

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

January 14, 2021

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

Matthew Randle, Chairperson
Joan McDermott, Vice Chairperson
Chris Gibbs
Gene Crego
Kathryn Gallowitz
Edward Logan
Kirk Loving
Michael Noble

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Colonel Wanda Wright, Director
Jennifer Harris, Legislative Liaison
Lupita Santellano, Executive Assistant

Absent

Rebecca Villalpando

Call to Order – The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission meeting was held virtually via Google Hangouts, link: meet.google.com/jqq-vm-sc-uux; phone number (US)+1 617-675-4444, PIN: 425 562 6665 6167#. Chairman Randle called the meeting to order at 10:01 am.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – Chairman Randle called for a motion to approve the, November 12, 2020, Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. There being no changes to the minutes, Commissioner Gene Crego moved to accept the meeting minutes, Commissioner, Edward Logan second the motion. The motion carried.

Introductions

All Commissioners and department members introduced themselves and provided background information and names of Veteran organizations they are associated with.

Department Announcements and Updates

Director Wright updated the commission on the background and history of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS) as well as programs and initiatives the department participates in, in order to provide an overall feel of the work the department does. Director Wright states the department started off as a Commission. The CEO through the recommendation of the Commission ran the agency and managed veteran issues. The Commission changed to a department twenty years ago. When the commission changed to a department, the commission still made recommendations to an individual but that changed as the cabinet head became a cabinet member. Director Wright states there have been 4 or 5 cabinet members that ran the department. The commission became an Advisory Commission versus a Commission that controlled the department. Director Wright is a cabinet member who works for Governor Douglas Ducey, she is the voice for Arizona's Veterans.

The ADVS runs three cemeteries. One in Sierra Vista near Fort Huachuca, the second is in Marana, and the third is located in Belmont near Camp Navajo. Col. Wright emphasized the importance of options and flexibility when burying Arizona's Veterans. ADVS's state run cemeteries have a little more flexibility than a

federal cemetery as it relates to burials. The VA no longer have inground burials because they are full but they do offer a columbarium option. All three cemeteries run by ADVS are currently having burials. During Covid-19, burials continued; however, during the beginning of the pandemic, families were not allowed at the burials and later were limited to a small group that had to followed set protocols. Director Wright asked the Commission to talk up this benefit in the veteran community. Veterans can be buried at the cemetery at no cost and will receive a headstone free of charge. Director Wright clarified there may be funeral arrangement fees to pay; however, the burial itself is free of charge. If the spouse of a veteran would like to be buried at the cemetery there is a small fee associated but their name will be added to the headstone as well. Director Wright emphasized this is a great benefit for families that do not have money to bury their Veteran. Veterans may preregister and prearrange this benefit.

State Veteran Homes – ADVS also runs State Veteran Homes. This benefit allows families who can no longer take care of their veteran or Veterans who can no longer take care of themselves a place to call home. ADVS runs a veteran home in Tucson, 120 bed capacity, and one in Phoenix, 200 bed capacity. This fall ADVS will be opening up two more Veteran Homes, one in Flagstaff, 80 bed capacity, and the second in Yuma, 80 bed capacity. This is a great benefit for vets who are 70% service-connected disabled or higher because the VA pays for the Veteran's entire bill while the Veteran resides at the Veteran Home.

Veterans Services Division (VSD) – This division supports filing claims on behalf of Veterans who have an illness or injury that was created through military service. Director Wright stated she believe VSD provides this service the best. Director Wright recognized there are other VSO's that file claims as well and the department appreciates those VSO's. Director Wright states VSD is held at higher standards and the quality they put into reviewing applications for disability and the training that is provided to them allows for a high approval rating. VSD currently has a 90% approval rating. VSD stays informed on the newest information the VA puts out. For example, the VA most recently upgraded agent orange to other diseases that are associated with agent orange.

VSD is completely virtual at the moment; however, this will change after the spread of Covid-19 slows down. VSD is seeing more Veterans while on a virtual platform. Director Wright asked that the Commissioners talk about the great work that is being done by VSD. Director Wright reiterated that no Veteran should ever be charged to file a claim for disability and no Veteran should ever be charged to file an appeal. It is ADVS's obligation as a department to make sure Veterans are taken care of.

Administration - ADVS also has an administrative branch that takes care of the normal day to day work such as Information technology (IT), Human Resources (HR), and other administrative units.

