

**Arizona Department of Veterans' Service Advisory Commission**  
4141 N. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street (North S. Herrera Way), Phoenix, AZ 85012

**January 10, 2013**

**MINUTES**

**Advisory Commissioners**

George Cushing, Chair  
Jeffrey Olson, Vice Chair  
Jefferson Begay  
Philip Hanson  
Wayne Krula  
Ronald Perkins  
Brett Rustand  
Lionel Sanchez  
David Toliver, Sr.

**Absent**

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

Robert Barnes, Deputy Director  
Homer Rodgers, Assistant Deputy Director  
Mike Klier, Assistant Deputy Director  
Gabe Forsberg, Strategic Planner/Women Vets  
Coordinator  
Katherine Harding, Exec. Asst. to the Director  
Judy Smith, Admin. Secretary

**Guests**

Monica Cabrera, Public Information Officer for the  
VA Regional Office  
Pacer Reina, Salt River Pima Indian Community  
(SRPIC)

**Call to Order** – The meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Chairman George Cushing. Commissioner Perkins motioned to approve the minutes. Vice Chairman Olson seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

**Communications** – Chairman Cushing and Commissioners received copies of a letter from L. Jack Nottingham of Tucson, Arizona, directed to Senator David Bradley of Senate District 10 and members of the Arizona Legislature. Chairman Cushing and Mike Klier will address this letter further.

Commissioners received an invitation from Jonathan Gardner, Director of the Southwest Arizona Health Care System in Tucson to attend the dedication of the new Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Yuma to be held today at 1:00 p.m.

The event conflicts with today's Advisory Commission meeting and commissioners are unable to attend. The proper declination was made to Mr. Gardner's office; José Avalos, Veteran Benefit Counselor (VBC) from the Yuma office, will attend and represent ADVS.

**Agency Announcements and Updates** – Deputy Director Robert Barnes noted that Colonel Strickland could not be present today and sends his regards to the commission. He is attending a Behavioral Health Summit with the Military Family Coalition and Major General Hugo Salazar at the Arizona National Guard.

The Center for Medicare & Medicaid (CMM) regulatory survey team surveyed the Phoenix Veteran Home in mid-December. There were no issues with quality of care and there were only 12 minor discrepancies. Colleen Rundell, Administrator, is educating her staff on the minor discrepancies so the action report can be updated and sent to CMM. Survey findings were sent to the Governor's office.

The Tucson Veteran Home increased its census to 60 residents, which is 50% of total capacity for the buildings that are open. Twenty to thirty new staff was hired for the new building that is to open in February, which will take the census to 90. The Dementia wing will open in the summer.

Chairman Cushing noted that he visited the Tucson Veteran Home site during the building phase and again after it opened. He recently toured the facility along with his friend the National Vice Commander of the Montana Western Region of the American Legion. His friend was so impressed he went home and wrote a letter to his Veteran agency requesting that a Veteran Home just like ours be built in Montana.

Mr. Barnes reported the Veterans' Service Division (VSD) is in good shape after hiring new counselors to replace those who retired or moved on. New hires will receive intense classroom training the first week of February and then go into the field for on the job training. After that they are ready to work on their own with some monitoring and minimal supervision.

Chairman Cushing asked how many Veteran Benefit Counselors (VBC's) the agency currently has working. There are 36 counselors; 5 of them are new who will take classroom training and bi-annual training in April.

Chairman Cushing inquired if any counselors are considering retirement. Mr. Klier indicated that the counselor in Kingman might be leaving in the summer and Tom Jones is retiring from the Yuma office this year.

Chairman Cushing is concerned about the Chandler office with only 2 counselors serving the area. Veteran Counselor William Phalen moved from the Phoenix office to Chandler. He and Ron Shackle are working the Chandler office. Mr. Klier advised there is good coverage around the state.

Commissioner Sanchez inquired if counselor salaries would be increased and noted that the agency fought for raises for VBC's in the past and were successful. ADVS is trying to retain good employees and hopes to increase VBC salaries.

Mr. Barnes noted that recent changes in the Arizona Department of Administration (ADOA) personnel rules include performance evaluations that will be tied to merit raises for all state employees. Performance evaluations for all state employees are being done in January.

In October, the state implemented a temporary Employee Retention 5% pay increase for the period October 2012 through June 2013. We hope with the new state budget that this pay increase will be continued after June.

The ADVS Fiduciary Department continues to improve efficiencies and service to Veterans in guardian and conservatorships. In previous years, there were only 4 State Licensed Fiduciaries; we now have 8. Two more are awaiting licensing approval.

