

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

April 8, 2021

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

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

Absent

Rebecca Villalpando
Arlethe Rios
Joseph Brophy
Carolyn Smith

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

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

Guests

Angela Tate, The Alzheimer's Association

Call to Order – The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission meeting was held virtually via Google Hangouts, link: meet.google.com/jqq-vmisc-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 January 14, 2021, 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, Chris Gibbs second the motion. The motion carried.

Introductions

Commissioner Andy Meshel introduced himself to the commission.

Department Announcements and Updates

Director Wanda Wright updated the commission. The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services will receive the keys for the Yuma and Flagstaff home in September of 2021. The opening of the Veteran Homes in Yuma and Flagstaff have been pushed back to calendar year 2022. Yuma will open in January 2022, to its first veteran; Flagstaff will open two months after. Director Wright states the Yuma home will have no problem finding staff. She states there are concerns regarding the hiring of staff for the Flagstaff home, due to the \$15.00-dollar pay rate. The certified nursing assistants (CNA's) at the Phoenix and Tucson home currently make less than \$13.00 per hour. The department is looking at different options for the Flagstaff home, a course correction- waiver, stipend, or geographical location rate. The Phoenix and Tucson homes are well, they are at 5 stars. However, the department is concerned regarding the census of both homes. Census has gone down significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Tucson home is a 120-bed facility with a current census of 80. The Phoenix home is a 200-bed facility with a current census of 120. The Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) pays the veterans/resident's room and board and if census is low, so is

the pay. Director Wright states the homes also have to keep a certain level of nursing staff in order to keep business open.

The cemeteries are performing burials at a steady rate. The cemeteries are allowing more people to attend burials, ceremonies and memorials but will continue to ask people to socially distance and wear their masks; this is the case throughout the department. There have not been any reported issues so far. The Veteran Benefit Counselors (VBC's) continue to work from home. The department is now on a campaign to find itinerate offices across the state where VBC's can meet veterans who may not have the technology to file virtual claims. A few of the itinerate office offers received so far are located in Chinle, City of Surprise, and two others in Southern Arizona. Director Wright states, people and organizations are donating offices for one or two days a week, which is great for those veterans who do not have access to technology. Director Wright admitted she was surprised at the almost 30% increase in productivity by the VBC's during the COVID-19 pandemic. The VBC's have filed more claims during the pandemic than in previous years, bringing in close to 60 million dollars a month into the state from federal VA funds from filed claims or pensions. The VBC's have a 93% approval rating for claims filed. Director Wright states no other organization has that high of an approval rating that she is aware of.

Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (PIA) continue to outreach via social media and through newspapers. Director Wight states ADVS has contract with the Arizona Broadcasting Association. She states the commission will soon hear PSA's about Be Connect, ADVS, collaborations and new initiatives that are happening within ADVS and its partners. The PSAs are in the final stages of production and should be coming out soon. The department will keep the commission informed on when to expect the PSA's. ADVS continues to work steadily with the VA in regards to vaccinations. Director Wright states federal law passed allowing the VA to vaccinate veterans, their spouses and their caregivers. A veteran does not need to be enrolled with the VA to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. The department continues to work on other smaller initiatives in order to reach veterans in different areas.

Commissioner Gallowitz congratulated Director Wright on the VBC's 93% approval rating. She asked if Director Wright was aware of the approval rating of other organizations. Director Wright states the department may have access to that data but she has not asked for that information. She believes the approval rating of other organizations may be less than ADVS' VBC's. ADVS VBC's are highly engaged in training and ADVS has a great legislative liaison that keeps the department up to date on legislation. VBC's keep up to date on changes that are happening with the CFR in regards to VA benefits and services.

Legislative Liaison Update

Jennifer Harris, Legislative Liaison for ADVS updated the commission. ADVS proposed two pieces of legislation. One of those bills is SB1443, the Military Family Relief Fund. SB1143 expands eligibility for applicants and cleans-up the statute for clarity. This bill was signed by the Governor on March 18, 2021. Jennifer Harris thanked all stake holders, especially Peter Kloeber, former Veterans' Services Advisory Commissioner, for his support and help with SB1143.

