

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

October 14, 2021

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

Joan McDermott, Chairperson
Gene Crego, Vice Chairperson
Chris Gibbs, Commissioner
Kathryn Gallowitz, Commissioner
Edward Logan, Commissioner
Kirk Loving, Commissioner
Michael Noble, Commissioner
Rebecca Villalpando, Commissioner
Andy Meshel, Commissioner

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

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

Guests

Tracie Pinkston, Acting Director Veteran Affairs Regional
Office
Matthew Randle

Call to Order – The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission meeting was held virtually via Google Meets, link: meet.google.com/jqq-vm-sc-uux; phone number (US)+1 617-675-4444, PIN: 425 562 6665 6167#. Chairwoman Joan McDermott called the meeting to order at 10:00 am.

Chairwoman McDermott lead the Commission in the pledge of allegiance.

Approval of Meeting Minutes

Chairwoman McDermott called for a motion to approve the July 8, 2021, Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. There being no changes to the minutes, the motion carried unanimously.

Presentation

Director Wanda Wright introduced guest Tracie Pinkston, Acting Director of the Veteran Affairs Regional Office (VARO).

Director Wright presented Matthew Randle, former Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Chairman, with an appreciation plaque for Matthew Randle's service to the Commission and to Arizona's Veterans.

Department Announcements and Updates

Director Wanda Wright updated the Commission. The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS) now has the keys to the Arizona State Veteran Home – Yuma (ASVH-Y). ADVS Staff is still not provided full

access to the Yuma building due to additional construction items such as lighting and adjustments to resident rooms that must be completed before ADVS is allowed full access to the building; these additional construction items may take between 45 – 50 days. Large equipment and furniture will then be brought in; delivery and set up will take an additional 30 – 45 days. ADVS has begun hiring for different positions at the State Veterans Home in Yuma (ADVS)Yuma. There have been delays in the construction of the Flagstaff home. It is unknown when ADVS will receive keys for the Arizona State Veteran Home – Flagstaff (ASVH-F).

Be Connected launched a new initiative called Secure Your Weapons. This initiative is meant to help tackle the issue that continues to be fire arms/ lethal means and suicide. Be Connected and ADVS have collaborated and created flyers, billboards, postcards, coasters, etc. to distribute to veteran organizations. However, ADVS and Be Connected are going back to the drawing board after the VA suggested the original humorous image was too edgy. The Secure Your Weapon items will display Be Connected's number and website. The images used on some of the flyers display very dignified photos of people carrying fire arms. Director Wright believes these items will remind veterans of the military tradition to secure their fire arms. Veteran organizations may request Secure Your Weapon advertisement items by filling out a jotform and submitting it to Be Connected; Jot form [here](#).

ADVS has two Women's expo's coming up. The next expo is taking place on October 16, 2021, in Show Low, Arizona. The following expo is being held on October 23, 2021, in Sierra Vista, Arizona. ADVS has been experiencing veterans registering for the expo and not showing up.

ADVS is currently working with AHCCCS to support mental health. ADVS received a grant from AHCCCS and was able to hire navigators for each region (Northern, Southern, and Central). Director Wright states there is enough grant money for ADVS to be able to pay for mental health support for veterans.

The Transportation Survey has been completed. The survey results have been posted on ADVS's website; the link can be found [here](#). ADVS sent the transportation survey data to all councils of government to help them with transportation initiatives. Director Wright thanked the Commission for their help with the transportation survey and recommended the Commission read the survey.

ADVS is working with the state HR to try and attract/hire more veterans in state service. ADVS is trying to create Skillbridge opportunities within State Government. Next year ADVS plans to tackle the housing issue. ADVS has hired a housing Coordinator. Director Wright has a meeting with the State Director of housing to discuss HUD/VASH issues.

Chairwoman McDermott asked Director Wright if ADVS has been affected by the Governor's Cyber Command Center. Director Wright explained the Arizona Department of Administration (ADOA) manages the entire state internet system. ADOA has put together the Cyber Command Center together to watch over all state departments and protect the departments from any cyber threats. All Chief Information Officers (CIO's) must report to the Cyber Command Center. ADVS must abide by state metric, the highest risk sense score is 850; ADVS's risk score is 850.

Chairwoman McDermott asked Director if she had an update on the ATLAS telehealth program. Director Wright does not have an update and has not heard anything in regards to the program since the telehealth pod was installed in Wickenburg, Arizona. Chairwoman McDermott asked if there has been any progress in resolving the slowdown in access to personal records. Director Wright asked Tracie Pinkston for an update regarding the slowdown in the release of personal records, such as DD214's. Ms. Pinkston states some of the work load has been move to one of the VA Regional Offices. No other information is known.

Vice Chair Crego asked Ms. Pinkston if VBA is hiring 2500 employees. Ms. Pinkston confirmed the VBA is hiring 2500 employees to help process all of the claims that will soon be submitted due to the Toxic exposure in the Gulf War.

