

Arizona Department of Veterans' Service Advisory Commission
4141 North S. Herrera Way, (formerly North 3rd Street), Phoenix, AZ 85012

March 12, 2015

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners

Ron Perkins
Kara Caldwell
Andrew Griffin
Phillip Hanson
Jeffrey Olson
John Scott
David Toliver

Excused:

Brett Rustand, Excused

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Robert Barnes, Interim Director
Dave Hampton, Public Information Officer
Judy Smith, Administrative Secretary

Guests

George Cushing, Former AVSAC Chair
Cosme Lopez, Director, U.S. Department of Justice
Stan Zeitz, Vice Chair, ADVS Military Family Relief Fund
Nelson Ladd, Director, WVC-Korean War Veteran
Dave Lucier, President, CEO, AZ Veterans & Military Leadership Alliance
Joel O'Connor, DVOP, AZ Dept. of Economic Security
John Howry, DVOP, AZ Dept. of Economic Security
Marion Cartland, Publisher, AZ Veteran Connection Magazine

Call to Order – Chairman Ron Perkins called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m.

Introduction and Welcome of Guests – Chairman Perkins welcomed former AVSAC Chairman George Cushing, now a member of the Military Family Relief Fund Committee; Stan Zeitz, Vice Chair of the Military Family Relief Fund; Cosme Lopez, Director of the U.S. Department of Labor; Nelson Ladd, Korean War Veteran and member of the West Valley Korean War Veterans; and Dave Lucier, President of the AZ Veterans Military Leadership Alliance.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – Chairman Perkins called for the approval of the January 8, 2015 Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. Commissioner Hanson moved to approve the minutes as presented. Commissioner Griffin seconded the motion. Motion carried unanimously.

Interim Director Glen Grippen – Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center – Chairman Perkins welcomed VA Medical Center Interim Director, Glen Grippen. Mr. Grippen attended the Legislature on Wednesday and noted that President Obama and Veterans Affairs Secretary, Robert McDonald, the Deputy Secretary, the Under Secretary and advisors to the Secretary, will visit the Carl T. Hayden Medical Center on Friday. The Advisory Commission appreciates Mr. Grippen's appearance here today.

Dave Toliver noted the VA's budget allocation is based on 600,000 plus veterans. Given the fact that the veteran population increases during the winter season, how does this affect budget allotments? When is the budget allocation for veterans made, and would the budget consider winter visitors an impact to Arizona?

Commissioner Olson asked Director Grippen what the official number of veterans is for Arizona, and if part-time residents would be eligible for ADVS programs? Director Grippen said the official number is around 550,000.

Robert Barnes, ADVS Interim Director, said state benefits don't require residency in Arizona. Many part-time residents have vehicles registered in Arizona and their disability would qualify them to apply for benefits. Non-resident visitors take advantage of the VA services while here and file for greater benefits.

ADVS Veteran Benefit Counselors assist all veterans without knowing if they are part time residents. ADVS has never separated temporary residents from permanent residents. Mr. Barnes does not know of a budget issue regarding temporary residents or whether any statistics are kept on how many non-resident veterans are assisted.

Director Grippen said there have been many successes in the VA over the past year; however, more work still needs to be done. The VA is in a growth mode, and is seeing more veterans this year than last year and will continue to increase the number of patients being seen.

Physical changes are being made to the VA campus; a parking garage is under construction; a new Emergency Department is under construction that will double the size of the Emergency Department.

Director Grippen's concern is that the market share of Phoenix is significantly less than Tucson and Prescott. The VA Medical Center needs to see more veterans, however, the VA campus is so congested that it is difficult for people to get there and park.

To help alleviate this congestion, Primary Care has been moved from the VA campus to Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC's). Three are in the greater Phoenix area and three are in Globe, Show Low and Payson. Three more clinics will come on line next year. The Scottsdale CBOC will open in six weeks, with a grand opening in mid-May.

The VA is moving some primary care providers and their patients off campus into the community outpatient clinics. Letters were sent to the patients of the two physicians who are moving off campus into the Scottsdale community. Letters have gone out to veterans within the Scottsdale zip code of the new clinic to alert them that the clinic is available.

The best way we can see more patients is to extend our services to the greater areas where the veterans live. A new CBOC is scheduled for Goodyear and a new Inner City clinic will open within five miles of the VA campus.

Primary Care is being moved off the main campus to allow for parking and main campus remodeling. Space in the main hospital needs to be created to set up a 'swing ward' for use while each ward is being remodeled over the next 5-6 years. We are far too busy to close down wards for remodeling; therefore, a 'swing ward' will be created.

The plan is to remodel surgery rooms and specialized service areas. Director Grippen feels this is the only way the VA can reach out to another 10,000 to 12,000 veterans and provide high quality satisfactory care.

The remodel was started by former interim directors Young and Costie and Director Grippen intends to follow through with the plan by continuing to improve outreach and services to veterans.

Director Grippen tries to visit veteran groups every week. He attended a Town Hall Meeting for the Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) and will attend a Town Hall in Show Low soon, as well as another BVA Town Hall in May. His goal is to provide more outreach and higher quality services to veterans. The VA still has more complaints than it should have, but is working to make things better and is starting to see change. Six months from now the public will see a lot more change.

Visitor Cosme Lopez inquired about extended hour veteran care for those who cannot make appointments during regular 8 to 5 daytime hours.

Director Grippen said extended hours have been addressed with CBOC physicians and the results are not as good as they should be. He expects to see clinic appointment times extended to accommodate veterans who have jobs and can't make daytime appointments.

