

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

December 13, 2012

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners

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

Absent

Jefferson Begay (excused)

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Colonel Joey Strickland, Director
Homer Rodgers, Assistant Deputy Director
Mike Klier, Assistant Deputy Director
Dave Hampton, Public Information Officer
Travis Schulte, Military Family Relief Fund/
Veteran Program Specialist
Gabe Forsberg, Strategic Planner/Women Vets
Coordinator
Katherine Harding, Exec. Asst. to the Director
Judy Smith, Admin. Secretary

Guests

Sharon Helman, Director of Carl T. Hayden
Medical Center

Call to Order – The meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Chairman George Cushing. The minutes were approved as published.

Communications – Certified letters directed to five commissioners from Robert Jobst, a member of American Legion Post 78, Dewey/Humbolt, Arizona, were received at ADVS. The letters were forwarded to Chairman Cushing. Chairman Cushing advised ADVS via email that Mr. Jobst's issue should be handled by the American Legion and that he would forward Mr. Jobst's letter to the Department Commander and Judge Advocate at the American Legion for their action.

Chairman Cushing wrote Robert Jobst a letter explaining that his concern is not a commission responsibility and should be addressed by the American Legion. Since then, Chairman Cushing received word from the American Legion Judge Advocate that they have addressed the matter with Robert Jobst.

The secretary reported that fully executed Oaths of Office have been received for new commissioners Jefferson Begay and Brett Rustand.

Agency Announcements and Updates – Colonel Strickland noted that this has been a good year and the agency is meeting its commitments for state Veterans. One letter with a minor complaint was received the entire year.

The agency began the year with the state sunset audit. The agency had only minor deficiencies, which have been corrected. The 8 month review of Fiduciary is ongoing. The auditors are satisfied with the Fiduciary Department.

The Legislature and Governor are pleased with the audit results and have granted ADVS a 10-year continuance to serve Veterans.

The agency has awarded nearly \$600,000 to 20 Veteran organizations from the Veteran Donation Fund (VDF).

The agency received requests for funding from Veteran Service organizations and 33 grant requests of \$5,000 or more, which indicates people are in need of funds. ADVS has presented \$600 thousand in funding to community programs and nearly \$100 thousand in grant requests of \$5,000 or less.

The University Of Arizona Law School in Tucson requested \$150,000 to support their Veterans Court Program.

Nearly \$2 million dollars in remodel and renovation over a 5-year period was spent for the building structure at the Phoenix State Veteran Home, making it a world class home for Veterans. The census is at 170-175 residents. We have a strong Medicare census with 14 Veterans on the Medicare Program. Congress passed a 70% or higher disability rating Veteran program, starting in February, 2013 that will increase admissions.

With newer technology in place, we want to update the nurse call and patient security systems. Another plan is to create a double entry in the front foyer. The facility needs to change to an electronic medical records system, which is already being used at the Tucson facility.

The Phoenix Veteran Home is financially secure with surplus funds. The ADVS is fortunate to have Colleen Rundell as Administrator. She comes to ADVS as the former National President of all State Home Administrators for the U.S. and is doing a great job as the home's Administrator.

Chairman Cushing commended the agency for the good care Veterans are receiving at the home. He is told by family members at various outings he attends how pleased they are for the good care their family members are receiving at the Phoenix State Veteran Home.

ADVS has a \$40 million budget; we receive \$5 million from the State General Fund and the balance of funding is self-generated. ADVS is working to improve the Fiduciary Department. The fees are lower than 5%, the lowest in the state. We are working with the legislature to raise Fiduciary client fees.

The Tucson home is opening its 3rd wing; there are 60 Veterans in residence. At one time there were 80 residents; some were there a short time for rehab and physical therapy treatments. Our goal is to have 120 residents by June.

Renovations at the Sierra Vista Cemetery are on track to be completed by March, 2013.

We are working with the Chinese-American Ki family who wish to donate 40 acres of land near Marana, northwest of Tucson, for the cemetery project.

