

Arizona Veterans Advisory Commission

MINUTES

July 14, 2016

Advisory Commissioners Present

Brett Rustand (telephone)
Ryan Peters
Joseph Brophy
Peter Kloeber
Ron Perkins
Rebecca Villalpando

AZ Department of Veterans' Services

Wanda A. Wright, Director
Tera Scherer, Executive Assistant

Advisory Commissioners Absent

Danielle Desmond
Jill Nelson
Arlethe Rios

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 May 12, 2016 Veterans Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. There being no changes to the minutes Commissioner Perkins moved to approve the minutes as written. Commissioner Villalpando seconded the motion and the motion carried unanimously.

Introduction of New Commissioner – Newly appointed Commissioners introduced themselves. Joseph Brophy, a Marine Corps veteran; Rebecca Villalpando, Navy Veteran; and Peter Kloeber, retired from the USAF.

Chairman Rustand introduced the Arizona Veterans Advisory Commission slide show to give new Commissioners an overview of the commission and how they assist Arizona's veterans.

Commissioner Perkins provided an internal form for commissioners that can be used to document a veteran's comments or concerns that they feel should be brought to the attention of the Commissioners or staff at the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services.

Agency Announcements and Updates - Wanda Wright, Director, ADVS – Navajo Veterans Act was signed into law, which will establish the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration and Advisory Council, making the first Navajo Nation VA in the country. Since then, ADVS has signed an agreement with the Navajo Nation for ADVS to train and accredit Navajo veteran benefit counselors (VBCs). This is a partnership that has other Native American tribes in the state interested in doing the same.

Currently there are 30 ADVS VBCs in the state. The Department holds two training events each year to update staff on policy updates and changes. In the fall the training event will offer a day of training to veteran service organizations with representatives that work in the same capacity as our VBCs to assist veterans with filing claims. Currently those organizations are not as accurate and statistics show claims processed by these individuals are not as high as ADVS VBCs. It is the Department's hope that inviting those individuals to the training conferences will assist with claims filing accuracy.

Transformation and continuous improvement initiatives within the Department continues. The state has purchased a contract with a company to train and implement the transformation process throughout all state agencies. ADVS has identified several goals to lead the Department towards the governor's

overall fundamental goals. A few measurements the Department is focusing on include quality of care at the State Veteran Homes, Fiduciary Division's casework, and VBC claims processing. In addition to each agency working to implement their own goals, the synergy between the State of Arizona's different agencies is improving, as all agency directors meet weekly as part of this process.

The Roadmap to Employment initiative continues to educate potential employers on how to hire more veterans. The state's veteran unemployment rate is down to 4.3 percent. A checklist was developed for potential employers to become a "Veteran Supportive Employer". Education is conducted on such things as how to recognize a veteran; concerns veteran employees may have; and, an understanding of the difference in communicating with veteran employees versus a civilian employee.

The initiative is being funded with \$1 million from the Governor's office. The software side of the initiative matches MOS/AFSC with available jobs from employers rated as Veteran Supportive, eliminating the need for job fairs as information will become completely automated. The state is piloting the program, the first ever of its kind in the country, with the Arizona National Guard units. Once the program is found to be successful the plan is to take the program state-wide for use by all citizens. In the early stages the info and data collected will be provided to military installations to assist with military members' transition to civilian careers.

Director Wright stated she has formed a women veteran working group that focuses on homelessness in the female veteran community. Included in the group are VA staff such as their women veteran coordinators. The primary focus right now is to develop a way to locate those female veterans that are homeless, as the majority of them are not out on the streets—they are sleeping on couches and tend to move from friend to friend, for example.

Partnerships with other state agencies include the Department of Economic Security (DES), with whom she is working with Director Jeffries to co-locate our VBC offices with their DVOP/LVRS (disabled veteran outreach program/local veterans employment representative). This is an ongoing initiative, as building/space leases expire the two agencies will continue to work together to offer the best service available to veterans, and they believe that part of that is to house the services together and form a "one stop shopping" experience for veterans.

ADVS is beginning to work with AHCCCS (Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System) to identify veterans that unknowingly may qualify for VA benefits, in hopes of getting our veterans off the program.

Director Ryan at the Department of Corrections (DOC) has set up a block in Tucson that houses only veterans that are within two years of release. DOC allows DVOP/LVRS and VBCs to enter the prison to assist the incarcerated veterans with the transition back into civilization by assisting with job searches and reinstatement of VA benefits, as monetary benefits drop to 10 percent while an individual is incarcerated. DOC is currently working to establish a female veteran block of 40 women. Maricopa County has plans to establish the same program within the prisons located there. The goal is to reduce recidivism among the veteran population of Arizona.

