

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

July 23, 2020

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

Peter Kloeber, Chair
Rebecca Villalpando, Vice Chair
Arlethe Morrison
Chris Gibbs
Gene Crego
Joan McDermott
Matt Randle

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Colonel Wanda Wright, Director
Lupita Santellano, Executive Assistant
Jennifer Harris, Legislative Liaison
Eli Fabrega, Auditor General's Office (guest)

Call to Order – The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission meeting was held virtually via Google Meets. Link: meet.google.com/jke-mgsa-vfw; phone number (US)+1 617-675-4444 PIN: 776 432 876 3518#. Chairman, Peter Kloeber called the meeting to order at 9:00 am.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – Chairman, Kloeber called for a motion to approve the April 9,2020, Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. There being no changes to the minutes, Vice Chair, Rebecca Villalpando moved to accept the meeting minutes. Commissioner, Joan McDermott second the motion. The motion carried.

Department Announcements and Updates

Director, Colonel Wanda Wright updated the Commission. Colonel Wright states most of the state departments are teleworking while displaying high production. The Yuma and Flagstaff Veteran homes construction are ahead of schedule. Construction should be complete before May 2021, for both homes. ADVS is working as a team on all other administrative operations such as hiring staff. Director Wright interviewed candidates for the Regional Compliance Officer position on July 22, 2020. Soon ADVS will hire administrators for both Yuma and Flagstaff Veteran homes.

Cemetery burials are back to normal. The cemeteries are providing military honors again; however, the family groups have to remain small. Families are much happier now. The cemeteries will have to schedule ceremonies for those individuals who were buried during the time when the cemeteries were not allowing ceremonies to take place due to the Covid-19 pandemic. There is one current issue being worked on by the cemeteries. The cemeteries had hired seven to eight prisoners to complete ground work; however, due to the issues with the prison system and Covid-19, the cemeteries no longer have access to the prisoners. The cemetery ground work has taken a hit in the realignment of markers. The cemeteries are figuring out how they can get this work done in the future.

Veteran Benefit Counselor (VBC) production has increased. VBC's continue to work from home and have managed their time very well, they have diminished every wait time they had across the state to zero. They have been able to virtually move customers and clients around so that they can take care of them. Veterans are able to receive an appointment immediately if they are trying to file a claim.

ADVS VBCs have increased the monthly federal revenue into the state to claims by 3 million dollars over fiscal year 2020 (July 1 2019 – June 30, 2020). The starting revenue number is 50 million dollars per month, which is now at 55 million dollars per month that is being brought in through claims and pension.

The Programs department is figuring out how to do outreach during this pandemic. Programs department staff are used to going out and being in front of a group of people, which cannot be done now. Programs is working on creating virtual outreach that is informative to Veterans. A new goal for Programs is to reach new veterans who are not currently in the ADVS system. Programs recently met and came up with the AZ Vets Virtual Education series. The idea is to have a live through Facebook and record educational information about benefits. The Facebook lives would provide information about the GI bill, pension benefits, aid and attendance, and claims. The lives will allow people to ask questions in real time.

ADVS has worked closely with the VA Medical Center recently and has held numerous meetings in regards to the Veteran Homes. Col. Wright states, PPE has been hard to find, as well as Covid-19 test kits as more testing is required. ADVS continues to work with the VA to make sure the Veteran Homes have what they need in order to test the staff and veterans. The Tucson Veteran Home is still Covid-19 free; they are 1 of 5% of Nursing Homes in the entire state that is Covid-19 free. The Phoenix Veteran Home has a number of residents who have tested positive for the virus, who remain and are being taken care of at the veteran home. There are a few Veterans who tested positive who are being taken care of at the VA Hospital. There are a number of staff at the Phoenix Veteran home who are on leave and must test negative for Covid-19 in order to return to work. The Veteran homes are working on having the VA or Department of Health Services (DHS) come in to regularly test Veterans and staff at the homes.