Public and Intergovernmental Affairs Division (PIA)– This division conducts outreach to the communities. PIA hones in on certain veteran demographics to make sure they understand and have access to their benefits; mainly LGBTQ, women Veterans, and minority Veterans. PIA works the programs to help those groups specifically so they get the information they need to file claims, use the cemetery, or use the Veteran home if they need to. Also, access to other programs like Be Connected or have an interface with the VA if they are not comfortable with that.

Be Connected - Director Wright is a co-founder of Be Connected. ADVS partnered with the Arizona Coalition for Military families to provide a state wide program that helps with navigation to resources. Be Connected can send a navigator to a Veteran's home to help with any issue the veteran is experiencing. There are some Veteran Benefit Counselors (VBCs) who are associated with Be Connected. Be Connected is a suicide prevention program that provides early intervention by helping those Veterans who are struggling financially. The VBCs are able to intervene by reviewing a Veterans eligibility for pension. The

VBC may also connect with a spouse who has lost her husband and doesn't know what to do next. The VBC will help the spouse understand EIC or survivor benefits. Be Connected will help a veteran navigate any resources the veteran may need. Director Wright provided an example of a Be Connected success story.

Veteran Donation Fund (VDF) – The VDF is a program that is funded by license plates Veterans buy such as the Veteran license plate, the woman Veteran license plate, and the freedom license plate; \$27.00 of each of those license plates goes into the VDF. Through those donations, ADVS grants nonprofits with small grants, below \$5,000, and large grants \$5,000 - \$75,000. The VDF supports nonprofits that continue to do the work that ADVS as a state department cannot do, such as, the furnishing of a Veterans permanent housing after having been homeless for three years. ADVS has supported veteran treatment courts when they were just starting. Non-profits may apply for small grants year-round while large grants are open once a year.

Military Family Relief Fund (MFRF) – The MFRF is available for Post 9/11 and Pre 9/11 Veterans who through military service deployed out of Arizona, Arizona Guards member and deployed, or their home of record and deployed. MFRF verbiage is still being worked out. If the Veteran is experiencing financial instability because of their injury, or having to do with their deployment, ADVS may pay up to \$20,000 for a lifetime towards that Veteran's bills. ADVS does not pay the veteran directly, ADVS pays the vendors directly. The MFRF will pay a Veteran's bill such as a mortgage, court note or phone bill if the veteran is experiencing difficulty paying their bills. A veteran applies through an application process, the application is then reviewed by a committee. MFRF has two committees, the Post 9/11 MFRF Committee and the Pre 9/11 MFRF Committee, who determine if a Veteran's application is approved or denied, as well as the dollar amount.

Vet Tool Kit – The ADVS works in partnership the Department of Economic Security (DES) and career navigation through Be Connected. When an individual is about to start their job and the individual does not have the right tools to start their job, the department can give up to a \$750-dollar stipend to purchase the item(s) needed for that veteran to begin his/her job. The department evaluates the Veteran's needs and verifies the item(s) are required by the business. Once confirmed, ADVS partners with the Arizona Housing Coalition to purchase the item for the veteran.

There are a number of other programs that ADVS offers or is affiliated with. Director Wright suggested the Commission visit the ADVS website at dvs.az.gov for more information.

Director Wright emphasized the department is constantly working to come up with ideas on how to further support Arizona's Veterans. ADVS has a strong relationship with the VA. All three VA Directors and Director Wright meet quarterly and discuss what they can do for one another. Director Wright states ADVS production levels are higher than ever during this pandemic. The department has been able to manage the Phoenix and Tucson Veteran Homes and keep infections low. ADVS has been able to manage morale. Director Wright states ADVS has managed to come out on top during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Chairman Matt Randle asked Col. Wright to explain how the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed the VDF to the forefront. Director Wright stated two things were done based on Covid-19. ADVS made Covid-19 specific grants for non-profits to help deal with financial instability and food instability.

Commissioner Kathy Gallowitz asked Director Wright to please describe in detail the relationship between ADVS and Be Connected. Director Wright stated she and Nicola Thomas are co-founders of Be

Connected. The original legislation for suicide prevention is the Clay Hunt Act which was introduced in 2015 - 2016. She explained this legislation required the VA to work with the community. Thomas Winkle and Nicole Winkle with the Arizona Coalition for Military Families, and Director Wright sat down and decided to push for the VA to be part of this program. The co-founders met with the Phoenix VA first and the VA agreed to be part of this program. The VA put their chief of staff in charge. The VA wanted to make this program a VA program instead of a community program. The VA had a change in leadership and a new Chief of Staff, Dr. Maureen McCarthy, was appointed. Dr. McCarthy was open minded and worked with the co-founders on the Be Connected program. Dr. McCarthy also help the co-founders work with the Tucson and Prescott VA. AHCCCS joined the program because of Medicare, the National Guard joined, Tricare joined because they are also a VA contract. The Be Connected co-founders had a number of non-profits and behavioral and mental health providers that helped them decide the best way to run the Be Connected program.

