like the Commission to educate people on the need to donate specifically to the pre-9/11 MFRF fund. There are many Korean and Vietnam war veterans that are also in dire need of financial assistance.

Commissioner McDermott asked if anyone knew whether the VA CBOC (community based outreach clinic) in Lake Havasu is moving to a new location. Director Wright stated she is not aware, however did just learn that in 2023 the lease is up at Phoenix's VBA location on Central and Lexington. Additionally, the Phoenix VA Medical Center's community living center is being considered for renovation, and the cemetery in Cave Creek is also being renovated so will be moving their administration into trailers during that process.

Old Business – Director Wright had asked each of the commissioners research the availability of transportation in their regions and identify where there are gaps in the veteran community. This information was compiled and sent to ADVS for next steps. It was discovered that each community is very aware of transportation needs within their area and the gaps that exist, not just for veterans, but for many citizens.

Director Wright stated that the next steps has the University of Arizona compiling research and data from around the state.

New Business – Gary Ochoa provided [presentation materials](#) on the southern region and a few upcoming events happening around Tucson.

Gary is encouraged about the new year and the opportunity to have a new counselor funded through the state's opioid grant and would appreciate their assistance in getting more VBCs funded. He stated that the southern region has an additional five VBC positions on the billet, but these positions are unfunded.

Chairman Kloeber requested a white paper on factual information relative to educating the public on the need for more VBCs and a breakdown of the financial impact to the state of Arizona. Col Wright stated that the Department's Legislative Liaison, Jennifer Harris, is in the process of drafting that document now.

Commissioner Randle recommended Ms. Harris get in touch with Kirsten Engel, a member of the House of Representatives from Tucson. He thinks it would be great for the two of them to meet to have a discussion of how to bring the VBC initiative to the Tucson area.

Mr. Ochoa has increased the itinerate sites in the Tucson area with the addition of Green Valley at the American Legion offering services twice a month; in Globe at the VA CBOC; in both prisons; at veterans court; and at the University of Arizona Student Union. The VBCs in these locations are

meeting with veterans face-to-face, through the use of the Virtual VBC program, at the prisons via telephone consultations with a Department of Economic Security employee on-site to assist.

Outreach Activities

Gene Crego stated that Congressman Andy Biggs is hosting another [Drop Zone event](#).

Commissioner Morrison has been attending monthly VSO (veteran service organization) meetings, but her focus is on the census. She has done a lot of events in the Sierra Vista community, but really wants to ask the other commissioners to provide information to her on what specifically veterans in their regions need and states it will be very beneficial for all communities to get all their veteran residents counted. Further, Commissioner Morrison offers her service in communicating the importance of completing the census to any of their groups. Chairman Kloeber suggested she reach out to the Unified Arizona Veterans about presenting at their annual meeting of the state's VSO leadership.

Commissioner McDermott supplied the Commission with [her report](#) of outreach conducted. In addition, she would like to report that Navigator training for Be Connected is coming to western Arizona. They hosted a successful Standdown event at the aquatic center.

Commissioner McDermott shared with the group that they had an interesting thing happen in her community. The VFW in Lake Havasu has traditionally taken on the responsibilities of flag retirement ceremonies and last year over 3,000 flags were retired. Recently, Lake Havasu City Fire Department has banned the ceremonies because the number of flags that are synthetic and creates hazardous smoke. Stakeholders are meeting next week to discuss options. Commissioner McDermott further stated that the County Commissioner looked into building an incinerator, but the costs prohibit this option. They also contacted the military base and they agreed to accept them, which they then turn over to the VFW, so that is not an option either. Commissioner Randle stated that the Postmaster is assigned with the responsibility of flag destruction.

Commissioner Randle stated that veteran courts remains his focus. Judge Pollard recently announced his retirement and a successor has not been named. The process for replacing judges in veteran court is new to Arizona and with its cyclical nature he hopes the process will be institutionalized and the municipalities recognize the need to provide, fund and appoint individuals to serve in the veteran courts.

Commissioner Randle further stated that there are a significant number of attorneys in Pima County that served in the military. The state bar has been making a push for attorneys to assist veterans and sent out the information for the upcoming Maricopa County Standdown for attorneys to offer legal advice pro bono at that event.

A couple years ago, the VA and CFR (code of federal regulations) can be part of the process for veterans entering the reconsideration and appeal phase of the claims process. Oftentimes veterans approved for any percentage of disability miss opportunities for potential increases and reconsideration of their claims. The attorneys do not cost the veteran anything; the attorney actually gets paid by the VA at the time of award, equal to about 20 percent of any lump sum payouts made to a veteran on their claim. Commissioner Randle sees this as a great opportunity to assist veterans free of charge to them and would like to make this information available.

Gary stated he is the vice chair of the Tucson Veterans Affairs Committee and will bring the veterans court issue up for discussions at their next meeting. Tucson Mayor, Regina Romero will be in attendance at that meeting.

Commissioner McDermott asked about Yuma and where they were with getting their Veteran Court set up. Mr. Ochoa stated the community is actively moving forward on that initiative. Further, stakeholders from the Yuma community came to Tucson and viewed sessions of veteran courts.

Commissioner Gibbs stated the Veterans Day in Safford was a success. Last year the ceremony had 18 in attendance and this year there were 275. With the Field of Honor and several other activities that were held, the communities of Graham and Greenlee counties have been ignited; they are very patriotic communities. Unfortunately, memberships in the VSOs have declined dramatically, but memberships immediately after the event saw an increase of about 25 new members.

Chairman Kloeber worked to get a navigator training scheduled and on February 21 in Flagstaff he has a goal to beat the record for attendance at this type of training. Chairman Kloeber actively attends meetings for the Northern AZ Veterans Coalition, UAV, VFW, MOAA (chapter and state meetings) and the Be Connected Community Network meetings.

Chairman Kloeber wanted to remind everyone that the [website](#) is their resource. They've all had a lot of questions of, *what does the commission do?* He suggested the commission go to the website and review the Strategic Policy Objectives and Guidelines that were edited and adopted at the May meeting. The Commission's duty is to "provide strategic advice to the Department of Veterans' Services and the Governor." They are to take the information they get from ADVS and share it with their veteran groups, then return any information affecting the veteran community back to ADVS. Further, Chairman Kloeber has asked Carol Culbertson, the secretary of the UAV, to send out a notice to everyone about vacancies and information about the commission to help fill vacant positions.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order

Chairman Kloeber stated the Commission has some open positions currently and in the future. Right now Commissioner Randle is considered in holdover status since July 1, as his appointment has not been completed by B&C.

Commissioner Brophy notified him last year that he was not applying for a second term and his position became vacant on July 1, 2019. On July 1, 2020, Commissioners Smith, Morrison, Kloeber and Gibbs terms expire. Of those Commissioners, Kloeber and Morrison cannot extend as they have already served two terms. Commissioner Gibbs will probably apply for a second term and Commissioner Smith will not reapply.

Chairman Kloeber further stated that he spoke recently with B&C and stated they were very apologetic in regards to the delays in getting appointments processed and explained they will be undergoing some transition at B&C with the appointment of a new director.

Chairman Kloeber would ideally like to have three commissioners from each of the three regions, but that may be difficult to achieve.

Hearing no further discussion topics, Chairman Kloeber called for a motion to adjourn. Commissioner Randle moved to adjourn and Commissioner Gibbs seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 1:17PM.