HB2542 - Veteran Suicide Annual Report. This bill would add utilization and encounter data from Be Connected into the annual report. Jennifer Harris states adding the information provided by Be Connected will help identify trends for early intervention. This bill was introduced last year and expired in the process during the COVID-19 pandemic. This bill was transmitted and passed the senate and house.

HB2706 – Appropriation for VBC's. This bill was submitted by Representative Richard Andrade. The bill would allocate \$948,400.00 from the State General fund in FY22 to the Arizona Department of Veteran's

Services to hire twelve new VBC's. Some updates had to be made to the FAQ, which answers questions and states facts regarding this bill. Updates were also made to this bill due to the VBC positions now being teleworking position. This bill made it through the house and senate committees and is being held or tabled for budget negotiations.

HCR2022 – Fisher House; service members; supporting. This bill supports the operation and construction of a Fisher house near the VA in Phoenix. This bill made it through the house but did not get first read and assigned to a committee. Jennifer Harris states March 26, 2021, was the last day for bills to be read in committee. Committees are no longer meeting, with the exception of appropriations, which received an additional week.

SB1172 - Veterans' home facility; Mohave County. This bill appropriates funds for ADVS to construct and establish a veterans' home facility in Mohave County. This bill made it through the senate and house committees. Jennifer Harris states this bill was introduced by Senator Sonny Borrelli. She has not heard from Senator Borrelli but states he is hard at work advocating for this bill. Jennifer Harris believes this bill is being tabled for budget negotiations.

SB1331 – Veterans' income tax; exemption. Senator David Gowan introduced this bill. This bill made it through the senate but was not heard in its assigned house committee. Jennifer Harris states the only chance for this bill to be approved is if it makes it to budget negotiations. This bill would exempt income taxes on a veteran's full pension amount.

SB1359 – Veteran's income tax exemption. Senator Rogers introduced this bill, which did not receive a hearing.

SB1143 – Veterans Oversea Conflict Plates, brought forward by the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and was signed by the Governor on April 5, 2021. This is a special plates bill introduced by the VFW. Money collected from the specialty plates, \$17.00 dollars, will be annually allocated to a VFW entity located within the state for the purpose of training and paying persons throughout the state where needed to process claims for service-connected disabilities and illnesses.

There are a couple of fantasy sports event wagering bills that were introduced. One of those bills being SB1797 fantasy sports betting; event wagering. The Governor's office tried to communicate with The American Legion and the VFW on their gaming compact negotiations because these bills could provide a revenue stream that was not available before. SB2772 was never assigned to committee in the senate but did make it out of the house.

Old Business

Chairman Randle requested all the commissioners fill out a conflict-of-interest form. Chairman Randle requested Lupita Santellano send out the link to the PDF fillable form which must be filled out, signed, and promptly returned to Lupita Santellano, Executive Assistant via email.

Director Wright updated the commission in regards to the Veteran Transportation study. ADVS partnered with the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) on the transportation study. The VA shared their veteran email list in support of the study. 100,000 emails were sent to veterans. Currently, there are approximately 2,000 surveys that have been taken. The goal is 5,000 surveys taken before July 2021. Director Wright explained to the new commissioners that ADVS has contracted with the University of Arizona (UofA) to write the survey and deploy the survey. ADVS will work around the

survey to nominate people who need transportation for vaccinations and food, which will allow for an outreach opportunity for the department on social media. The ultimate goal is to collect the data from the survey, analyze the data, and create legislation for transportation for some of these areas most affected. The department plans to partner with the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) and Council of Governments (COG) when the time comes. Director Wright shared the Transportation Survey link with the commission, <https://azvetsurvey.online/zec>.

The Annual Symposium is coming up on April 21 and 22, 2021. The Symposium is virtual this year. Director Wright encouraged the commissioners to register and be part of the Symposium. Director Wright shared the registration link with the Commission, <https://2021symposium.eventbrite.com>.