ADVS is working with the VA on homelessness. The first stimulus package provided millions of dollars to the states for the homeless. Mohave county does not have transitional housing. Col. Wright states she requested the Governor's office grant funds for the Mohave county complex that is currently being built. The Governor's office was able to grant \$500,000 towards transitional housing in Mohave County. ADVS has also worked with the VA on determining how to test the homeless for Covid-19. US Vets, Catholic Charities, The Victory Place, and Valor, have encountered issues related to Covid-19 testing in homeless veterans. If the veteran is engaged with the VA it is an easier process to have them test; however, if the homeless veteran is not engaged with the VA, it can be complicated to test the veteran.

Chairman, Kloeber asked if there were any questions from the Commission.

Commissioner, Chris Gibbs asked if the Veteran Homes are testing Veterans and staff regularly. Col. Wright states the Veteran Homes have to test veterans and staff weekly, per DHS requirements. The Veteran Homes are currently working on finding a way to test weekly; most recently they have tested Veterans and staff by using the VA, DHS, and Arizona State University (ASU) for testing. The Veteran Homes are doing the best they can.

Commissioner, Chris Gibbs asked Col. Wright for the name of the new virtual education series created by the Programs Department. Col. Wright states the name of the series is AZ Vets Virtual Education Series.

Vice Chair, Rebecca Villalpando, asked if the Commission could do anything to help the Veteran Home in Phoenix with items the home may need. Col. Wright suggested the Commission can help boost staff morale. Col. Wright suggested the Commission could buy staff food or thank you cards. ADVS currently offers hotel rooms to staff who are working closely with Veteran's who have tested positive for Covid-19, so that they do not go home and infect their family members. The Veteran Homes have also provided shower rooms for staff members who would like to shower after their shift. Lupita Santellano, Executive Assistant can provide the Veteran Home addresses.

Commissioner, Joan McDermott, asked what the communication between the County Public Health and the VA is? Commissioner, McDermott provided an example of a veteran who tested positive for Covid-19, while testing at the VA and the County Public Health Department did not have record of his case. Col. Wright states, the Veteran homes are required to provide their Covid-19 positive numbers to DHS because they are a state entity. The VA does not have to provide their numbers to DHS because they have their own way of doing business. Col. Wright suggested the Veteran call DHS himself in order for his case to be counted. Commissioner, McDermott asked Col. Wright if she knew how veterans could ensure the VA shares their Covid-19 test information. Col. Wright does not know the answer to this question but will ask the VA.

Jennifer Harris, Legislative Liaison provided the Commission a legislative update. During the last Commission Meeting in April, the legislature had gone on an extended recess due to Covid-19. In late May of 2020, the house reconvened and heard bills that they considered non-controversial and could vote out and transmit to the senate unamended. On Tuesday, May 26, 2020, the senate reconvened. The senate had 30 bills scheduled for a full vote from the senate, one of those bills was the ADVS bill on veteran suicide annual report but unfortunately there was a motion to sine die; the motion was approved and carried. The senate adjourned without conducting any further business. The senate did not reconsider the Governor's office priorities due to deficit projections for fiscal year 2020 and fiscal year 2021. In April of 2020, Jennifer Harris spoke to the Commission about the skinny budget, where the legislature because of Covid-19 created a baseline budget which carried over the regular costs per year with no additional spending.

There are two Veteran related bills Jennifer Harris is tracking that were signed by the Governor. SB1523, which is the mental health omnibus that was passed and HB2096, which is the security card registration bill that also passed. Jennifer Harris states she highlighted SB1523 because mental health is a big issue that ADVS focuses on. This bill grants a seat to a representative of a Veteran's organization or Military Family Advocacy program on the newly created Suicide Mortality Review Team; allowing for veteran representation. Bill HB2096 would allow a veteran who is honorably discharged from the military to receive a 45-day security guard registration certificate while they wait for their background check to be complete, allowing the veteran to get to work faster. Effective date for bills without an emergency clause or delayed effective date is August 25, 2020. The legislative update can be found on the ADVS website under <https://dvs.az.gov/legislative-updates>. The legislative wrap-up will provide the status of the bills within the process.