Legislative Liaison Update

Jennifer Harris, Legislative Liaison for ADVS updated the Commission. Jennifer highlighted a few bills such as:

SB1443- Military Family Relief Fund (MFRF) bill sponsored by Senator Borelli, which expands eligibility criteria, specifically expanding the resident requirement. The MFRF Application is now digitized. This bill went into effect September 29, 2021.

HB2542 – Arizona Department of Health (ADHS) Annual Suicide Report, which would add the Be Connected utilization information data to the Annual Suicide report.

Budget highlights:

Senator Borelli introduced a bill that granted ADVS 25 million to build a state veteran home in Northwest Arizona. ADVS was approved to hire 12 Veteran Benefit Counselors (VBCs). ADVS received a supplemental appropriation of 100,000, which will be given as a grant to a charitable organization in Southern Arizona whose initiative is to help reduce veteran suicide. The income tax exemption for military retirement pay was also passed in this previous session.

Old Business

Transportation Survey Update – ADVS partnered with the University of Arizona (UofA) to conduct the transportation survey. Director Wright states UofA did a great job. One of the reasons for limited transportation is the cost for auto repair. A lot of veterans do not have the funds to fix their vehicles. The second reason was the difficulty in getting to appointments because the veteran cannot drive. The more rural the harder it is for veterans to find transportation. Director Wright states there is a lot of good information collected from the survey and recommend the commission read the report. The link can be found [here](#).

Annual Letter to the Governor – Chairwoman McDermott drafted the letter to the Governor based on guidance from Director Wright and some input provided by the Commission. Chairwoman McDermott asked the commission to review the drafted letter provided to the via email within the next two weeks. She plans to finalize the letter in November of 2021. Chairwoman McDermott would like to send a second letter to help address other issues/legislative changes. The second letter will be drafted and sent to the Governor after January 2022. Jennifer Harris mentioned the Commission could read the Department of Defense (DOD's) regional office recommendation report on key initiatives that are currently not available in Arizona.

New Business

Commissioner Gallowitz gave a fifteen-minute presentation on the Be Connected Faith Network and respectfully request that the Commissioners help broaden awareness to faith community leaders as well as veteran community leaders. Commissioner Gallowitz presentation may be found [here](#).

Outreach Activities

Vice Chair Crego provided an outreach report linked [here](#).

Commissioner Gibbs thanked Vice Chair Crego for being a good source of information. He mentioned Veterans' week in Safford runs from November 6th – November 13, 2021. Safford will be hosting a Veterans Day parade and luncheon. There's a resource fair on November 19, 2021. Commissioner Gibbs invited Director Wright to the resource fair.

Commissioner Gallowitz - Continues to be very actively involved in the Be connected Faith Based network and the Southwest Veterans Chamber of Commerce. She attended the American Legion National Convention and the Building Homes for Heroes event, where a Veteran received a new home. She also participates in Senator Mark Kelly's Veterans group as an observer and interested party. She's excited to attend the Veterans Hall of Fame on Friday, October 15, 2021.

Commissioner Loving highlighted an upcoming event with the Association of the United States Army, the 32nd annual Joint Military Service, Junior ROTC Armed Forces Career Officer's Day (AFCOD) EXPO and Luncheon to be held on Tuesday, November 23, 2021, at McCormick Ranch Golf Club located in Scottsdale, AZ.

Commissioner Villalpando attended the Veterans Memorial Ceremony in Black Canyon City. She has been working with a couple veterans that qualify for claims, she's been working with them for a year and a half. She thanked ADVS for the letter of support for the Veterans Walk in the Goldengate Community.

Commissioner Logan left the meeting before being able to provide his outreach information.

Commissioner Noble thanked Director Wright for coming out to Lake Havasu for her presentation on Be Connected. The Annual Vietnam Veterans Dinner was held on October 2, 2021. He highlighted an event for veterans coming up on October 15-16, 2021 near camp Verde. He mentioned Toys for Tots is starting up again.

Chairwoman McDermott provided an outreach report linked here. She also mentioned the Sunset audit is complete

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order

Director Wright states the Sunset Audit report is finalized and now ADVS must go in front of the legislature.

Tracie Pinkston states the VBA is holding virtual outreach events and is hiring 2,500 new employees. VBA has processed 40,000 claims locally; however, there is a backlog currently. Vice Chair Crego asked Ms. Pinkston to provide a biography on herself. Acting Director Pinkston provided a brief biography.

Director Wright showed the Commission the Secure Your Weapon gunlock and flyers. As well as billboards.

Commissioner Gallowitz share the Patriots Ball information; link [here](#).

The Commission voted on whether the next Advisory Commission meeting should be held in person or virtually. The Commission voted for a virtual meeting in January of 2022 and an in-person meeting in April of 2022.

Chairwoman McDermott called for a motion to adjourn the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Meeting. The motion carried unanimously. Meeting adjourned at 12:04 pm.