New Business

Director Wanda Wright presented a Certificate of Appreciation to retired Commissioner, Peter Kloeber. Retired Commissioners, Arlethe Rios, Carolyn Smith, and Joseph Brophy were not present for the presentation but have all been sent certificates of appreciation for their service as Veteran Services Advisory Commissioners.

Outreach Activities

Commissioner Crego states the Drop Zone will be held in Chandler on April 10, 2021, from 10 am – 2 pm MST. He was told 1,000 people plan to attend this event put on by Representative Andy Biggs. Commissioner Crego states he received information regarding the Native American Women program and has forwarded that information to fellow veterans.

Commissioner Loving has been working with the Military Orders of the World Wars. They have a patriotic education program called the Arizona Youth Leadership Conference, which is scheduled to take place this summer. The commissioner has been working with different organization and different schools to encourage Arizona's youth to attend this conference. The conference will be an in-person event. The location for this event has not been selected yet.

Commissioner Noble states COVID-19 slowed activities at the VFW, American Legion and Marine League but activities are increasing again. He states he has been involved with Marines Assisting Marines. He has volunteered to help veterans with health issues but also those with housing issues by assisting them with their move from existing homes to new facilities.

Commissioner Gibbs states the moving wall is headed to Safford and Thatcher. The wall was most recently in Williams, Arizona and will be in the town of Thatcher on June 10, 2021, through June 14, 2021.

Commissioner Logan states he will be inducted into the Arizona Hall of Fame (AHOF) class of 2020, on May 25, 2021.

Commissioner Meshel had no updates.

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

Commissioner Gallowitz share she started Women Who Lead a Free Monthly Leadership Discussion Forum, which fosters leadership development and mutual support for women veterans and non-veterans. She is on the board of Southwest Veteran Chamber of Commerce and encouraged the commissioners to join the Patriots Ball on October 16, 2021. The foundation raises money for suicide prevention and gives out small grants for organizations. Commissioner Gallowitz also states she was on a virtual call with Bunker Labs and believes they will be a great asset and partner in the ecosystem in Arizona. The commissioner emphasized her support of the Coalition and encouraged the commission to attend the virtual Annual Symposium- faith track. Commissioner Gallowitz states the faith-based initiation launches June

2021. Trauma informed care and navigator training are available May 5, 2021 and May 18, 2021. The commissioner has asked the commission to share this information.

Guest, Angela Tate with the Alzheimer's Association is now connected with Be Connected. She states the association is looking at a pilot program with veterans. She would like to connect with members or coordinators of geriatric care in Arizona, Nevada, and Hawaii. She states she shares information provided to her by the Coalition association wide.

Commissioner Crego requested Angela Tate's contact information.

Commissioner Logan states the Tempe Chamber of Commerce is holding an event on April 14, 2021; The Red, White, and Blue Awards Ceremony, which honor several outstanding members of the military community. The commissioner will share the link to this event with Director Wright and Lupita Santellano.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order

Chairman Randle states he has exceeded his time as chairman and the commission. The commission will be accepting nominations or offers for the chairmanship. Chairman Matt Randle encouraged Commissioner Crego to run for chairman.

Chairman Randle requested a motion to adjourn the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Meeting. Commissioner Edward Logan moved to adjourn. Commissioner, Joan McDermott second the motion. The motion carried. Meeting adjourned at 10:56 a.m.