The Military Family Relief Fund (MFRF) reached its \$1 million goal in tax credit donations earlier than usual. Grants totaling \$600,000 were issued in 2012.

The department's budget for this fiscal year is on track; we are half way through it and don't anticipate any problems or shortfalls.

The Director's focus for the department this year is to continue maintaining and improving our core services; VBC's, Fiduciary and the Homeless Veteran Program. The agency will be completing 2 cemetery projects in 2013, the expansion of the Southern Arizona Sierra Vista Cemetery and the development of the Northern Arizona Cemetery near Flagstaff. Homer Rodgers will give more details in his project report.

The State Legislature convenes Monday, January 14. The Governor's budget is to be released on January 18<sup>th</sup>. We don't anticipate any issues or challenges in this legislative session. Dave Hampton will keep everybody apprised as we move forward.

Commissioner Hanson expressed concern with the legislative speaker's assignment of a non-Veteran as chairman of House Public Safety & Military Regulatory Affairs Committee. Mr. Hanson is concerned that the appointee doesn't have a military background and wondered why the speaker didn't assign someone with military experience. The speaker combined Military and Veterans issues within the Public Safety Committee and with many military and Veteran issues coming forward, we need to be aware of what is happening in the legislature.

Mr. Barnes said the Legislature changed the legislative makeup and the name of the oversight committee. He noted that Dave Hampton, ADVS Public Information Officer, attends the daily legislative sessions and will report back any issues. Mr. Barnes and Dave have reviewed pre-filed bills of the House and Senate and haven't found anything of issue. The Governor's budget release will be the next important matter to be reviewed; we don't anticipate any problems.

Commissioner Krula praised Dave Hampton for the legislative updates he forwards to commissioners.

Mr. Barnes called on Mike Klier for further agency updates. Mike named 2 goals he proposed for the Veterans' Services Department (VSD):

1. A Quality Control Department within the VSD as they move forward with electronic claims coming in from the field. Quality Control will make a final review of claims before they go to Veterans Affairs (VA). Our department is running parallel with the VA for processing electronic claims.
2. The department has gone from 4 to 3 regions within the state. Cathi Starr, Southern Regional Manager of the Tucson VSD office, will oversee Yuma. There is not a large Veteran population, but Yuma is an active military area. Instead of replacing Tom Jones when he leaves the department, we will add another counselor in the Yuma office.

David Mosier, Northern Region Manager in Prescott will cover Kingman, Bullhead City and Lake Havasu. Both Cathi and David are strong managers and this is a good move for the department.

All Veteran Counselors will attend bi-annual training in Phoenix in April.

Commissioner Krula questioned the reason for consolidating the regions. Mike responded that 4 regions are no longer necessary; the Yuma office can be managed from Tucson and the northwestern regions out of Prescott. The consolidation allows flexibility in planning of quality control.

Mr. Barnes said we can offer better and higher quality of service if we bring in 2 people full time to the Phoenix Regional Office to do quality control and handle appeals and claims decisions before they go to Veterans Affairs (VA). Our office would allow 10 days to review claims before sending them to the VA for processing.

Commissioner Begay inquired what services are provided in regional areas by Veteran Counselors. He represents the Northern area and inquired where the Northern Region office is located. Mike Klier explained that the Northern Veteran Counselor Region office is in Prescott. Mike said he would be happy to meet with Mr. Begay to explain the Veteran Counselor services and the areas they serve.

Commissioner Perkins met a man in Yuma who is looking for a job as a Veteran Counselor. Mr. Perkins told the man about the ADVS website and where to apply. The website says we have a VBC position open for Yuma. Mike said we have one position open in Yuma at present. The position just closed on the website and interviews will be held soon.

Mike will provide the Commission a list of Veteran events that are taking place around the state.

Homer Rodgers presented a Projects Update handout. He will be meeting with David Evans & Associates, the architectural and design team of Phoenix for the Flagstaff Cemetery project. The search for an architectural firm was conducted nationwide; we are fortunate to be working with a local firm.

Tuesday through Thursday, January 15-17, 2013, he will be meeting with Howard Orr of Veterans Cemetery Grant Services from Washington D.C., who is coming to Phoenix to see the potential Marana cemetery site and tour the Sierra Vista Cemetery project.

Mr. Rodgers said the Sierra Vista Cemetery project is about half completed and is on schedule. The only conflict is a road between the two cemetery plots that is eroding because of improper installation of sprinklers, which will be corrected. Curbs will be added and the road will be replaced.

Wednesday, Mr. Rodgers and Howard Orr will walk the Flagstaff Cemetery site and meet with the design team, David Evans and Associates.