All ADVS executives were engaged in Veteran Day events. Colonel Strickland spoke at 8 Veteran events over the Veterans Day weekend and said people appreciate seeing the leaders of the agency and how important it is that we are visible to the community.

In October, ADVS hosted the 50th Commemoration of the start of the Vietnam War and was designated the Vietnam Veterans Commemorative headquarters. Vietnam Veterans are the largest group of Veterans in the state and ADVS will host 2 events a year in support of Vietnam Veterans for the next 13 years. March 31, 2013 marks the state's official recognition of Vietnam Veterans.

ADVS will host the first Native American Veterans' Service ceremony to honor 300 Native American Veterans on May 25, 2013. Veterans will receive a plaque commemorating the event that will be held in conjunction with the opening of the Arizona Military Museum and the Heard Museum. The Advisory Commission will be invited to this event.

ADVS has good relationships with members of the Navajo Nation and they are visiting our offices more frequently. We received a call from the Tribal Leader of the San Carlos Reservation regarding their interest in a future Veteran cemetery on the reservation in the Globe/San Carlos area. Hopi

Veterans Services Chairman Eugene Talas, presented the agency with a plaque in appreciation of our support of their association.

Colonel Strickland presented commission members the results of a Statewide Employee Engagement Survey conducted August 29-September 14, 2012 by the Governor's office. ADVS scored above average on the survey and is one of 4 outstanding departments in the state to receive special recognition.

Colonel Strickland asked Homer Rodgers for a report of construction activities. Mr. Rodgers presented a projects update handout and gave an overview of construction projects at the Tucson Veteran Home, one being fencing around 3 sides of the property to connect with the existing fence from the original construction. Construction of the smoking canopy started December 3rd and is to be completed in January, 2013. The balance remaining in the Tucson Veteran Home construction fund is \$5,100, which must be expended by June 30, 2013. These funds will be used for minor construction related needs that arise.

The Sierra Vista project is 47% complete and is to be completed by March 1, 2013. There have been no change orders from the construction companies which means the project is on track and within the projected costs.

We are working with the Veteran Cemetery Grant Service for the chapel at the north area of the Sierra Vista Cemetery. The building is free-standing and completely enclosed. A local group raised \$100,000 toward the building costs of \$250,000. We expect to dedicate the chapel on Memorial Day, 2014.

The Veteran Benefit Counselors (VBC's) in Sierra Vista are in an office separate from the Cemetery office and we plan to buy new furniture for the Cemetery office to make it more comfortable for grieving families.

The next ADVS project is the cemetery near Flagstaff. The Flagstaff City Council and Mayor are in full support of the \$7.4 million dollar Cemetery project and came to ADVS headquarters for a special meeting.

The first development will be 15-20 acres of the entire 40 acres. Commissioner Sanchez inquired if the cemetery will be in the Camp Belmont area. The cemetery will be built at Camp Navajo and Camp Belmont which was used in WWII.

Colonel Strickland introduced Travis Schulte who oversees the Military Family Relief Fund (MFRF), and is point of contact for the Employer Support of the Guard & Reserve (ESGR) Jobs Program, in conjunction with the National Guard.

Travis works with businesses and organizations to employ Veterans. ADVS is required by law to create Veteran-friendly campuses around the state.

Travis noted that ADVS will host an employer summit on January 30, 2013 with the Arizona National Guard and AZ Coalition of Military Families to aid Veterans and connect them to resources for hiring Veterans. ADVS is planning a higher education summit in the spring to implement the campus supportive law that was passed by the Legislature. The summit is designed for employers to address their concerns in hiring Veterans. We aim to mitigate employers' concerns and connect the Veterans to long term employment.

Travis gave an update on the MFRF program. To date, \$850,000 in donations has been received. We are well ahead of last year in donations and expect to reach the \$1 million cap before December 31st. The funds are distributed to families of deployed soldiers. To date, the fund has awarded \$513,000 to veteran families; we expect to award just under \$600,000 by the end of this year. Last year's award was \$421,000.

The MFRF program is overseen by a 9-member committee of distinguished Veterans appointed by the Governor and chaired by Colonel Randy Meyers. We are one of only a few states that provide this program.