Commissioner Hanson inquired about the issue of mileage away from the clinics. Have there been any changes in this policy?

Director Grippen said there have been many concerns about the Choice Act Law. The expectations from the veteran and legislative communities are that the program would do more for veterans, but it has not. Washington D.C. is reviewing the law; hearings are ongoing to see why it is not being used more.

Yesterday, at the Arizona State Senate, Director Grippen reported that 10,000 Choice Cards were mailed out and about 500 appointments have been made as a result of those cards. The VA supports the law, as do veteran groups and congressional delegations. We have to determine why it is not as successful as it should be.

Part of the issue is the mileage factor and there have been some mis-communications about co-payments that veterans were not aware of, as well as issues with veterans having to work with the intermediary, TriWest, or a network of providers, to make their appointments. The veteran still must go through the network of providers in the TriWest agreement. Director Grippen is working with TriWest to get more information out to veterans so they can better utilize the services.

Visitor, Dave Lucier asked if Director Grippen could characterize the VA's relationship with TriWest as to how it is working and what needs to be improved to make it better.

Director Grippen said he is communicating with Dave McIntyre, President and CEO of TriWest Healthcare Alliance, nearly every day. Multiple teams are in place trying to improve communication, and the interchange of medical records between TriWest and VA physicians.

The VA is meeting with ASU to see how it can improve services to veterans from a public relations perspective. Efforts are being made to streamline Emergency Department admissions on weekends into mental health programs of hospitals in the community.

Mr. McIntyre is supportive of the VA; we are the greatest user of the TriWest services in the network. We use them to help us reach the backlog of patients and get more services out to veterans.

Dave Lucier said ASU has a medical processing and caregiving initiative with the Mayo Clinic and the VA might be able to take advantage of that resource. Dave offered his help if the VA needs it.

Commissioner Scott said an issue was brought to him by veterans concerning connecting with the VA Hospital for care after surgery and TriWest outpatient appointments. There is some mis-communication for veterans who are having difficulty getting the rehabilitation they need after surgery that was done by a provider other than the VA.

Director Grippen said the VA would initially give an authorization for surgery and the health care entity provides the pre-op and post-op that is included in the surgery authorization. If the patient needs physical therapy, it would not be included in the initial VA authorization.

This method was causing problems in getting second referrals done quickly and was changed within the past 45 days. Authorizations have been changed to include physical therapy and lab testing up front. We are trying to reduce the back and forth between the VA and TriWest.

Commissioner Olson said he and George Cushing attended a National Leadership Legislative Conference for the American Legion in Washington, D.C. and there was discussion about the Choice Act and Choice Cards.

Representatives from several states said one of the issues was that veterans did not want to interrupt their ongoing care and were not using the Choice option. Commissioner Olson wanted to know if that had been experienced here.

Director Grippen said veterans are electing not to use the Choice option; participation is at 5%. Only a few veterans are using primary care in the private sector; most are electing to use primary care in the VA system. Therefore, more specialty care referrals are being made and the VA cannot keep up with the need for specialists. It is a trend across the country.

We know the VA still needs to improve and be much better with access and outreach. The VA is being studied by various commissions in Washington; they want to make radical changes. We ask, why does the VA need radical change if the veterans want to remain with the VA for care?

Chairman Perkins said the VA has improved in many areas. A newspaper article said full time employment has increased over last year. How many vacant full time positions are there right now?

Director Grippen said there are around 500. Each week he authorizes new positions. We are not meeting the demand and need to keep pushing to meet the demand. Budget is a challenge but he believes service is driving that perspective.

Mr. Barnes said Director Grippen has interacted with ADVS from the beginning of his tenure and continues to do so. Veterans come to the agency with significant issues; Director Grippen has taken time to meet with veterans, hear their complaints, answer their questions and has helped veterans resolve issues.

ADVS holds quarterly leadership meetings at Director Grippen's office to discuss issues that were talked about here today. Director Grippen is doing a great job for the VA and is always open to suggestions from ADVS or matters we wish to discuss.

Commissioner Olson noted that he and Director Grippen had worked together at the Minnesota VA several years ago. He knows Mr. Grippen to be an outstanding individual who excels in his field. His love of veterans and his interest in making the VA healthcare system the best brought him out of retirement to serve in Phoenix. That is a tribute to Mr. Grippen.

Chairman Perkins thanked Director Grippen for taking time out of his very busy schedule to meet with the Advisory Commission. Mr. Grippen said he made it a point to be here today as the Advisory Commission is an important group to interact and partner with in helping all of us work together to improve services to veterans.

Director Grippen acknowledged the kind words and recognition but gave credit to his staff who works hard for veterans. He noted that the person at the top is only as good as his staff, as everyone knows. The VA is improving but is not yet as good as it needs to be. He receives far too many complaints and the VA doesn't reach out to near enough veterans. The VA will continue to strive to be better. Director Grippen said while serving as deputy administrator under Administrator, Tom Mullen in the Minneapolis VA Hospital, he learned about putting veterans first every single day.

Tangela Richardson, U.S. Department of Labor, Los Angeles, CA – Ms. Richardson is a veteran, having served 1-1/2 years active duty in Kuwait and 16 years in the Army Reserves.

The Employee Benefits Security Administration (EBSA) falls under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Labor. EBSA National headquarters are in Washington, D.C. The Los Angeles office has jurisdiction over Southern California, Arizona, Hawaii, Guam, Wake Island and the American Samoa Islands.

