

Arizona Veterans Advisory Commission

MINUTES

JANUARY 14, 2016

Advisory Commissioners Present

Brett Rustand
Ryan Peters
Danielle Desmond
Ron Perkins
Arlethe Rios
David Toliver

Advisory Commissioners Absent

Phillip Hanson
Jill Nelson

AZ Department of Veterans' Services

Wanda A. Wright, Director
Dave Hampton, PIO/Legislative Liaison
Gary Ochoa, Southern Regional Manager,
Veterans Services Division
Tera Scherer, Executive Assistant

Invited Guests

Jennifer Gutowski, Interim Director, Southern
Arizona VA Medical Center

Call to Order – Chairman Brett Rustand called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – Chairman Rustand called for the approval of the November 12, 2015 Veterans Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. There being no changes to the minutes Commissioner Toliver moved to approve the minutes as written. Commissioner Perkins seconded the motion and the motion carried unanimously.

Introduction of New Commissioner – Commissioner Desmond introduced herself to the committee. A 2004 graduate of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, she is the mother of two children and an employee of the City of Phoenix, Commissioner Desmond is honored to be appointed to the Veterans Advisory Commission.

Jennifer Gutowski, Interim Director of the Southern Arizona VAMC

Ms. Gutowski is the interim director of the Tucson VAMC as Jonathon Gardner retired on January 4. Currently there is a nationally announced recruitment to fill the position permanently. The announcement closes on January 21. Ms. Gutowski has been with the VA for over 16 years and has been in Tucson for three years in the capacity of CFO.

With the takeoff of the Choice Program they continue to work closely with the third-party administrator, TriWest, to improve coordination of referral services. They've found that the process tends to be very confusing for the veterans so her staff continues to work closely with veterans during the referral process.

On February 27 the Tucson VAMC will be participating in a national access stand down. The goal of the stand down is to deploy resources for the most critical consults to provide care either through their facility or through TriWest and other community partners. This is part of their commitment to regaining confidence and trust in the veteran care system.

The Point in Time (PIT) homeless count is on January 27. The number last year was 1,862. There are over 200 volunteers and they will be working with HUD and the City of Tucson to get out and connect with the homeless community.

The emergency department had some negative publicity recently regarding wait times in the emergency room. They believe individuals are having a difficult time getting in to see their primary care physician so they end up seeking services through the emergency department. They are aggressively

working on this situation. A relatively new chief of primary care is working closely with the emergency department and his action plan will address any further issues that may arise. For example, each provider has five slots open every day for people to be seen. Commissioner Peters asked what the wait time is for a new patient to see their primary care physician. Ms. Gutowski stated that as of today the next available appointment is January 20.

The Arizona Fisher House construction has been completed. Staff is getting ready for that to officially open and the dedication will be held on February 18. The community has been tremendous in the support of the project and the Tucson VAMC is excited that their campus will have the first Fisher House in all of Arizona.

The simulation lab received an advanced level of simulation certification for sim-based training. The Polytrauma unit continues to support teams from throughout the state.

Commissioner Toliver asked about the turnover among providers in the Yuma area. Ms. Gutowski stated that anecdotally the answer relates to the area being semi-rural and very humid. She stated that they have done a lot with the salary to make it comparable to the market to assist in recruiting and retention of providers.

Gary Ochoa, Southern Region Manager, ADVS

Mr. Ochoa served 22 years in the Marine Corps and has been at ADVS for eight years. His area covers everything south of Tucson, Sierra Vista, Fort Huachuca, MCAS Yuma, as well as Safford. He believes that many veterans come to Arizona to retire and to spend the winters and that is why we are experiencing an influx of people requiring assistance. His VBCs (veteran benefit counselors) step in to help navigate the different programs available through the federal Veterans Administration.

ADVS staff participated in the Homeless Stand Down at the Days Inn earlier this month put on by Tucson Veterans Serving Veterans. In attendance were 200 individuals at the job fair; 132 received services at the resource fair; 14 were placed into housing that weekend; 60 dogs received spa treatments. One success story he wanted to highlight was that a homeless gentleman was both placed in housing and offered a job all within that 3-day weekend.