The Arizona Coalition for Military Families had experience with the National Guard, they ran Be Resilient for three years and they had zero suicides. The Program changed the name from Clay Hunt Initiative to Be Connected. Initial funding for Be Connected was through the VDF grant.

Commissioner Edward Logan asked if the VBC's could review prior claims filed with the VA for a possible higher rate. Director Wright stated the VBC are able to take the original claim, with evidence signed by a Physician that confirms the change in status, and can re-submit the claim to the VA.

Commissioner Michael Noble asked Director Wright what a new is expected of a new Commissioner as por of the Advisory Commission. Director Wright stated the Commissioners are her eyes and ears in the community. She recommended the Commissioners attend their locals VSO organization meetings and advise her on anything of concern within the Veteran community.

Commissioner Kathryn Gallowitz took notice of the survey at the bottom of ADVS email signature blocks and applauded how wonderfully responsive the ADVS team is. Director Wright thanked the Commissioner and explained ADVS's feedback system.

Legislative Liaison Update

Jennifer Harris, Legislative Liaison for ADVS updated the commission. Jennifer Harris oversees the VDF Grant and serves as the Administrator for the Gold Star Military Medal program. The legislative session opened on Monday, January 11, 2021. Jennifer stated the legislative session is different this year due to Covid-19. She states that during legislative session she posts a summary of every bill she is following that affects Veterans or is stemmed from a veteran issue, the summaries are posted on Fridays on the ADVS website at dvs.az.gov, under the about section. Jennifer attends the UAV and Legislative Veterans Caucus meetings and hears topics the community is interested in. Those interested can be added to the email distribution list. Jennifer states she adds addition information of what is going on in the legislature in her distribution emails. Both the house and the senate have covid19 protocols in place. The senate is not allowing in person testimony but they do remote testimony available upon a request. The house is allowing in person testimony as well as remote testimony. Jennifer suggests Commissioner read the agendas for further details.

Bills that have been re-introduced:

SB 1024 – Enduring Freedom Memorial appropriation. The appropriation totals \$21,422.91. The funds are appropriated through ADOA. The money would be used to alter or modify the state memorials and to add names to the memorial.

SB1143 – Veterans Overseas Conflicts plates, which are special plates for Veterans of Foreign Wars. Monies from sale of these plates will go into a fund that will help the VFW train and pay persons throughout the state, where needed, to process benefit claims for Veterans with service-connected disabilities. This is a bill that Senator Wendy Rogers will be running this bill.

HB2128 – This bill will require occupational licensing fees be waived for any active-duty military member, members spouse or any veteran, if the individual is applying for an occupational license for the first time.

Jennifer Harris states that Representative Andrade has not introduced the bill yet but through stakeholder meetings and Veteran Caucus meetings she knows he is planning on reintroducing a bill to fund additional VBC's for ADVS. He is reintroducing his resolution on military sexual trauma. He is also reintroducing his bill named Ask A Question, which required agencies and Commissions and boards to ask customers if they have ever served in the military. Senator Borelli states he is going to reintroduce his bill to construct a veteran home in Mohave county.

Commissioner Gene Crego asked Jennifer Harris to explained if a veteran can still go down to the state capitol and register so they can watch the bills at home and comment on a bill. Jennifer Harris stated the request to speak system is still available. Anyone can visit www.azleg.gov and create an account; however, you have to register at one of the kiosks that are located at the capitol or at the legislative office in Tucson before you can access the account remotely. If you are going to go down to the capitol to register your account, call first and find out what the process is for registering your account. Once registered, sign in to request to speak, send your request to speak to the email on the agenda. Provide your name, your position, and who you represent. Once approved, you will receive a link to speak, do not share this link with anyone. Vice Chair Joan McDermott asked If you an account is removed after a significant time of inactivity. Commissioner Crego stated she should still be in the system.