EBSA reaches out to service members who are retiring or separating from the military by providing informal assistance to those working in the private sector within the U.S.

EBSA works to bridge the gap for military members who are entering the private sector by providing resources and information so they know what to expect when they transition and begin work for a company in the private sector.

EBSA assists employees who are offered retirement benefits and health insurance plans by making sure they are fully informed of their rights. There may be confusion for those who are using Tri-Care or the VA Medical Center for health care. For those who are not using Tri-Care, and are eligible to enroll in their employer's retirement and health benefits, EBSA assures they are fully informed of their rights when enrolling in the employer health plan and determines that employers are in compliance with what the law states for veterans. EBSA ensures that family members can enroll in the veteran's employer health plan, even if the veteran is enrolled in TriWest.

EBSA has jurisdiction over Title 1 of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) and provides enforcement. Part of the ERISA Title 1 law is making sure employers are within the compliance of what the federal law states.

Group health plans such as the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (COBRA), Affordable Care Act (ACA) or retirement benefits are EBSA's responsibility in terms of dealing with employers on a daily basis. EBSA gets involved when participants have questions about their retirement benefits and insurance when they leave employment.

When employees stop employment, their health benefits continue up to 1-1/2 years under COBRA. Federal law guarantees this coverage as long as the employer meets certain qualifications. If the employer is not in compliance with COBRA laws, EBSA gets involved and advises the employer of the Federal law. EBSA's involvement is not to create a negative relationship with the employer; it is to advise them of the laws so they are providing the employee the benefits for which they are entitled.

The Health Insurance Portability & Accountability Act (HIPAA) guarantees special enrollment rights. If a veteran employee is laid off their job, they are eligible to become enrolled in their spouse's employer health insurance plan.

EBSA receives the most phone calls regarding COBRA, HIPAA and ACA requirements. Many don't understand how ACA works or how it benefits them or whether their employer is in compliance. EBSA provides protections in health plan rules. If there are issues with an employer not responding to the employee, EBSA provides a resolution.

EBSA's assistance in outreach education is tied into our mission to assure that plan employees, spouses and children are properly enrolled and that the employer is providing benefits according to health care rules. We deal with employers, service and insurance providers, doctor's offices, or third party administrators to assure that employees, spouses and children are enrolled in plans correctly.

There is more activity in the COBRA, HIPAA, and ACA laws. These options are used when the employee is not using Tri-Care or VA medical benefits.

EBSA has 10 regional field offices throughout the U.S so that when people relocate, there is a regional office to visit if they have questions.

Benefits Advisors are the front line for people calling the office. If problems with an employer cannot be resolved through the benefit advisor, investigators take the issue further. If too many people are being affected, an investigation may need to be opened.

The majority of EBSA investigators have law degrees, a masters or PhD degree. They assure that the civil and criminal side of the federal law is investigated, if needed. Our main goal is to resolve issues so they don't elevate to the next level.

EBSA maintains statistical data on how much money it saves employees in making sure their rights are guaranteed and in getting resolutions for employees.

In fiscal year 2013, the agency recovered \$1.69 billion dollars, which includes health insurance, COBRA benefits, retirement, pensions and 401K's. Three thousand six hundred seventy-seven civil investigations were closed; 72.8% of those resulted in monetary or other corrective action.

Three hundred twenty criminal investigations were closed; 70 with guilty pleas or convictions and 88 individuals were indicted on criminal charges.

The regional office in Los Angeles wants to be the first field office to reach out to military service installations. We plan to conduct outreach to military installations to introduce EBSA and get our information to them.

In conclusion, Ms. Richardson provided contact information as follows: Website: www.dol.gov/ebsa; Ask questions electronically: askebsa.dol.gov; contact a benefits advisor at the nearest regional office, 1-866-444-3272.

Chairman Perkins asked about EBSA outreach to military bases. There are several military bases in Arizona and Southern California; do you make regular visits to these bases or is there a representative who makes these visits? Would that person be going to Luke Air Force Base? He noted that transitional briefs are held periodically on the military bases.

Ms. Richardson said her co-worker will be in Phoenix March 26th and will give a presentation at Luke Air Force Base.

Ms. Richardson said this is the first year EBSA has been able to get access to the TAP Program. They never show up unannounced; these visits are set with a point of contact at each installation.

Commissioner Toliver said Ms. Richardson brought up one of his concerns which is the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). Many of the problems with people separating or retiring are that they don't understand their benefits. An effective TAP program, especially for those who serve one enlistment, is a great way to educate our young people coming out of the military.

Chairman Perkins asked Ms. Richardson if her slide presentation could be provided to the secretary so copies can be distributed to commissioners and ADVS. There is good information he would like to make available to the commissioners.

Stan Zeitz, Vice Chair of Military Family Relief Fund (MFRF) – Mr. Zeitz was provided questions ahead of the meeting so he could be prepared to answer.

Mr. Zeitz stated that the Military Family Relief Fund was started in 2008 to monetarily help post 9/11 veterans returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Shortly after the program started, the country experienced a downturn in the economy.

The purpose of the fund is to help veterans transition into civilian life. Many are experiencing financial difficulties and need financial advice because of bad choices. The funds provide decompression from the veterans' problems. A committee of 12 meets once a month to review applications and make decisions for funds disbursement, depending upon application requirements.

Mr. Zeitz was asked how much was awarded in 2014 and how much money has been awarded since the inception of the program.