Jennifer Harris, Legislative Liaison, states in normal times she would anticipate to see the majority of the bills next session but no one knows what the next session is going to look like. The Governor's budget priorities for next session are going to be baseline needs, public safety, public health, and structural balance. The primary elections may affect some of the bills presented next session. There are a few contested races that include Veteran Representatives who introduce Veteran related Legislation, such as Representative Blackman, who is being challenged. Representative Blackman has introduced different license plate bills. He had a bill that would waive disability license plate fees for purple heart recipients.

In the wake of Covid-19, Governor Ducey has issued 40 executive orders; to include the continued postponement of eviction enforcement actions. Commissioners who are working with veterans who are in need of eviction postponement are encourage to read the executive order. The order is not automatic. Tenants or renters have to notify their landlord in writing of a hard ship related to Covid-19 the tenant must also request a payment plan. After August 21, 2020, renters will have to provide their landlord the copy of their application for rental assistance through state, city, or county offices.

On July 21, 2020, Governor Doug Ducey announced the State of Arizona had received \$975,000 for the Arizona Corona Virus relief fund to support the homeless. These funds were granted to Gospel Rescue Mission and Family Services Primavera in Tucson, in Phoenix – Human Services Campus, St. Vincent de Paul, Phoenix Rescue Mission, Chicanos Por La Causa, and UMOM. On July 14,

2020, the Governor's office announced \$6 million dollars were received to prevent homelessness and to support those in need. There was another long list of organizations who received funding, to include \$500,000 for Jerry Ambrose Veteran Council.

Jennifer Harris mentioned the Joint Legislative Budget Committee (JLBC) are holding monthly fiscal highlight meetings, normally done quarterly, they are now held monthly due to Covid-19. According to JLBC, the fiscal year 2020 deficit did not fall as short as predicted. The JLBC is still looking at a zero to a billion dollar-short fall for fiscal year 2021. The Governor's office continues to work hard to avoid furloughs. Jennifer Harris mentioned ADVS was very close to receiving funds for an additional six Veteran Benefit Counselor's this year; however, the legislature motioned to sine dine and the bill did not move forward.

Commissioner, Joan McDermott mentioned Governor Ducey is holding a news conference at 12:00 pm, today, July 23, 2020, to talk about the eviction postponement order.

Chairman, Kloeber commended Jennifer Harris, on her legislative updates displayed on the ADVS website. Chairman, Kloeber encouraged the Commissioners to share the legislative update information with Veteran Service Organizations (VSO's) or groups they are currently working with.

Old Business

Chairman, Peter Kloeber would like to receive an update on the Veterans' Transportation Survey. Col. Wanda Wright states the Veterans' Transportation Survey kick off date is August 1, 2020. ADVS has contracted with the University of Arizona (UofA) to have a group of students, a master degree student, and faculty member take a year to conduct a study across the state in relation to transportation issues for veterans. While this study is taking place, Be Connected is planning on conducting a pilot in Show Low, Arizona by recruiting volunteers to help support the transportation project there. If the pilot works, the project may be spread across the state.

New Business

Chairman, Kloeber mentioned it is time to submit the annual letter from the Commission to the Governor. Last year, the Commission sent a letter to the Governor on July 11, 2019. The three topics discussed in the letter were Veteran suicide, the need for additional Veteran Benefit Counselors, and the need for Veteran affordable housing. In last year's letter, the Commission thanked the Governor for his continued support in the Veteran Suicide prevention initiative and request additional VBC's and affordable housing. Commissioner, Peter Kloeber asked Col. Wanda Wright to provide topics for this year's letter. Col. Wright suggested the Commission request support for Veteran Home staff in a myriad of ways, to include increase in pay and acknowledgement for the work done during the pandemic. She also suggested continued support in suicide prevention and more safe housing for men and women who are victims of domestic violence. Col. Wright would also like the Commission to include the good work Be Connected is doing. Be Connected is out in the community supporting veterans in early engagement. There are 10 navigators who are doing encounters and 6 people on the phone lines taking phone calls. Col. Wright, would like to thank the Governor for helping ADVS fund two new Veteran homes. The two new Veteran Homes will house two new VBC; the VBC's will be able to take crisis calls. Transportation is another important topic. Be Connected needs the Governor's support in relation to transportation for veterans. Be Connected provides multiple resources for Veterans; however, if the veterans do not have a vehicle or mode of transportation, they cannot get to the resources provided.