He had a couple of benefit counselors down in Yuma that were continually ill and needed to move them out of their location as they suspected mold was a problem in the facility. Director Wright got involved and reached out to the DES (Department of Economic Services) Director and together, within only a couple of days, they had found a location within the DES building that would temporarily house these two individuals. Mr. Ochoa stated that this is an example of the partnerships that our Department is making as DES is the perfect location to house VBCs because of the services provided by both agencies, making it convenient for veterans as they do not have to leave the building.

Powers of Attorney that VBCs hold for the purpose of assisting veterans with processing claims to the VA brought \$22 million into the state of Arizona in the month of December. If we tie in the American Legion side of VBCs that number rises to \$29 million. He says this just proves the importance of these positions. He would like to see the agency grow and would like to get the word out of our need for more funding.

Mr. Ed Torres of the Missing in America project works closely with Southern Arizona Veterans Cemetery in Sierra Vista. This program goes about finding veterans that have not been laid to rest with military honors. The next internment will be done at the Marana cemetery. The dedication for this new cemetery is in March.

Fisher House dedication is February 18. The community is trying to raise another \$1 million dollars and believes the grass root efforts of the Tucson community is the biggest that Fisher House Foundation has ever seen.

Another partnership the agency is forming is with the Department of Corrections. VBCs are visiting with veterans in the penal system to get their benefits reinstated once they are released. In the past, a VBC would walk around the various yards one day each week trying to find these individuals. Through this partnership the veterans are being housed together within a certain time prior to release. This has made the VBCs time spent there much more effective.

Chairman Rustand asked about turnover within the VBC career field and Mr. Ochoa stated that morale is higher and the adjustments made to their salaries have helped. Before they were salary employees going out multiple times each month on Saturdays and working late during the week and not being paid for the extra time. He feels the salary still needs to be increased because what they are finding is the VBCs use their position with the state as a stepping stone for employment where there is more opportunities for advancement, such as at the VA. He continues to be hopeful that staffing levels will continue to increase and more VBC offices will open throughout the state.

Wanda Wright, Director, ADVS

Director Wright thanked Mr. Ochoa and pointed out that his update touched on everything that she was going to present and that Gary, an employee separated from her by three levels of management, was a great example of the excellent communication at the Department of Veterans' Services.

Partnerships between agencies are what allows things to move quickly within state government. That is how she was able to get office space in DES for those VBCs, she reached out to the other agency and asked for the help. ADOA has been instrumental in moving the cemetery projects along because we were experiencing some difficulties with some of the contractors.

The Phoenix Veteran Home is now 20 years old and is in need of a lot of maintenance and repairs. Redesign and funding is currently the focus there. Yuma is on the list for the VA for a new home to be built, but did not make the funding cut for this year.

The two new cemeteries will be opening soon. The dedication ceremony for Marana will be March 26 and the one in Flagstaff is scheduled for June 4. She will be meeting with people from Marana to discuss the details of that dedication later in the month.

Women Veteran Expos: Four events are coming up in March and April. The first event will be held on March 12 at Glendale Community College. The University of Arizona in Tucson will be hosting the expo on March 9. On April 9 the expo will be held in Tempe at Arizona State University then at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff on April 16. Available at these events will be workshops, resources such as legal and financial assistance, childcare and breakfast and lunch will be served. In the afternoon there will be a professional segment that will touch on such things as the glass ceiling. All four of the locations where the expos are being held are certified Veteran Supportive Campuses, which is significant in itself.

Veterans Programs division continues to work homelessness issues. The department sponsors stand down events and VBCs are at each one throughout the state. There is a stand down coming up in Phoenix on January 28 that we will be attending.