In 2014, 177 applications were paid and \$419,000 was distributed.

The amount dispersed from the fund since its inception is \$1,868,335.40.

The amount remaining in the fund at this time is about \$5.2 million.

Mr. Zeitz read the disbursement of expenditures since the inception of the program and will provide a copy to the secretary.

Mr. Zietz said the Legislature and ADVS saw the need to help veterans and created the program to assist veterans returning from the wars. The fund is a state tax credit. The tax credit for a family or married couple is \$400 and for an individual, the tax credit is \$200. For those who file taxes separately, the tax credit is \$200.

Once the yearly donations cap of \$1 million is met, any checks received after that must be returned to the donor.

Much attention by veteran groups has been drawn to the amount remaining in the fund. The question posed was, "Why isn't all the money collected being dispersed to other committees, programs and functions?"

Veteran groups are asking to join with ADVS to help veterans who do not complete their education requirements through the G.I. Bill. Their funds run out before they get their certificate or degree.

When the committee evaluates applications, it appears that some of the veterans are using their G.I. bill funds to live on, a very natural thing to do, but not wise. When these funds run out, they apply for M.F.R.F. funds.

Mr. Zeitz said the M.F.R.F. law is written so that the money collected must help veterans and their families; however the M.F.R.F. committee has no jurisdiction over joining veteran groups and feels strongly that if education assistance were added, it would be in violation of the law as written and would put a burden on the committee. As the program was presented, the committee would not feel qualified to make those judgments.

The rate of unemployment is said to be 5.8%; it's higher than that. Some veterans who are working are having a hard time keeping their jobs; they are battling Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other illnesses such as Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

Many veterans are not aware the M.F.R.F. fund exists; advertising of the fund is minimal. We receive many applicants through VA hospital staff who see that veterans being treated at the VA are in need of financial assistance and they refer them to ADVS. We need a broader means of advertising this program.

E.J. Montini of the AZ Republic has written several articles about the fund to bring awareness, after which the fund receives a surge of applications.

We need to get into communities and get the word out to veterans about the MFRF Program. Many veterans make bad choices and need financial advice. Mr. Zeitz asked if the Commission knows of Certified Public Accountants or any financial services who would work pro bono that veterans could be referred to.

Commissioner Griffin said the Veteran Resource Centers in his area offer free personal financial training to Coconino County residents and the Hopi and Navajo Nations.

The limit of funds to be paid out at one time is \$10,000, under certain circumstances; the maximum paid out to the veteran over a period of time is \$20,000.

In 2018, the program will terminate unless it is extended further; which would be determined by the Legislature. The committee can only make suggestions about continuing the fund and does not believe the needs of veterans will diminish by 2018. It is the committee's opinion that the remaining funds should be used according to its intended purpose; to help veterans. The fund has dispersed almost \$1.9 million since its inception.

Commissioner Griffin said he is not sure the Flagstaff community knows about the Military Family Relief Fund. He coordinates with 32 veteran organizations in Coconino County and would like to get this information out to the community. Is there anybody from the MFRF group who could travel his way?

Mr. Zietz said he would travel to Flagstaff and give this information once Commissioner Griffin gets a group together.

Commissioner Toliver asked if there is a possibility in 2018 that Vietnam Veterans or other veterans other than Post 9/11 veterans can be considered for this funding or brought into the program that are not currently deployed?

Mr. Zietz said concerns should be directed to the legislature who would need to make this change. The MFRF committee cannot change the law.

Commissioner Hanson asked who the champions are, if any, on changing legislation.

Mr. Zietz said Sonny Borrelli, a Republican member of the Arizona House of Representatives, has a bill before the legislature that would allow the MFRF committee to award up to \$20,000 per qualified family.

Commissioner Hanson asked if they were looking at individuals and organizations to make legislative changes. It takes someone or an organization to draft legislation to give to Sonny Borrelli or a representative in the legislature and we don't have that.

Dave Hampton, ADVS Public Information Officer, said under the current statute, once the Military Family Relief Fund sunsets, any remaining funds go into the ADVS Donation Fund, which would be the department's best way to get the funds out to veterans throughout the state after the program ends.

Commissioner Olson said it seems that the committee is doing its best to operate the fund legally. As you review applications, is there a reason for denial that seems to be more common than others?

Mr. Zeitz said many of the veterans have been out of the service for a while with a successful period of adjustment and suddenly they fall into financial troubles. The committee cannot relate their deployment to their current position.

It creates a hardship when the veteran asks for only one month of aid because by the time the committee reviews the application, a decision is made and the fund makes payment, he's back asking for three months of assistance because the bills stack up quickly. The law says we can go out to 6 months on bills and give them a buffer. In the future, we will expend for an extended period of time, not only to cover immediate needs, but to give a buffer.

Chairman Perkins asked if the new bill that is proposed to increase the award amount from \$10,000 to \$20,000 and reduce the 2/3 majority will give flexibility in awarding funds.

Mr. Zeitz said it will give flexibility in awarding funds. A bill has just moved out of the Senate to remove the 2/3 majority requirement.

Commissioner Scott said in his involvement with several veteran groups and UAV he hears about the unspent money and what will happen to those funds. How can we direct a more effective outreach component if there is no marketing budget to get the information out?

Commissioner Scott asked Mr. Zeitz if the committee is provided a list of returning veterans.

Mr. Zeitz said they do not receive a list. Mr. Barnes said nobody gets a list of returning veterans; with the exception of the VA, and they do not share it because of privacy concerns.