Private donors receive an income tax credit up to \$1 million. The organizations who donate do not qualify for the tax credit. The Joint Legislative Tax Credit Review Committee conducted a review of all tax credit programs in the state and recommended that the MFRF program be extended to 2018. Money left over after all awards are made will be diverted to the Veterans Donation Fund at the conclusion of the program in 2018.

Mike Klier, Assistant Deputy Director of the Veterans' Services Division (VSD), reported that counselor positions are now at 100% in the field with 16 offices and 36 counselors around the state. The aim is to position offices so the Veteran travels an hour or less to the office or the counselor travels to homebound Veterans. The Veteran counselors attend various area meetings to present information to Veterans.

New counselors spend one week in the Phoenix VSD office and then are sent to their duty station, after which they return to ADVS for a week's training with the Training Officer before working independently. ADVS is trying to hire outstanding people retiring from the military who want to make this job a second career and will bring discipline to the job.

Arizona has 600,000 or more Veterans; 48-50 thousand of them are women. Thirty-five percent of ADVS Veteran Counselors are women. Our agency hosts the Annual Women's Military Conference; this year it was simultaneously held with Tucson.

The Flagstaff VSD office covers the Northern regions; Chinle, Hopi, Fort Defiance, Window Rock and Tuba City, as well as Hualapai and Page. The Show Low office covers the White River and Apache Reservations and Springerville. Prescott covers the Yavapai area and the southeastern regions of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe. The Tohono O'odham and San Carlos Reservations and Globe are covered by Safford.

The Western Region covers Yuma, and the Colorado River Indian Tribes in Bullhead City, Kingman, Lake Havasu and Quartzite. The Central Region in Phoenix covers the Salt River Tribes and Maricopa County.

Commissioner Sanchez questioned which office covers Gila Bend. Gila Bend is covered from 2 directions by the Yuma and Tucson VSD offices. VSD provides bi-annual training so counselors are current with Federal changes and there is great Veteran benefit coverage over the state. The department has made visits to the Havasupai Tribe at the foot of the Grand Canyon to serve its Veterans.

Sandra Flint at VARO is completing a new Vetrospect Program the VA intends to implement whereby claims will be filed electronically. Mike advised Sandra that our agency would like to be the pilot when the VA is ready to implement the program. Our agency has approximately 50,000 claims that could be electronically transferred to Vetrospect and future claims would be entered electronically.

ADVS is considering establishing a Quality Control office, wherein claims from outlying offices would be sent to the Phoenix VSD office and verified for accuracy. Any errors would be relayed back to the counselor originating the claim for correction and the corrected claim would be forwarded to the VA Regional Office for processing.

VSD is one of the core strengths of the agency that will continue to be viable. Arizona Veterans were awarded \$400 million in survivor and compensatory benefits through the VSD. There are many rural veteran issues and VSD will continue to schedule outreach meetings to the reservations. Mike will provide a calendar of Veteran outreach events for 2013 to the Advisory Commission.

Dave Hampton, ADVS Public Information Officer, presented a list of Senate and House committee members who will be hearing Veteran issues in the Legislature. There are 4 Veterans on the House Committee, including the first female Native American Veteran. The new 51st Legislature convenes January 7, 2013.

Commissioner Perkins complimented Dave and ADVS staff for a great job in setting up the Pearl Harbor Commemoration at Wesley Bolin Plaza. The B-17 flyover was quite impressive.

Introduction and Welcome to Invited guests – Chairman Cushing introduced newly appointed Commissioner Brett Rustand who comes to the commission with great credentials, having served in the OEF/OIF branches of the service in Army Aviation. We welcome Brett to the Arizona Veterans' Service Advisory Commission.

Chairman Cushing introduced Sharon Helman, Director of VA Medical Center. Ms. Helman presented a fact sheet of health care services, special programs the VA provides, and construction projects that are underway or to be built in 2013.

She is working with key leaders to correct several matters. The VA's first challenge is Veterans' access to healthcare services. Veterans are experiencing long waits at outlying VA clinics with nearly a 9 month wait to be seen. These long wait times are unacceptable and Ms. Helman is working to change this.