Employment: The Department continues to partner with the Arizona Coalition for Military Families. The Coalition continues to provide employer training and mentorship to employers across the state with the focus on successfully hiring and retaining veteran workforce as part of the Veteran Supportive Employer program. The partnerships ADVS has with businesses and other state agencies remain ongoing. ADVS and the Coalition are now working together to form an OJT/apprenticeship program for veterans. Director Wright recently met with DEMA and the National Guard regarding certifications for certain MOSs to get them employed quickly.

Another partnership is with the Governor's office on a pilot program for employment technology that segues with a resource network that the Coalition has been working on that will provide an all-encompassing one stop service for veterans using technology. Additionally, we are in talks with AHCCCS on how we can work together to provide better services to veterans. Additionally, the VA has loaned out their women veteran coordinators for their expertise in assisting with planning the expos.

The Department has done what they could for salary for VBCs to acknowledge their hard work and extra hours. When they were all salary employees they were not getting overtime for extra hours worked. Appointments are now accepted rather than the veteran sitting there waiting for an available VBC. Walk-ins are more limited and they've gone to scheduling appointments so the VBC isn't left working to late in the day every night and we're not leaving a veteran or a family member in the waiting room for hours. We still have, within the budget, a six percent raise to VBCs available and is looking at the number of FTEs (full time equivalent) available in the department to see about hiring more VBCs. This is where new legislation is needed to help with funding for the growth of the agency.

The website is being updated daily as well as our Facebook. We are trying to link with other agencies through social media to grow awareness of what we do.

Lastly is the LEAN process, or transformation process. The agency is well ahead of a lot of the other agencies. One project that has been identified is a new communication bridge. The idea is to have one phone number for our veterans to call. Right now the VBCs are tasked with answering very simple questions where she feels scripts can be made up for those questions that do not require the expertise of a VBC.

A major strategic project we will be endeavor very soon is to market our Department. We are consistently hearing "we've never heard about you" and ADVS continually gets confused with the VA. Her hope is that we become as commonplace in a sentence as the VA and that people will be able to differentiate between the federal and state level.

Commissioner Rios asked if there was any way to provide information of our availability to those separating from the military and Director Wright stated that she is currently working with the DOD reintegration office as they are reorganizing the Transition Assistance Program (TAPs). Mr. Ochoa stated that VBCs are involved with TAPs at the area bases. Director Wright advised that she is on a committee with the state's military commanders so she will be approaching them about the service we offer. Commissioner Peters stated that in other states there is a questionnaire at the licensing bureaus that inquire about military service and whether individual would like to receive state-specific benefits, which could be another avenue to pursue.

Chairman Rustand asked about the possibility of continuing to combine offices with local DVOP/LVERs (disabled veteran outreach representative /local veteran employment representative) at DES offices throughout the state. Director's response was that it would be difficult to do something like that on a large scale as leases of state locations run five years, but this is an avenue she would be interested in pursuing as she envisions as many VBCs co-located as possible.

Commissioner Perkins asked about the possibility of cemeteries in rural areas designating a portion of the cemetery for veteran interments. Director stated that it is her understanding that the VA is not interested in continuing with their national cemeteries model so is working closely with states to have designated cemeteries, but has not heard anything about local rural communities' cemeteries.

Dave Hampton, Legislation Liaison, ADVS

Each Friday Mr. Hampton puts out a list of all veteran bills that are introduced and presented a copy of this document to the Commissioners. ([Please see that document here.](#))

SB1074 VA student ID card to vote was assigned to three committees for review so it is Mr. Hampton's opinion it will not get through this process before sine die.

Chairman Rustand had a question on HB2009 about establishing a database of veteran businesses. Mr. Hampton explained the statute would require ADVS to establish a registry. The department would bring back VetBiz that the VA previously used. Mr. Hampton stated that Representative sponsored a similar bill but specifies honorably discharged and wounded in combat.

Chairman Rustand asked if the Department had a wish list that we would like to see put through. Mr. Hampton replied that ADVS does not have a legislative agenda as the agency is in agreement with the Governor's agenda. Director Wright stated we do have a budgetary item in place for more veteran benefit counselors.