Chairman, Kloeber asked the Commission if there were any other topics to add to the annual letter to the Governor. Commissioner, Arlethe Morrison states it is important to write another letter to the Governor in which the Commission requests six additional VBC positions. She states six additional

VBC positions would impact the agency and the state greatly. Additional VBC's would bring in money to the state while helping veterans. Also, Commissioner, Arlethe Morrison offered to draft a thank you letter from the Advisory Commission to the Arizona State Veteran Homes.

Chairman, Kloeber states the letter to the Governor is usually one page but that will not be the case this year. Chairman, Kloeber asked Col. Wanda Wright and Jennifer Harris if the annual letter to the Governor could be voted on and turned in October of 2020. Col. Wanda Wright agreed the annual letter to the Governor could be turned in October of 2020.

Outreach Activities

Commissioner, Joan McDermott states Covid-19 has dramatically affected every aspect of life across the U.S. and Western Arizona is obviously no exception. In Mohave County, for example, since the beginning of April 2020, when there were 23 COVID-19 cases, there are now 2,438 cases with 115 deaths. Seven-hundred of those cases are not assigned for contact tracing due to staffing issues; just this week, six individuals were finally hired to do that task. La Paz County has very little data available.

Veteran service organizations are making sometimes-painful adjustments. Their ability to carry out their mission to support veterans is being curtailed, as fund-raising events are cancelled, facilities are closing or dramatically curtailing services that provide sources of communication and camaraderie. Options to utilize virtual media to allow communication is being implemented.

The Courts continue to serve veterans with the required pandemic restrictions. Lake Havasu City is conducting all staffing and hearings via Zoom with the exception of a graduation on July 10, 2020, when only the graduates, the Court officials, and several VIP's, including Rep. Paul Gosar, were physically present. Bullhead City and Kingman Courts are conducting variations of the restrictions. A large parcel of land adjacent to the Kingman airport was donated for the development of veterans' service facilities months ago through the efforts of State Senator Sonny Borelli. Due to the pandemic, any funding for that project has been shelved.

Last evening, Commissioner, Joan McDermott attended the virtual meeting of the Jerry Ambrose Veterans Council (JAVC) conducted by President Pat Farrell. ADVS Director Wanda Wright was in attendance. JAVC announced the operation 6 project to develop the Arnold Plaza site in Kingman to provide temporary housing and on-site services for homeless and at-risk veterans has been awarded a \$500,000 grant. This support will provide the essential momentum toward the completion of the much-needed service for veterans in Northwest Arizona.

The opening of that 57-bed facility in Bullhead City (1594 Oatman Rd.) has been delayed several times due to the pandemic, but they now plan a 'soft opening' in September 2020. The Center will provide shelter for the homeless in the region. Initially, the component devoted to serving veterans will have 2 beds for males and 1 bed for a female veteran. They are working to meet safe pandemic accommodations. Commissioner, McDermott will be touring the facility next Tuesday with Susan Kokkinen, Sr. Program Manager.

A veteran with serious complicating health conditions who lives alone in Lake Havasu City had difficulty getting tested for COVID-19 locally. When he was finally contacted by the Northern Arizona VA Healthcare System (NAVAHCS), he was immediately tested at the local VA clinic, received word of the positive results in less than 2 days, and is now receiving a call from a nurse at NAVAHCS daily to assure he is stable, and has a follow-up test scheduled in a week. He is singing praises for VA healthcare.

Commissioner, Arlethe Morrison exited the Advisory Commission Meeting to attend another meeting. She requested the Commission continue to push the census for all veterans.

Commissioner, Gene Crego states the Unified Arizona Veterans (UAV) usually cancel their meetings in July and August but they have decided to continue virtual Zoom meetings through the rest of the year. The UAV meet the first Saturday of each month. Commissioner, Crego states Dr. McCarthy from the VA Hospital is leaving division seven next month, which is Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. There is a gathering scheduled for July 30, 2020, where Vietnam Veterans of America will present a

national achievement medal and certificate to nine VA employees, two from Prescott, three from VAMC in Phoenix, the VARO in Phoenix, the VAMC in Tucson, and the fisher house. Three of the recipients are daughters of Vietnam Veterans.