Commissioner Scott said most community colleges and four year institutions have Veteran Resource Centers that aren't aware of the Military Family Relief Fund that could help veterans who are struggling after their G.I. Bill funds expire.

Mr. Zeitz said there is a program within MFRF named Transition in Place (TIP). Veterans and families are in a 6 month transition period where they are placed in homes to get them into a stabilized environment and each month they are given more responsibility. At the end of 6 months they are able to be on their own. The Stand Down is where we find the most veterans in need.

Commissioner Griffin asked what the commission can do to address what we all recognize; there is no funding to market the program's availability. Is there something we can do with AZ Public Veterans Services to generate some support, or does a bill have to go forth in the legislature to gain some flexibility on how to use the funds?

Commissioner Scott asked if it would be a conflict of interest if a non-profit applied for a small VDF grant to advertise resources in the community and use that grant specifically for marketing all statewide programs, with MFRF being one of the programs.

Mr. Barnes said he will need to look into the matter and get back to Commissioner Scott with an answer.

Chairman Perkins said UAV and other veteran organizations know of veterans who need help; he suggested having someone brief those organizations on the MFRF program. They should be advised that the MFRF Program is listed on the ADVS website and people can access the website to get information and an application.

Commissioner Olson proposed issuing a newsletter through VFW and other associations around the state. People who read them may know a relative or friend who could use the M.F.R.F. services and help get the word around about the program. That is something the commission could do immediately without legislation.

Commissioner Olson noted that Mr. Zeitz and the MFRF Committee are handling the fund legally and doing a good job but are hampered by the need for a super majority to grant funds up to \$20,000.

A good policy move for the commission to support them in legislation would be removing the need to for a super majority and increasing the limit from \$10,000 to \$20,000.

After commission discussion, Commissioner Olson would like to make a motion to that effect.

Discussion on the M.F.R.F. Program before the motion:

Commissioner Scott asked how many people would be looking at a longer term \$20,000 intervention.

Mr. Zeitz said it would be a small percentage; below 10%. The \$10,000 limit was an obstacle to the committee on several occasions last year. We started seeing a surge in the need to pay above \$10,000 in 2010. Those applicants needing funds above the \$10,000 level were 202 in 2011, 243 in 2012; the number dropped in 2013 to 169 and to 177 in 2014. Out of those, below 10% in funds was granted.

Commissioner Hanson said we sometimes over-estimate the influence our veteran organizations have toward those coming out of service. They are not interested in contacting the VFW or American Legion. They are trying to survive. We can put out as much information as we want through UAV or other organizations and it's not going to reach the people who need it.

Commissioner Olson said Mr. Hanson's point is well taken. They aren't completely successful yet but veteran organizations are attracting large numbers of men and women. The goal of using veteran service organization newsletters isn't necessarily to reach the veteran, but the grandparents. If grandparents give them a message, they will listen.

Chairman Perkins said this may tie into Ms. Richardson's organization. EBSA works with the military bases and many people we're talking about are National Guard and Reserve Veterans. They have rotations of members going out and coming back; do you ever address them?

Ms. Richardson said her office has recently launched an initiative to speak with reserve service members. She may have more access since she was in the Reserves. Her organization may be able to facilitate getting the M.F.R.F. information out to National Guard and Reserve members.

David Lucier said a lot of good information has been presented today, and the focus should be on these three inter-related elements when it comes to veterans:

- Education and training
- Jobs and economic opportunity.
- Health and wellness

Mr. Lucier said the basic legislation that enabled the Military Family Relief Fund needs fixing. Everyone is doing what they're supposed to do by law, and there is no problem with that, but the basic legislation that enabled the Military Family Relief Fund needs fixing. The very basis of how it is funded and how the funds are used is restricted in so many ways, hence the \$5.2 million in unspent funds.

There are a lot of ideas on how to spend the excess funds so we need to look at a proper legislative fix for this problem and overall veterans funding. Veterans do have some input at the Legislature.

Mr. Lucier said the universities are seeing that veterans are using their G.I. Bill for education. He noted that U of A, NAU, and ASU are on the lookout for veterans living on the G.I. Bill and they offer those veterans counseling and other initiatives.

Motion regarding the M.F.R.F. Program:

Commissioner Olson made a motion to support an initiative to the Legislature to raise the MFRF award amount from \$10,000 to \$20,000 and to remove the need for a 2/3 super majority for granting funds. Commissioner Toliver seconded the motion. Motion carried.

Commissioner Scott asked how the commission supports this motion; would a letter be written? Chairman Perkins said the motion will be part of the minutes of today's meeting.

Commissioner Olson said Stan Zeitz and George Cushing of the MFRF Committee, and everyone here today knows we've taken this supportive action. If the subject comes up in testimony, the commission can say this motion was made, seconded and carried in support of legislation.

Dave Hampton said **House Bill 2090 – Military Family Relief Fund; amount** went out of Senate Appropriations on Tuesday unanimously; the next step is the floor of the Senate and it will pass.

Agency Announcements and Updates – Chairman Perkins said there has been interest since the new governor was elected regarding the budget forecast for 2016 and a fear of budget cuts. The Commission was concerned that the ADVS budget may be cut and, in support of ADVS, the subject was put on today's agenda so Director Barnes could address it.

Interim Director Barnes noted the governor's fiscal year 2016 budget passed March 7th. There are no changes for the agency's budget from last year. Partial year's funds were requested for the two cemeteries. Both were funded at the amount requested.