Commissioner Logan Jennifer Harris where the legislature stands on eliminating income taxes for Veterans. Jennifer Harris stated she has not seen a bill reintroduced. She believes there will be more information after the Governor releases his Executive Budget on Friday, January 15, 2021.

Commissioner Gallowitz asked Jennifer Harris if observers can attend the Legislative Veterans Caucus meetings. Jennifer Harris stated the Legislative Veterans Caucus meetings are open to any public citizens and are run by co-chairs from each party. Currently Representative Andrade and Representative Blackman run the Veterans Caucus meetings which meets monthly; this year the Veterans Caucus meetings are being held on a virtual platform. Anyone who is interested being added to the distribution list may reach out to Jennifer Harris for more information. Director Wright suggested to those interested in attending the Legislative Veterans Caucus meetings to do so as public citizens and not as Commissioners. Chairman Randle also suggested the Commissioners do not represent themselves at the legislative level as the Governor's Commissioners. He asked that the Commissioners reach out to him, Jennifer, or Director Wright with questions regarding this matter. He strongly urged the Commissioners do not use their title other than to gather info for Director Wright and her team.

Commissioner Gallowitz asked Chair Randle if it was appropriate to reach out to him for clarification or questions. Chairman Randle advised Commissioner Gallowitz email him, Director Wright, Jennifer Harris and Lupita Santellano with any questions she may have.

Commissioner Crego stated in the past the department has asked Veterans to support a bill the department is supporting. Jennifer Harris explained the purpose of the legislative update and agreed she provides information on bills the department supports. Jennifer Harris states the department encourages Veterans to support bills the Veterans are interested in supporting. Jennifer Harris requested volunteers for the review of applications made towards the large grant. Those interested must contact Jennifer via email.

Old Business

Veterans Transportation Survey – Director Wright stated the department decided to contract with the University of Arizona (UofA) to conduct a transportation study. The transportation study will gather information and data on the gaps for transportation, specifically for medical appointments, as well as social determinant health wise, such as the Veteran cannot get to church or to the grocery store. The study started off slow because of Covid-19. The team has worked on who they want to talk to and they have created a survey. UofA is going to conduct quantitative and qualitative research on the survey. ADVS will be distributing that survey probably at the end of January 2021. The department is on time as far as trying to figure out where are the gaps for transportation are. The survey asks regular demographic questions. The survey asks what types of transportation a veteran currently has available to them and it asks what the veteran is missing. The survey goes through more demographics on what a veteran would like to see if they could. The department is sending the survey out through the mail as well as email. ADVS has the ability through partnership with the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), to have access to those Veterans' addresses registered through the DMV. ADVS is going to take a sampling of those surveys in high critical rural areas where transportation is not good. The survey is a small card that will ask the veteran to call in to a number if they do not have the capability to complete the survey online. ADVS has access to a significant email list through VSD's work with claims. The department will also share the survey with stakeholders and the Commission for further distribution. ADVS would like to have 10,000 Veterans take the survey. Director Wright asked the Commission to talk about the survey and share the survey with their local veteran community. Director Wright also stated UofA will then pick people who took the survey to make phone calls to and gather anecdotal quantitative information from them specifically so they have stories from the survey. A UofA epidemiologist will review the data gathered and provide ADVS a report from the data gathered. ADVS would like to introduce legislation to support those counties in most need by session 2022, specifically transportation needed to and from hospital visits and medical appointments.

Letter to the Governor – Chairman Matt Randle states he had every intention of completing the letter to the Governor before the end of the calendar year; however, he received news of the four new commissioners coming on board so he decided to wait for the new Commissioners to review the letter. Chairman Randle spoke with Director Wright to gather the departments focus for the letter. Prior Commissioners have all had a chance to provide input on the letter. Items in the letter include the new home in Mohave county and the funding for the new benefit counselors. Chairman Randle asked the Commissioner if they approved the current drafted letter which was emailed to each Commissioner for review. Commissioner Crego approved the draft. Chairman Randle asked the Commission if there were any requests to add content to the current drafted letter. Commissioner Noble stated provided 2 topics, Covid-19 vaccine distribution by the VA and VA clinics, and halted

elective procedures at the VA. Both of these topics are federal topics not state topics; therefore, the Governor does not have any influence on them. Chairman Randle explained the current vaccine distribution in Tucson. Commissioner Logan suggested Commissioner Noble search the Arizona Department of Health website for more information regarding vaccine distribution. Director Wright stated the Phoenix VA is distributing vaccines to group 1A, to those members who are enrolled and qualify for 1A and to staff and current patients in the VA hospitals. 1B vaccines are starting be administered to senior citizens over the age of 75. Those who are enrolled in the VA at least will be able to get to their VA hospitals. The distribution of vaccines to clinics will begin fairly soon, Director Wright stated, she did not have an exact date of distribution. Commission Gene Crego states clinics will have the vaccines in two weeks.