Mr. Ochoa stated that there is an influx of veterans that visit the offices to see what is available through the state for benefits so there is a need to compare what we offer versus what other states have available. Mr. Hampton reminded the commission that Arizona is not a rich state like Texas and California and Director Wright added that Arizona offers the lowest tax base of any other state and that our legislature is very veteran friendly. Commissioner Perkins added that in November they held a veterans caucus and invited veteran service organizations to come in and speak to legislators about ideas.

The meeting adjourned at 11:34 a.m. The next Advisory Commission Meeting will be held March 10, 2016, at the Arizona State Veteran Home in Phoenix.

ADVS State Veterans/Military Legislation Update

52nd Arizona Legislature, Second Regular Session

Friday, 15 January 2016

Inclusion of any legislation in this report does not constitute endorsement of that legislation by the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services.

(Notations in Red represent new information or final action.)

SB = Senate Bill

SCM = Senate Concurrent Memorial

SCR = Senate Concurrent Resolution

SR = Senate Resolution

HB = House Bill

HCM = House Concurrent Memorial

HCR = House Concurrent Resolution

HJR= House Joint Resolution

HR = House Resolution

To view bills go to: <http://www.azleg.gov/Bills.asp>

Senate Bills

SB 1036- union civil war memorial

Would authorize the building of a Union Civil War Memorial in Wesley Bolin Plaza at the State Capitol without the use of public monies. The State may not facilitate fund-raising for establish a fund for the monument.

Primary Sponsor(s): Sen. Sylvia Allen, R-Dist. 6

Major Actions:

SB 1074- voter identification; VA; student identification

Would add a valid Veterans Administration health identification card issued by the VA and a valid accredited Arizona university or college identification card to ID currently legally used to vote.

Primary Sponsor(s): Sen. Martin Quezada, D-Dist. 29, et al

Major Actions: **12 Jan 2016-First Read and assigned to Senate Public Safety, Military and Technology (PSMT) Committee, Senate Government Committee and Senate Judiciary Committee.**

SB 1114- appropriations; veterans' services; veterans' home

Would appropriate \$10-million in Fiscal Year 2016-2017 to the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services for distribution to the City of Flagstaff for a veterans' home.

Primary Sponsor(s): Sen. Sylvia Allen, R-Dist. 6

Major Actions: 14 Jan 2016-First Read and assigned to Senate Appropriations Committee and Senate Public Safety, Military and Technology (PSMT) Committee.

SCR 1001- purple heart state; day

Would declare Arizona a "Purple Heart State" and proclaim December 7, 2016 as Purple Heart Day in Arizona.

Primary Sponsor(s): Sen. Sylvia Allen, R-Dist. 6

Major Actions:

House Bills

HB 2009- veteran-owned businesses; procurement preference

Would require the Arizona Department of Administration to establish a goal of awarding 1.5% of State contracts to qualified veteran-owned businesses beginning 1 January 2017 and increasing 3% or more for every year after the first year and require the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services to establish a registry of veteran-owned businesses and verify the veteran status and eligibility of businesses seeking to be considered for the registry.

A qualifying veteran-owned business is one that is at least 51-percent owned by at least one honorably discharged veteran receiving monthly combat-related special compensation. The qualifying veteran would have to control management and daily control of the business, and the home office of the business would have to be in Arizona and not a branch or subsidiary of a foreign company.

Except for construction contracts, a qualifying business would have to use at least 50%of the proceeds of the contract to pay for salaries.

Primary Sponsor(s): Rep. Mark Cardenas, D-Dist. 19

Major Actions:

HB 2019- credited service; military service purchase

Would allow eligible military veterans enrolled in the State/public retirement system for at least five years instead of the current ten years to purchase up to 60 months of completed military service to count toward the public retirement.

Primary Sponsor(s): Rep. David Stevens, R-Dist. 14

Major Actions: 11 Jan 2015-First Read and assigned to House Government and Higher Education Committee and House Rules Committee.