House Bill 2671 – The two cemeteries under construction received \$929,000 in funding, an increase from last year of \$274,000.

Large Grants - Chairman Perkins said questions were raised by Commissioners Rustand and Olson at the Executive Meeting about Large Grant distributions. Their questions were about the large grant process and how much money is dispersed. The subject was listed on today's agenda and Director Barnes was asked to address the Commission.

Mr. Barnes said the process for the last two years is that the Request for Proposal (RFP) goes out in October and November with a cut-off date of December 31st to be returned to ADVS. According to the state statute, the RFP's must be reviewed and evaluated by a committee, after which their recommendations are sent to the director.

The 2015 large grants were completed; notices went out by February 11th. There were 31 requests for a total of \$2.9 million dollars. Of those requests, 11 were approved for just over \$600,000 in distributions. Last year \$560,000 was paid out in large grants.

Mr. Barnes noted that grant information, proposals, evaluations and grant recipients are posted on ProcureAZ and are open to public review.

Commissioner Olson said he tried to access the grant information and needed a password to get into the program. Mr. Barnes said an area on the front page of the site allows entry to grant bids and information where a password is not needed.

A new system, the ECIBIS Program, is in place with the state for handling grants and is expanding to solicit grant proposals. ADVS will move to this program next year to make the process easier, as well as access to grant information.

ADVS granted monies to peer support and navigation funding for the H3 vets and the homeless veteran program for veterans moving into housing. Funds were granted to the TIP Program, and the Arizona Hall of Fame Society received funding this year for the great work they do for veterans statewide.

Central Arizona Shelter, a homeless provider in Phoenix, was granted funds. Monies were granted to Empowerment Systems, the fiduciary for the AZ Coalition for Military Families, for their symposium that is coming up in April. The Coalition trains service providers for veterans and military families and is helping with the roll out of the ADVS employment initiative later this month.

Grants were made to veteran judicial courts at the U of A Law College for veterans advocacy work at the Veterans Court. The college prompted an initiative for changing discharges due to the change in the law for PTSD from the Vietnam War era.

ADVS granted funds to the Arizona Foundation for Legal Services that does website and pro bono work for veterans, veteran education, and legal matters through their website. The Arizona Foundation for Legal Services conducts veteran education on legal matters.

Funds were granted to the Veterans Medical Leadership Council (VMLC Charities) that does good work for the community and for veterans.

ADVS granted funds to the Veteran Heritage Project which is the annual book of veteran interviews conducted by high school students. The students learn about history through veteran stories and the veterans get the opportunity to share and memorialize their stories.

ADVS granted funds to the U.S. Vets initiative in Northern Arizona for mentoring and job training/placement. Commissioner Scott said the funding was specifically for a culinary program at the college to train onsite veterans in culinary skills. Some commissioners have toured the facility.

Veteran Homes

Census for the Phoenix Veteran Home is 165; Tucson census is 114. The VA conducted a survey at the Phoenix Veteran Home February 3rd through February 5th. The survey went well and on the Clinical side and the care and health of veterans, there were no issues.

The only issues were minor in Engineering; the radiant exit lights have become outdated, and two sprinklers are needed in a utility closet. Both issues are being addressed.

The Phoenix Veteran Home staff is doing a great job, which was noted in the survey. Mr. Barnes expressed kudos to administrator, Colleen Rundell, and her staff for a great job.

The Tucson Veteran Home is maintaining a full staff and doing good work. A new Director of Nursing, Barbara McGraff, with 30 years of experience in nursing was hired last week.

Next Monday, March 16, the Yuma Board of Supervisors will issue a proclamation declaring Yuma County as a Purple Heart County and Purple Heart Veterans will be recognized.

Veteran Services Division

Chairman Perkins asked if all the Veteran Benefit Counselor positions had been filled.

Mr. Barnes said they are filled for the time being, however, there are a few retirements coming up. A week's training was held at the agency last week for the newest VBC's.

A VBC at Sierra Vista is leaving at the end of the month and will be replaced. Two are leaving the main office in Phoenix during April. Flagstaff is now fully staffed with two positions.

Commissioner Scott asked what the total number of Veteran Counselors is. Mr. Barnes said the number is 36.

Cemeteries

Progress on the cemeteries is on time and within budget, even with some inclement weather in Flagstaff. The cemeteries are to be completed late this year, and will open in January, 2016.

Legislature - Dave Hampton, Legislative Liaison, said agency bill **HB 2091-In-state Tuition**, will conform Arizona's in-state statutes to the federal statute passed in August, 2014, by Congress in the Choice Act. The bill will conform to federal law so that veterans, their spouses, and children can continue to use the G.I. Bill in Arizona after July 1, 2015. All 50 states will need to comply by July 1, 2015. Currently, Texas is the only state in compliance.

Chairman Perkins believes Dave was involved in writing the bill for the in-state tuition; is that correct?

Mr. Hampton said he spent 2-1/2 frustrating weeks on the phone with Washington, D.C. determining the exact language to be used in the bill. Once the bill is signed, Arizona will be in compliance.

HB 2090 – Military Family Relief Fund; distribution amount is expected to pass this week or next and go back to the house and on to the governor.

This legislative session is expected to end by the second full week of April. Next week is the last week to hear house and senate bills in committees.

Communications – Chairman Perkins received a copy of the letter addressed to Mike Klier, ADVS Deputy Director, from Veteran Jack Nottingham, detailing his efforts to obtain a second disabled license plate for his wife's car through the Tucson Motor Vehicle Department, who declined his request.