Thursday a.m., Mr. Rodgers, Deputy Director Barnes and Mr. Orr will meet with David Evans and Associates to design the master plan and 1<sup>st</sup> phase of development. The current schedule is to have the design plans ready by mid-June for a 30 day bid with 2 weeks for contractor selection. The average time to construct the first phase is 18 months, depending upon the weather.

Mr. Rodgers noted that the Veterans Cemetery Grants Service is a very sharp organization that reviews plans diligently, which is probably the reason there are few problems with the jobs.

Chairman Cushing inquired whether the newly chosen architectural firm for the Belmont project would be hiring the contractor. Mr. Rodgers explained that once the design is accepted through approval by the ADVS Director, Deputy Director and Washington DC, final plans will go out for bid.

Chairman Cushing noted that the contractor for the Tucson home was a Veteran-friendly contractor. We would like to see Veteran-owned businesses get as much business in Arizona as possible.

Mr. Rodgers said the civil and architectural engineers for the Belmont project are members of the team who designed the Tucson Veteran Home. The master planner who specializes in cemeteries is not the same.

Based on inquiries he received, Commissioner Krula asked how burial space is allocated for in-ground vs. cremation burials and is the spouse covered in the Veterans' burial plan if cremated.

Mr. Rodgers explained that, according to Washington DC's action plan, the first phase development is based on a formula for underserved veterans. At this point, one garden will be for in-ground burials and another for cremated remains. Different options will come out of the action plan and there will be a study done on cultural aspects. Currently, a spouse of a Veteran can be buried first with the Veteran still living. A name plate for the spouse of a Veteran is placed on the grave and when the Veteran passes, a new nameplate with both names is placed.

ADVS serves as subject matter experts for the Navajo Nation 60-bed facility to be built. The Navajo Nation secured the funding and will receive orientation January 16-18 on how the Housing Authority requires them to distribute the funds and place contracts out for bid. They will issue contracts for bid in the next few months. The Navajo Nation is funding the entire project and will run it when completed. ADVS is happy to have served as subject matter experts.

**Disabled License Plate Suggestion** – Chairman Cushing noted that when he attended an event in Tucson, Jack Nottingham approached him to discuss the possibility of a disabled Veteran license plate and said he would be sending him a letter on the subject.

Chairman Cushing read Mr. Nottingham's letter wherein he requested that Senator Bradley consider sponsoring a bill to create a license plate for all disabled veterans. Excerpts from his letter state he was approached at a Disabled American Veterans (DAV) meeting by a member who proposed a new 'disabled Veteran' plate. Mr. Nottingham explained to him that Arizona currently offers a disabled Veteran plate with a wheelchair (W/C) symbol. The member stated that many Veterans with disabilities do not qualify for a "disabled" or "W/C" plate. Some states have license plates that portray 'disabled Veteran' without the W/C symbol and that Veterans Affairs has different levels or classifications of disability, some not incapacitating, that do not require a disabled plate, but the Veteran is still considered "disabled."

Mr. Nottingham recommended that the legislature amend Arizona Revised Statute, Chapter 7, Article 12 by introducing legislation that would create an Arizona "Disabled Veteran" license plate, with the levels of disability established by the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS), as well as the Arizona Committee on Veterans' Affairs or the Arizona State Legislature.

In reading Mr. Nottingham's letter again, Chairman Cushing believes Mr. Nottingham would like a specific plate that says "disabled Veteran", without a wheelchair symbol.

Mike Klier remarked that in order to propose this legislation, Mr. Nottingham would be required to have a sponsor and funding of \$36,000 in order for the legislature to consider his request. A committee within the legislature would consider his request and, if approved, the \$36,000 would be paid to the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) as a fee for changing their die casts to make a new license plate. Mr. Klier said it would be difficult to get this legislation passed. There are already 137 Arizona specialty license plates.

Commissioner Olson suggested we record the letter as received by the commission and if the legislature wants to go through with the request, they will do so. Chairman Cushing will reply to Mr. Nottingham's letter indicating the commission will not take a stand on this issue and that he would need to find a sponsor to pursue legislation.

Commissioner Perkins questioned whether one's Veteran status can be listed when renewing a driver's license.

Deputy Director Robert Barnes said this procedure is not in effect at present but legislature was passed in 2012 allowing the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to restructure the program and data base to show Veteran status when renewing a driver's license. It should be possible in the near future to show Veteran status on a driver's license. Mr. Barnes will note this as an action item and get back to the Commission on the matter.

Commissioner Rustand noted that some states are already implementing this process and there are benefits in tracking and contacting Veterans. California is one of those states who encountered problems when they asked "are you a veteran" as opposed to "have you served in uniform" or "have you served in the military". There was confusion as to "what is a Veteran" and because of so many categories; many Veterans excluded themselves by not making a distinction on the renewal form.