The Buckeye and Payson Clinics are the only contracted clinics. The VA intends to make these two clinics permanent VA community based outpatient clinics.

A new permanently staffed Southeast Clinic will be built near the existing clinic in 2013. Dental, mental health, along with primary care services, will be administered at this clinic. By July 4, 2013, the VA will hire more than 200 staff to allow Veterans timely access to medical care. Clinics will have extended hours and weekend availability.

Currently, VA Hospital emergency room wait time is approximately 4 hours; The VA is trying to shorten the wait time.

The VA is hiring health care staff to administer physical exams instead of contracting doctors; as well as expanding the surgery program for routine surgeries. The requests for Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI's) sparked the need for more than one machine. Two additional MRI machines are being purchased.

Within the next 6-8 months the VA will offer full comprehensive pain management to Veterans through therapeutic programs and alternative therapy, with drugs prescribed as a last resort.

To improve medical treatment for returning Veterans, a full comprehensive clinic for chronic pain and alternative therapy will be available to Veterans. A recreation therapy program and physical therapy with a pain management team will be offered.

The VA is working with the City of Phoenix and other partners to create areas of skills for Veterans such as welding art, horticulture, gardening and farming.

The VA is revamping the Homeless Veteran Program. An area is being renovated to centralize staff. They are helping Veterans hone their skills for work applications. The VA is receiving more financial support to house homeless Veterans.

A "Student at Home" Program was created for homeless children to help hone their math skills. The Phoenix VA is the first in the nation to apply this program.

The VA is hiring Veterans for job openings; over 39% of new hires are Veterans. The Schedule A Authority allows Veteran applicants to receive preference over other applicants. Ms. Helman asked that ADVS send Veterans who want to work with the Federal VA to the VA Human Resources offices. ADVS is already doing this.

The VA entered into a National and State Indian Health Services agreement whereby doctor visits are paid by the VA with no co-payment and Native American Veterans will have pharmacy access by mail.

The VA is trying to make the Veterans' experience better while they are in the hospital. A "Fresh Ideas Start Here" (FISH) Program was started from an employee's suggestion. Recipe cards for special meals prepared for Veteran patients are placed on the food trays so family members can use these recipes when the Veteran goes home. Lemon and cucumber water is being offered to Veterans waiting to be seen.

To promote health and wellness of the more than 80,000 Veterans they serve, the VA is opening an extensive therapy program. Veterans will have access to state of the art exercise equipment. The program will also be open to VA employees, however, Veterans have priority.

Colonel Strickland stated that Ms. Helman is the 4th VA Director he has dealt with since coming to ADVS in 2008 and that she is doing an outstanding job.

Commissioner Hanson noted that Ms. Helman spoke at the recent West Valley Chapter of Korean War Veterans event and stayed after the program to answer questions. That gesture is seldom seen and was very much appreciated.

Outreach Activities for the Commission – Vice Chair Jeff Olson reported on the Veterans' Day event at the Tucson VA Hospital. He was assisted by Terri Gent and Cathi Starr. It was an interesting and worthwhile day; at least 150 people stopped by the tables and viewed the portable display.

Cathi Starr, VSD Southern Region Manager, answered Veterans' questions and their concern that there is no appointment system in the Tucson VSD offices. There was interest in the Tucson Veteran Home and the Marana Cemetery brochures. People were not aware that these are state programs.

Open Discussion For the Good of the Order – Chairman Cushing received a letter from the Flagstaff Armed Forces Day Association inviting commissioners to attend the Armed Forces Day Parade on May 18, 2013, in Flagstaff. It is a Veteran-friendly community and the commission will let them know they are there to help.

New commissioner orientation and a tour of the Arizona Dept. of Veterans' Services offices will be January 10, 2013.

Chairman Cushing advised commissioners that regions were reassigned to include Jeff Begay and Brett Rustand.

Chairman Cushing closed the meeting by wishing everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy, Healthy, Prosperous New Year!

Meeting adjourned at 11:47 a.m. The next meeting will be held January 10, 2013.