Mr. Klier responded to the veteran noting that he, as the veteran, had already met the requirements for his disabled plate. His wife is not a veteran and therefore is not eligible for a veteran plate. Mr. Klier suggested Mr. Nottingham apply for the handicapped placard for his wife's car.

On February 13, Tangela Richardson of the California Department of Labor, called the agency to reserve time on the Advisory Commission meeting agenda to make a presentation on "Resources and Veterans going into the Private Sector" that her agency supports. Ms. Richardson is here today.

Outreach Activities for the Commission – Chairman Perkins asked for a report of outreach activities. Commissioner Toliver noted that he was nominated to the Advisory Commission by the Tuskegee Airmen's Association. Arizona is the only state that recognizes Tuskegee Airmen's Commemoration Day, which is coming up March 26th.

While attending the Buckeye Air Fair on February 21st, Commissioner Toliver realized that being a member of the Advisory Commission enables him to bring awareness to the commission by using the table top display when he is speaking on behalf of the Tuskegee Airmen before schools and organizations. He will pick up the table top display later today at the director's office.

Chairman Perkins will attend the Arizona Hall of Fame Patriotic Gala on March 21. It is a big event for the Hall of Fame Society; the governor along with state and federal representatives will be there.

Commissioner Olson attended meetings about the Choice Program at the Tucson VA Hospital. There are so many unknowns about the program and Tucson VA Director Gardner did an outstanding job of giving facts on the program.

The American Legion at the National level will make approximately 12 counselor trips to benefits centers over the next 10 months; a few trips have taken place already. The purpose is to visit

perceived to be problematic areas and setting up town hall meetings in conjunction with the VA, with access to VA counselors and VA computers, and the adjudication system for helping people on the spot to the best of our ability. Commissioner Olson has been appointed to the committee. In two weeks the committee will be making the first of 12 town hall meetings around the nation.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order – Chairman Perkins said the Commission Meeting schedule was discussed at the February Executive Meeting.

AVSAC Meeting Schedule Discussion

Last July, the meeting schedule was changed to every other month to allow commissioners to visit veteran organizations and attend veteran functions during the off months. His concern is whether that is indeed happening and, if not, should the commission go back to meeting every month?

He would like the commissioners' individual thoughts on how meeting every other month is working, or not working for the commission.

Commissioner Scott said meeting every other month works for him; he has been a member since October, 2014, so this is the only meeting frame he has known with the commission.

Commissioner Olson is concerned by being locked in to meeting every other month; the commission may miss out on addressing an urgent matter. Is there the potential for considering more flexibility? He noted that a special meeting could be called if needed.

Commissioner Hanson noted the commission is only required to meet quarterly.

Chairman Perkins inquired about the commission's table top display cases. The secretary said a third table top display was requested and purchased last year. Two table top displays are stored at the ADVS Director's Office and one is stored at the VSD office in Tucson. All displays will be updated with current information.

Commissioner Griffin suggested storing the third table top display at the VSD office in Flagstaff so it is available for events. The table top display will be brought to Commissioner Griffin at the next Advisory Commission meeting.

Commission Member Roster

Chairman Perkins noted that the Commission has been short one commissioner for nearly a year. Commissioner Olson's tenure is up in July. Vice Chairman Rustand's first term expires in July; he has applied online for an additional term.

In the past, the Governor's Boards and Commissions office hasn't made decisions on filling positions or reinstating current members until late fall. He is concerned the commission roster will dwindle by July.

Chairman Perkins asked if commissioners had any thoughts on the matter. Commissioner Hanson noted that commissioners usually continue on after their appointments are up until their reinstatement is received. He believes we can hold over commissioners whose terms are up if the commissioner is in agreement to stay on.

The state's boards and commissions have a huge number of commissions, about 200, which may contribute to the delay in appointing commissioners. The secretary noted that when contacting Boards and Commission, they seem to be very aware of our member shortage.

Farewell for Jeff Olson

Commissioner Olson will be leaving the commission in July. Chairman Perkins invited commissioners and ADVS staff to a farewell luncheon for Commissioner Olson after the May 14 meeting, as he will be out of town for the July meeting.

Commissioner Griffin offered to host the July or September commission meeting in Flagstaff at the NAU campus. He would make arrangements for meeting space with lunch and a tour of the Veteran Service Center afterward.

ADVS has been short staffed for some time and Chairman Perkins would not make a decision to hold an out of town meeting without referring to Interim Director Barnes if the agency can support this decision.

Director Barnes said administrative staff will be starting at the agency on Monday and meeting out of town would not be a problem for the agency.

Chairman Perkins would like the meeting held on the NAU campus, with a tour of the Veteran Service Center. Commissioner Griffin said the Veteran Service Success Center recently won an award for one of the best Veteran Centers in the nation; it ranks number four in the nation of four year public institutions.

Chairman Perkins asked Commissioner Griffin to invite local VSO commanders so they can hear the dialog and what goes on at AVSAC meetings and have the opportunity to address the commission.

When the Flagstaff meeting is determined, Commissioner Griffin will see that veteran service commanders are invited.

Comments from around the room

Commissioner Griffin attended an inaugural meeting of the Coconino County Veteran Services Advisory Forum. Service representatives of organizations from Coconino County and the Hopi and Navajo Nations were invited. The first quarterly meeting in January hosted 32 organizations and about 100 people. Commissioner Griffin noted that local ADVS staff was instrumental in making the meeting possible.