**Introduction and Welcome to Invited guests** – Chairman Cushing welcomed visitors Monica Cabrera, Public Information Officer for the VA Regional Office at Central and Osborn and Pacer Reina of the Salt River Pima Indian Community (SRPIC).

Monica Cabrera, attending on behalf of Sandra Flint, Director of the Veterans' Administration Regional Office (VARO), thanked the commission for their invitation. Ms. Flint sent her regrets that she is unable to attend the meeting. Monica said many great things are coming from the VA.

Mr. Reina's office opened in July, 2012. He is very busy coordinating many upcoming Native American events, one being the Veterans' Pow Wow in March. Notices will be sent out to draw as many Veterans as possible to the events which are open to the general public. Veterans from outlying communities and all are welcome to attend these events. The American Legion and Bushmasters are helping get the word out about events. The community expects 2013 to be a good year.

**Outreach Activities for the Commission – “Hiring Our Heroes” Job Fair** – Commissioners Cushing and Perkins attended the “Hiring Our Heroes” Job Fair on Tuesday, January 8<sup>th</sup>, at the Phoenix American Legion Post #41. There were 45 employer booths, along with the Commissioners' table top display. Chairman Cushing noted there was a large attendance and steady flow of people. There were many Iraqi and Afghan Veterans looking for work.

Commissioner Perkins noted that this national event began in 2011 and is hosted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the American Legion. The goal of the campaign is to hire 500,000 Veterans and Veteran spouses by the end of 2014.

At the “Hiring our Heroes” Job Fair, two women approached the commissioners with interest in the Veteran community. One woman had interest in being appointed to the Advisory Commission. They inquired about how to go about it and Chairman Cushing advised them to log onto the AZDVS.gov website where they can access meeting dates and agendas and read the minutes of monthly meetings. The women were happy for the opportunity to read the meeting minutes on the website.

Commissioner Perkins noted there were counselors helping Veterans by making suggestions for building a strong resumé and advising them on how to handle job interviews and the correct terminology that is needed, as well as how to adjust from military to the civilian workforce.

Chairman Cushing noted there were several Veteran-owned business people there and that they advised him there is no vehicle out there to certify Veteran-owned businesses. He noted that if there were such identification, businesses would have the opportunity to bid on more jobs.

A man approached the Commissioners' booth with a concern that there is no data base for Veteran-owned businesses. He felt that being certified as a Veteran-owned business would assist him and other Veteran-owned companies in bidding for jobs.

Chairman Cushing said he and Commissioner Perkins enjoyed the one-on-one experience with people at the event. The ADVS Advisory Committee is getting good exposure at public events and people are realizing the Commission is there and what it does for the Veteran community. Overall, people wanted to know what the commission does. It is very worthwhile to be around Veterans and hear younger Veteran issues and what they have to deal with to get jobs and support their families.

**Table Top Display** – Chairman Cushing would like to have an additional table top display created. Most events are in the Tucson area; however there are upcoming events in Flagstaff and Northern Arizona where the table top display will be needed. Having a table top display stored at VSD headquarters in Tucson and another at the Phoenix agency headquarters would be ideal.

The Advisory Commission tri-fold brochures, ADVS pins and MFRF Dog Tags are well received at events as well as ADVS brochures and the Veteran Manual, which is a great source of information and enhances the department and commission.

Commissioner Olson noted the Justice of the Peace in Sierra Vista received preliminary approval for a Veterans Treatment Court. Chairman Cushing noted a judge in Flagstaff is interested in a similar program.

**Open Discussion For the Good of the Order** – Chairman Cushing advised Commissioners Hanson and Toliver to advise their intent to continue with the Commission after their terms expire on July 1. In order to continue, they will need to reapply with the Governor's office and now is the time to do so as it takes time to get paperwork through the system.

Chairman Cushing noted that he and several of the Commissioners are looking forward to sharing their time and having lunch with 6 Phoenix Veteran Home residents at noon today in the Training Center. A tour of the Veteran Home will follow after lunch.

Chairman Cushing called Gabe Forsberg to the front of the room and presented her a gift on behalf of the Advisory Commission in appreciation of all she has done for the Commission for the past 15 years and for all Veterans. Commissioner Perkins thanked Gabe for her help in transitioning him into the Commission. Gabe is a great source of information and always provides materials on everything the commissioners need.

A motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Commissioner Sanchez. Motion was seconded by David Toliver. The meeting adjourned at 11:35 a.m. The next Advisory Commission meeting will be held February 14, 2013.