HB 2033- post-9/11 veteran education relief fund

Would create a Post 9/11 Veteran Education Relief Fund made of “private donations, grants, bequests, and any other monies” to provide, under certain conditions, financial tuition assistance to qualified veterans whose tuition assistance under the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 has expired. Would create a committee appointed by the Governor to oversee the fund, under the administrative control of the Arizona Department of Veterans’ Services.

Primary Sponsor(s): Rep. Sonny Borrelli, R-Dist. 5, et al

Major Actions: 11 Jan 2015-First Read and assigned to House Military Affairs and Public Safety (MAPS) Committee and House Rules Committee.

HB 2105- veterans with disabilities; benefits

Would allow Game and Fish to issue complimentary hunting and fishing licenses to veterans rated as at least 25% service-connected disabled; would charge no vehicle license tax or registration fee for veterans rated as at least 25% service-connected disabled; and would provide for free State park passes to veterans rated as at least 25% service-connected disabled.

Primary Sponsor(s): Rep. Phil Lovas, R-Dist. 22

Major Actions: 13 Jan 2015-First Read and assigned to House Military Affairs and Public Safety (MAPS) Committee.

HB 2153- VLT exemption; military members; spouses

Would eliminate the Vehicle License Tax on one vehicle owned by a spouse or surviving dependent of a U.S. military member killed in the line of duty or who died of injuries received in the line of duty.

Primary Sponsor(s): Rep. Sonny Borrelli, R-Dist. 5

Major Actions:

HB 2194- women veteran special plates

Would restrict sale of existing Women Veteran Special Plates to people who can prove they are veterans and/or an immediate family member of a person who has been issued the plate. Currently, monies from the sale of the plates goes into a special fund to benefit homeless women veterans.

Primary Sponsor(s): Rep. Jonathan Larkin, D-Dist. 30, et al.

Major Actions:

HB 2195- unpaid leave; employee; military family

Would require employers provide up to two consecutive work weeks of unpaid leave if an employee makes a written request prior to the leave and has: 1) an immediate family member who is honorably discharged from the U. S. Armed Forces and served in a combat zone within the nine months prior to the family member's leave request or, 2) has an immediate family member currently on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces and who served in a combat zone within 90 days prior to the family member's leave request.

Primary Sponsor: Rep. Jonathan Larkin, D-Dist. 30, et al.

Major Actions:

HB 2323- Native American veterans; tax refund

Would appropriate \$1-million from the State General Fund for a Native American Veteran Income Tax Settlement Fund to reimburse Native American veterans of the Armed Forces of the United States who were living within the boundaries of their or their spouse's tribal lands during active military service who may have been exempt from paying State income taxes but had State income taxes withheld from their military pay.

Primary Sponsor(s): Rep. Sonny Borrelli, R-Dist. 5., et al.

Major Actions:

HB 2324- G&F; military spouses; resident licenses

Would allow spouses of active military members stationed in Arizona to purchase Arizona resident hunting and fishing licenses.

Primary Sponsor(s): Rep. Franklin Pratt, R-Dist. 8, et al.

Major Actions:

HB 2329- appropriations; veterans' services; veterans' home

A companion bill to SB 1114. Would appropriate \$10-million in Fiscal Year 2016-2017 to the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services for distribution to the City of Flagstaff for a veterans' home.

Primary Sponsor(s): Rep. Brenda Barton, R-Dist. 6

Major Actions:

HCR 2001- Arizona veterans hall of fame

A concurrent resolution recognizing the Arizona Veterans' Hall of Fame. This Resolution passed the House but was not transmitted to the Senate in the 52nd Arizona Legislature, First Regular Session. Concurrent Resolutions must be passed by both Houses.

Primary Sponsors: Rep. Sonny Borrelli, R-Dist. 5. ; et al.

Major Actions:

HCR 2018- post-traumatic stress injury awareness day

A concurrent resolution proclaiming June 27, 2016 as Post-Traumatic Stress Injury Awareness Day in Arizona.

Primary Sponsors: Rep. Jay Lawrence, R-Dist. 23. ; et al.

Major Actions: