

# Arizona Department of Veterans' Service Advisory Commission

4141 North S. Herrera Way, Phoenix, AZ 85012

July 13, 2017

## MINUTES

### Advisory Commissioners Present

Peter Kloeber  
Joseph Brophy  
Danielle Desmond  
Jill Nelson  
Arlethe Rios (via teleconference)  
Brett Rustand (via teleconference)  
Rebecca Villalpando

### AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Nicole Baker, Public Information Officer  
Tera Scherer, Executive Assistant

**Call to Order** – Chairman Kloeber called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m.

**Approval of Meeting Minutes** – Chairman Kloeber called for the approval of the May 11, 2017 Veterans Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. There being no changes to the minutes, Commissioner Villalpando moved to approve the minutes as written. Commissioner Desmond seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

**Agency Announcements and Updates** – Nicole Baker, Public Information Officer of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, gave agency updates since the last meeting. Those updates can be reviewed in the ADVS monthly update [here](#).

Commissioners requested information on the Arizona Coalition for Military Families Navigator training. Dates were requested for the Military Veteran Community Networks meetings. ACMF is putting together the next quarterly meetings schedule.

### RimaAnn Nelson, Carl T. Hayden Medical Center

RimaAnn Nelson, Director of Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center was present to give an update on the Phoenix VAMC. Director Nelson started as an Oncology nurse and is entering her 25<sup>th</sup> year with the VA. She is the seventh director at Carl T. Hayden in three years.

The biggest issue the hospital deals with is growth. There are a number of veterans coming to the VA Medical Center every day, an average of 800 veterans a week. Of the 800 veterans signing up for benefits, many are not requesting a primary care manager. Capacity, equipment and demand are the key items for the number of veterans coming into the eligibility office every day. New veterans are being enrolled into the system at around 200 per week, a 35% increase in appointments. There have been 27,000 more appointments this year than last year. The number of outpatients is over 1 million in one year.

The demand for health care has outgrown the facility. Equipment is not up to the current standard and the building, built in 1949, creates a problem in renovating and bringing it up to today's standards.

Ten outpatient clinics were opened in the last year. The VA is going through the government process to lease new space, which took two years for the last two clinics that were opened. More than 900 new employees have been hired and over 400 more employees are being recruited. Sixty more clerks have

been hired to schedule appointments.

The VA is working with the media and stakeholders to report the good things the VA does for veterans in trying to get the media to balance their stories by not reporting on only the negative. Veterans that don't trust the VA are the ones that are hurting the most.

The VA is utilizing telehealth technology with Ipads in real time to provide care to the outlying areas.

A full executive staff is now in place. The Phoenix VA Medical Center is hiring a high number of veterans, with 38% of the staff being veterans. The VA hospital has 3,600 full time employees, an increase of 940 staff members.

The Phoenix VA Medical Center is experiencing an unexpected growth in veterans and calls into the VA, so a call center was set up to field calls. The VA is streamlining the system to provide mental health needs to veterans. Patients are being shuttled from the mid-town clinic to the VA facility for labs, etc.

Director Nelson opened the floor to questions. Commissioner Villalpando asked about the status of the Opal Clinic. Director Nelson said psychiatrists are being sought and they are actively recruiting for a Director of Psychology. There are currently eight psychiatry positions to be filled.

Twenty-four primary doctors were hired; two additional primary care teams are needed. The VA Medical Center is trying to stay ahead of the needs to avoid a crisis. They did not anticipate how large the growth of veterans would be in the Phoenix area.

The Phoenix VA Medical Center is part of the VISN 22 network and has the second largest VA budget behind Florida. Phoenix surpassed Los Angeles in the number of unique veterans.

The VA Hospital is working to get all outpatient appointments out of Phoenix and to the Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC's) so major diagnostics and operating room procedures can be done at Phoenix. Patient zip codes are being tracked to determine where new clinics are needed. Telemedicine is utilized to provide quicker services. Staff shortages are being dealt with by tapping into the doctors at facilities that have higher numbers of doctor to patient ratios.

The capacity of Emergency Room beds was doubled to 40, with three or less hours of wait time. Director Nelson visits the ER three times a day to find out reasons for any delays.

The VA Hospital is unable to find neuro surgeons because the salary they are able to pay doesn't match what the doctors would make as a civilian. The VA has a 90 day hiring process and is looking at bringing in doctors for 90-day stints to fill the vacancies.

If Commissioners hear stories in the communities or have questions, Director Nelson asked them to contact her assistant, Karen Craig, at 602-604-3914.

### **Outreach Activities**

Chairman Kloeber was in Washington, D.C. in April and heard the newly appointed VA Secretary, David Shulkin, speak. His number one priority is to be able to hire employees more quickly and remove employees when necessary. He will be putting this priority to test in Phoenix soon. During his investigations, he asked for outside eyes and ears so there would be no bias. Dr. Shulkin said to look at what the community is doing and follow their lead.

Commissioner Villalpando reported the ADVS Veteran Benefit Counselor in the Black Canyon City area is extremely busy and will consider expanding services to twice a month. The veterans in the area are grateful for the veteran counselor and many new cases have opened.

Commissioner Rustand noted that the Rally Point Apartments for homeless veterans opened. Another 55 units are coming soon through the West Point Federal Grant (HUD). LaFrontera awarded grants to be funded. The commission agreed this would benefit the Phoenix area as well as the Northern regions.

Chairman Kloeber was speaker at the Northern Arizona Veterans Memorial Cemetery on Memorial Day, May 29, 2017.

There will be an opening ceremony for the Vietnam Memorial Moving Wall on August 11 at 10:00 a.m. at the Twin Arrows Casino east of Flagstaff.

#### **Open Discussion for the Good of the Order**

Commissioner Desmond nominated Commissioner Rios for Vice Chair. Commissioner Brophy seconded the motion; the motion passed unanimously.

Commissioners Kloeber, Rios and Nelson are awaiting re-appointment; two additional members are needed to make nine members.

The commission's next meeting will be September 14 and when the MVCN schedule is known, the commission will meet with them to discuss local matters.

The commission needs to re-align its boundaries to better match commissioners' physical locations. Chairman Kloeber asked members to review the guidelines and suggest changes. Commissioner Rustand said everything discussed so far fits within the guidelines and there is not much need for adjustments.

Commissioner Desmond asked if the commission could have its own Facebook page to promote events. She would encourage the agency to further their use with social media and believes that AVSAC is missing opportunities. We should keep the goal for outreach and incorporate new things.

Commissioner Desmond motioned to adjourn the meeting at 11:37 a.m.