Two new cemeteries have opened; Arizona Veterans' Memorial Cemetery at Marana in March and the Arizona Veterans' Memorial Cemetery at Camp Navajo in Bellemont, Arizona in June. There is a new Veteran Home coming in Yuma, although that project did not make the funding list for the VA, the design process for a 60-bed home is in process, with hopes of receiving funding in the fall. Following that is plans to build a Veteran Home in Flagstaff. That facility will house between 60 and 70 beds, but funding is still two to three years out. The Arizona State Veteran Home in Phoenix is currently going through a feasibility study to upgrade the facility, as it is now 20 years old and in need of renovations.

The Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act established an initiative to enhance VA health care enrollment for combat veterans and provide and improve mental health care. Senator McCain is piloting a program at the Phoenix VAMC to see how to effectively reduce the veteran suicide

rate in Arizona. Currently, Director Wright meets with individuals from the VA and the Arizona Coalition for Military Families, to name a few, who are working together to collect data and share information. Statistically, Arizona has the fifth highest overall suicide rate, and caucasian men over 60 years of age are most likely to commit suicide.

Another partnership ADVS has is with the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) Arizona Chapter. ADVS is a commemorative partner for the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War and has reached out to the VVA to provide funding through the Veterans Donation Fund for events to be held around the state. Currently there are six events in the works to be held between August and January, with four more potential events planned with a goal of 3,000 Vietnam Veterans in attendance. The goal of this partnership is to reach as many Vietnam Veterans throughout the state as possible, where in previous years, only about 300 Vietnam Veterans were celebrated at one dinner held in Phoenix.

Director Wright gave an overview of the ADVS budget of \$31 million. The Governor appropriates how much of that \$31 million can be spent. The State Veteran Homes have their own funding, as the services provided there are paid services. The homes have over 250 employees between the two Veteran Homes. The Director's Office, or Department administration, has a \$2.3 million budget that goes towards building lease, payroll of the HR, IT, Programs, Finance and the Director's executive staff. The budget for the Veteran Benefit Counselors, including salary and building leases is \$2.8 million. The cemeteries budget is \$1.2 million and includes operational costs and salary. There is a small trust for maintenance when the cemeteries are full. Grants from the VA, DHS and the Governor's Office of Youth, Faith and Family total a little more than \$950,000 and lend to the budget.

The Veterans Donation Fund, funded from the sale of veteran license plates and donations, received 43 grant proposals in the last large grant cycle. Of those, 18 grants were awarded over \$750,000 from the fund.

The Military Family Relief Fund (MFRF) has a balance of \$5.7 million from donations. The fund offers a tax credit for those that donate. Director Wright would like to see the tax credit shifted to the Veterans Donation Fund once this fund sundowns in FY 2018. The program, year to date, has received 71 applications and distributed over \$200,000 to veteran families in need. In calendar year 2016 over \$500,000 to veterans and their families.

Open Discussion For the Good of the Order – Commissioner Perkins stated that with congress ready to cut a lot of veteran services, veteran service organizations and veterans need to contact their congressional members and let them know that is not okay to do. Director Wright advised the Commission that this is already taking place in our area, as Luke Air Force Base will no longer be servicing veterans over 65-years of age.

Chairman Rustand stated there is a lot of excitement in the southern Arizona region among employers that are going through the Veteran Supportive Employer training and the veteran population could not be happier with the initiative taking place.

Commissioner Peters brought up the appeals backlog with claims at the VA. Director Wright advised the commission that the regional office here in Phoenix stated that all claims centers began shifting claims to other facilities to work through the backlog and reminded everyone that the adjudication process for all claims always takes additional time.

Commissioner Perkins nominated Commissioner Peters for the position of Chairman. Commissioner Brophy seconded the motion and the motion passed unanimously.

Commissioner Peters nominated Commissioner Nelson to the position of Vice Chair. Commissioner Perkins seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

Commissioner Perkins recommended that new Commissioners review their manual and further stated the importance of attending the meetings and to please schedule personal engagements around those meetings whenever possible.

The next meeting of the Arizona Veterans Advisory Commission will be held September 8, 2016. The location of that meeting will be announced at a later date. The meeting adjourned at 11:44 a.m.