Commissioner Griffin attended the grand opening of a new Hopi Nation Veteran Clinic on the campus of the Hopi Medical Center in Polacca, AZ.

Commissioner Griffin submitted a nomination to the Arizona Hall of Fame on behalf of Veteran Billy Weldon, who serves as Commander of the Flagstaff Military Order of the Purple Heart and is involved in many other veteran organizations and activities in the area.

Commissioner Griffin will attend the Arizona Employment Roadmap summit in two weeks and the annual Arizona Coalition for Military Families Symposium, April 23-24. Many people in the Flagstaff area are doing good things for veterans; Commissioner Griffin intends to be involved in local activities and report back to the commission.

Commissioner Hanson noted that Sonny Borrelli sponsored a House Concurrent Resolution HCR 2008 recognizing the 15th Anniversary of the Arizona Veterans' Hall of Fame. Last Wednesday, it was brought to the house floor; a dozen members of the society were present in the gallery. As a former legislator, Mr. Hanson was given privileges to sit with Sonny Borelli on the floor of the legislature.

The organization has a problem of marketing and getting nominations. There are over 500,000 veterans in Arizona and the organization has trouble getting nominations to the Arizona Hall of Fame. Not long ago, there were only 232 living Hall of Fame members.

March 31st is the deadline to make nominations for this year. There has been a limit of 20 inductees per year, not including Medal of Honor recipients. That limit has now been removed. The Arizona Hall of Fame Society would like to see 100 or 200 nominations.

Requirements for nomination into the Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame are the nominee must be a veteran, must have an honorable discharge and must have lived in Arizona for at least five years or entered military service from the state of Arizona.

The application is limited to 12 single pages, a DD-214, nomination form, and cover letter from a sponsor must accompany the application. The nominee's support of veteran organizations, professional work and community or state or national work for veterans is considered.

Chairman Perkins noted that visitors George Cushing, Dave Lucier and commissioners, Phil Hanson and Jeff Olson are members of the Arizona Hall of Fame.

Visitor, David Lucier announced his new veterans online radio show at www.vetsonmedia.com, a Veterans Heritage Hour of military history.

Visitor Marion Cartland, Publisher of Arizona Veterans Connection Magazine said a draft of the newest edition of the magazine is ready to go to print. She will deliver printed copies to ADVS in two days.

Chairman Perkins said the Arizona Veterans Connection Magazine is one of the best veteran publications in the Phoenix metropolitan area and is distributed around the state.

Tangela Richardson has taken many good notes from today's meeting and looks forward to working in Arizona and furthering outreach for military and reserve members.

Stand Down

Commissioner Scott reported the Stand Down was held February 12-13, along with the point in time count, which means canvassing every street in Phoenix to find homeless veterans. The preliminary Stand Down data indicates 92 veterans went through coordinated assessment who were literally homeless. Of the 92, 66% scored within the rapid rehousing range, meaning they needed longer term intervention. We are now seeing veterans with substance abuse, severe mental illness and some with physical disabilities. The initiative of getting to zero veteran homelessness has made an impact and is reflected in these numbers.

There were 16 calls to the call center from canvassers who had encountered a street-living veteran. Forty-six surveys were completed at the Stand Down.

Overall, the number of homeless veterans has decreased. We are seeing more veterans who have been housed for the past two years and have remained in housing, which is a good thing.

The men's overflow shelter was closed and the building condemned. We are currently working with the Valley of the Sun United Way and City of Phoenix to find housing. An RFP was issued to request grant funding to get housing for the remaining veterans who were in the overflow shelter.

The plan from now on is that veterans are not sleeping in parking lots, or on mats on the floor and to house veterans while they look for permanent housing. The goal is to get homeless veterans into apartments and into the subsequent programs we have available.

Chairman Perkins said there was great concern over the closing of the men's shelter; and what would happen to the veterans. He asked if ADVS was helping out in any way.

Mr. Barnes said the ADVS Veteran Donation Fund is a huge resource for homeless veterans and the department gives grants to H3 veterans, US Vets and to navigation and peer support. The decrease in chronic veteran homelessness and the increase in supportive and temporary housing in Maricopa County speaks volumes for what the department has done over the past three or four years. The Department continues to support the homeless veteran programs and looks for opportunities to help homeless veterans.

Visitor Dave Lucier said the City of Tempe is in the process of designing and constructing a veteran supportive affordable housing project of about 45 units. The City of Tempe created its own Veterans Commission which is designed to become a regional commission.

The City of Tempe owns the undeveloped ground; an RFP has been completed and once it is approved, they are on track to start construction.

Chairman Perkins noted that when Colonel Strickland left ADVS and Jeff Begay left the commission, we lost touch with the Native American community. He asked Commissioner Griffin to reach out to the Hopi and Navajo Nations and encourage Native American Veterans to nominate fellow veterans for induction into the Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame. Colonel Strickland and Jeff Begay had actively encouraged nominations to the Hall of Fame from those communities.

Commissioner Griffin said the Vice Chairman of the Hopi Nation is a Marine Veteran; he will reach out to him and the Navajo Nation.

Commissioner Olson said it would also be appropriate to reach out to the Tohono O'odham Nation for applications to the commission.

The meeting adjourned at 12:08 p.m. The next Advisory Commission meeting will be held May 14, 2015, at the Veteran Home, with a farewell luncheon afterward for Commissioner Olson at a restaurant to be determined.