Commissioner, Chris Gibbs states he has been working to find office space in Safford for a VBC. Col. Wright mentioned Assistant Deputy Director for the Veteran Services Division, Scott Fincher, would like Commissioner Gibbs to return his phone call. Commissioner, Gibbs reports he is working with local food banks to create a system to deliver food to those veterans at risk during the Covid-19 pandemic. The local field of honor for Veteran's Day is still going to take place in down town Safford, Arizona.

Vice Chair, Rebecca Villalpando states the Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) officers are usually willing to provide space for a VBC's within their offices. Commissioner Gibbs states the DVOP office in Safford does not have sufficient space to accommodate a VBC.

Chairman, Peter Kloeber states the coalition continues to do great things; however, the Coalition has not met. Chairman, Peter Kloeber states Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) received a Covid-19 emergency grant for veterans in need. The Covid-19 relief grant cannot exceed \$500. To qualify, the applicant must be active duty or an honorably discharged veteran experiencing hardship due to Covid-19. The application must be submitted by a MOAA chapter officer. Chairman, Kloeber states he has processed four applications on behalf of veterans, and his chapter has processed one. The application is a two-page PDF fillable application.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order

Chairman, Peter Kloeber states there are four Commissioners whose terms are due to expire on July 1, 2020. Chairman, Peter Kloeber completed his second and final term, and has agreed to stay in hold over status. Commissioner, Arlethe Morrison completed her second term and has agreed to stay in hold over status. Commissioner, Chris Gibbs has reapplied for a second term, he is in hold over status. Commissioner, Carolyn Smith did not reapply, her position is vacant. Commissioner, Matt Randle reapplied for a second term, which has been approved. Commissioner, Gene Crego is still in his first term. Vice Chair, Rebecca Villalpando's Commission expires on July 1, 2022, and Commissioner Joan McDermott's Commission expires on July 1, 2022. Commissioner, Brophy's position is vacant, this position expires July 1, 2021.

Col. Wanda Wright has met with the Director of Boards and Commissions. There are five or six applicants to the Advisory Commission, only three are legitimate Veterans. There are two hard requirements to be approved to join the Advisory Commission; applicants must be a veterans and applicants must be nominated by a veteran organization. Also, there may only be 2 Commissioners from one Veteran Service Organization on the Advisory Commission. Chairman, Kloeber asked Col. Wright if it is possible to have one of the terms that expires this year, in 2020, extended to fiscal year 2021. Col. Wright will speak with the Director of Boards and Commissions about Commissioner, Chris Gibb's extension.

Chairperson Elections

Chairman, Peter Kloeber is in hold over status and is not eligible to be elected for Chair or Vice Chair. Rebecca Villalpando is currently the Vice Chair. The Commission was asked to nominate a Chair and Vice Chair. Chairman, Peter Kloeber nominated Matt Randle for Chair and Joan McDermott for Vice Chair. Commissioner, Gene Crego second the motion. Matt Randle and Joan McDermott accepted the nominations. The motion carried.

Newly appointed Chairman, Matt Randle thanked former Chairman, Peter Kloeber for his three years of service to the Advisory Commission.

Former Chairman, Peter Kloeber states it has been an honor to serve on the Commission. He thanked the Commissioners for their service. Commissioner, Kloeber will continue to be in hold over status until further notice.

Commissioner, Rebecca Villalpando states former Chairman, Peter Kloeber has done an outstanding job as Chair and thanked him for his service. Col. Wanda Wright, states former Chairman, Peter Kloeber has been the most organized Advisory Commission Chairman and she expressed what a great experience it has been working with him.

Former Chairman, Peter Kloeber requested for a motion to adjourn. Commissioner, Chris Gibbs moved to adjourn, Commissioner, Rebecca Villalpando second the motion. The motion carried. The meeting adjourned at 10:30 am.