Commissioner Edward Logan suggested the Commission include the elimination of state income taxes for Veterans in the letter to the Governor. Chairman Randle is not apposed to adding this topic to the letter; however, he would like to broaden the scope to anyone who is honorably discharged from the military not just those Veterans who have retired and have honorably discharged from the military. The Commission agreed to add this topic to the letter. Director Wright suggested a few sentences be added the letter regarding this topic. Chairman Randle will update the letter to the Governor and gather the Commissioners approvals of the final draft via email.

New Business

Plaque presentation and recognition of previous retired Commissioners is rescheduled to the next Commission Meeting on April 8, 2021.

Outreach Activities

Commissioner Joan McDermott briefed the Commission on current outreach activities. [See report.](#)

Commissioner Gene Crego thanked Director Wright for setting up the contract for the Arizona Hall of Fame Society so they can continue to do their work in Arizona.

Commissioner Chris Gibbs had no outreach activity to report.

Commissioner Kathryn Gallowitz stated she is getting oriented with Arizona. She is proud to be a new inductee to the Southwest Veterans Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors. She also serves on the Glendale Chamber of Military Veterans Affairs Committee. She is excited to host a Fallen Comrade ceremony in the Fountain Hills/Mesa, Arizona area. She is also excited about a Veteran Ministry that she is volunteering for in the Fountain Hills area called Vet Connect.

Commissioner Edward Logan stated today, January 14, 2021, is the last day for the Secretary of the Air Force.

Commissioner Kirk Loving stated he is happy to be serving on the Advisory Commission. He mentioned he has encouraged Veterans to register to receive their Covid-19 vaccine.

Commissioner Mike Loving thanked the Commission for entertaining his questions today and looks forward to working with the Commission.

Chairman Randle states he has been in contact with the VA in Tucson. There has been a spike in Covid-19 cases in staff and Veterans. The Veteran treatment courts are working virtually. The law students providing free legal counsel and the law school are working virtually.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order

Chairman Randle encouraged the Commission invite fellow Veterans within their Veteran Community to join the Advisory Commission.

Chairman, Randle requested a motion to adjourn the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Meeting. Commissioner Edward Logan moved to adjourn. Commissioner, Kathryn Gallowitz second the motion. The motion carried. Meeting adjourned at 11:57 a.m.

**REPORT TO AVSAC:
2021**

14 January

*A piece of USS Arizona, which still rests where is sunk in Pearl Harbor on that fateful 7th of December day almost 70 years ago, has arrived in Lake Havasu City courtesy of the efforts of our local Marine Corps League through the U.S. Navy relic program. The relic weighs 520 lbs. and is 4X6 feet in size. The Corps is working with the city to determine a location that is secure yet located where the most people can view it.

*VFW sponsorship of a Veterans' stand down in BHC remains on track for March 5th, while the Kingman stand down has been moved from January to March 26th.

*COVID-19: The general population in our region has moved into phase 1B of the vaccination process, although some phase 1A citizens are still being vaccinated. Delivery of the actual doses has been slow.

*Veteran organizations are either cancelling meetings completely or holding virtual or hybrid meetings, generally with only the essential leadership members required to attend.

*Military honors for Veterans who have passed away has been severely limited, with the local Marine Corps League honor guards on hold for many months and some other honor guards limiting the location and length of time for such honors.


*Veteran Treatment Courts across the region are holding hearings but are offering the option of attending virtually.

*The Arizona Coalition for Military Families – Be Connected has reached out to the veteran community to coordinate an opportunity to provide food to food-insecure Veterans, but the funds must be used by 31 January.

*Mohave Community College and the branch of ASU in Lake Havasu City have been primarily conducting classes remotely for many months.

*Arizona at Work representative, Todd Baldwin, continues to work closely with Veterans across Western Arizona to find employment. He has been able to assist many Veterans to secure appropriate work clothes and work items necessary to successfully do those jobs through a fund provided for that purpose.

Respectfully Submitted By:



Joan McDermott
Commissioner
AVSAC