REPORT TO AVSAC:

15 April 2021

***In general, feedback from veterans who receive medical care through the VA has been very positive regarding COVID-19 vaccinations & testing – much better than feedback from the civilian community.**

***ACMF-Be Connected. Food deliveries in Jan & Feb to food-deficit veterans in M.C. were heartily welcomed by the recipients. The upcoming Symposium on 21 & 22 April will be rewarding. Their volunteer transportation program is underway in Mohave County.**

***Vietnam Veterans Commemorative Events: The Lake Havasu City event on 29 March is sponsored by the city– 200 people were in attendance. Other cities in northwest Arizona also held events.**

***Veterans Resource Fairs: The Kingman event was held on 26 March (81 vets and 42 resource providers) & the upcoming La Paz County/Parker Veterans Resource Fair will be held on 15 May. The VFW District 8 Stand Down in Bullhead City for 5 March was cancelled due to the pandemic. The Lake Havasu City Veterans Treatment Court, veteran organizations, and other resources will hold their Fair in the Fall.**

***Side-by-Side Trail Association Veterans Event: A founding member of the Association requested that the group sponsor a trip to the relatively new Bunker Bar north of Lake Havasu City to honor elderly veterans who may not have opportunities to get out/are isolated on 30 April. They presented their proposal to the Lake Havasu VFW &, subsequently, I met with their Ride Committee on the 6th of April. They will offer off-road vehicle ‘adventure rides’, if desired, a free lunch, entertainment, and an opportunity to spend time with other veterans of their era. They are planning on making this an area annual event.**

***Veterans Treatment Court Events: Courts are opening up with ‘live’ options/masks required. Family Day in Lake Havasu City is scheduled for 17 July (there will be a ‘bouncie house’ & other things for the children, music, food provided by local clubs, and a special military display for veterans. The Lake Havasu Veterans Treatment court will hold a graduation tomorrow for 8 justice-involved veterans and will welcome 5 new veterans. The Bullhead, Kingman, and Lake Havasu VTC’s are doing community restitution projects again. Havasu’s ‘Alumni Meetings’ for graduates are resuming in May.**

***Veterans Resource Teams in Mohave County: Are projected to start meeting ‘in person’ in May.**

***The Wall That Heals: The Mohave Shrine Club of Bullhead City has signed on as a lead sponsor to bring the Wall to Bullhead on 21-24 October. Mohave High School students, led by teacher and Student Council Faculty Advisor David Lipinski, along with sponsor Vietnam Veterans of America 975, are driving forces for the project.**

***Jerry Ambrose Veterans Council: Operation 6 in Kingman has been approved for a VA Grant Per Diem to complete the project, which will have 25 ‘slots’ for homeless veterans, targeting those with substance abuse and/or mental health issues. They currently are housing 3 homeless veterans at the Rodeway Inn, with 24/7 supervision.**

***Speaker: On 16 March, I was a guest speaker before about 200 members of the Christian Women’s Connection Monthly Luncheon with a focus on Veterans Treatment Courts and other veteran services.**

***Flag Retirement issue: Lake Havasu area proceeded with its alternative plan to retire synthetic flags in coordination with Republic Services on 27 January 2021.**

***Lynxx Gaming & bingo in AZ clubs and posts: The legal process has continued to work its way through the courts.**

***Vietnam Veterans of America 975: The organization has been very active, attending many local events to reach out to veterans. They are assisting a local hospice by donating patriotic-themed blankets for veterans under their care.**

***VFW District 8: The District is holding its first-ever Awards Dinner on 17 April to recognize District comrades and auxiliary members who have served their posts and communities in outstanding ways.**

***Lake Havasu Museum of History: The War Comes Home Exhibit from the National Museum will now be held in February 2022.**

***Memorial Day: Veterans organizations are working with local cemeteries and city officials to organize services.**

***Resident ADVS VBC, Robert Bailey continues to assist vets who have no computers or smart phones locally.**

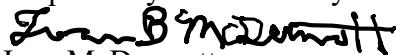
***Arizona At Work: Todd Baldwin is amazing at working with veterans to find jobs in our area. He can be very creative and always does follow-up.**

***Positive from pandemic: Many virtual trainings & workshops available!**

***I met with Kathy Gallowitz, our new Commission member, in January, when she and her spouse visited Lake Havasu for the first time – great martini at Martini Bay!**

***Continue to be hopeful that the veterans home in Kingman will still happen.**

Respectfully Submitted By:



Joan McDermott

Commissioner

AVSAC