

ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION
Director's Conference Room, 3839 N. 3rd St., Suite 209, Phoenix, AZ 85012
Thursday – September 9, 2010

M I N U T E S

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Chairman Gary Fredricks.

Present

Advisory Commissioners
Gary Fredricks, Chairman
Terrie Gent, Vice Chair
George Cushing
Phil Hanson
Lori Kiefer
Jeffrey Olson
Lionel Sanchez
David Toliver, Sr.

Absent
Kenneth Yamanouchi

Guests
Corey Harris, Vet Rep for Cong. Harry
Mitchell's Office

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services
Joey Strickland, Director
Robert Barnes, Deputy Director
(in at 11:15)
Homer Rodgers, Assistant Deputy
Director
Colleen Rundell, Administrator for the AZ
State Veteran Home – Phoenix
Mike Klier, Assistant Deputy Director
John Dudas, Region Manager*
Martha Alderman, Region Manager*
Art Nottingham, Region Manager*
Cathi Starr, Region Manager*
Travis Schulte, Homeless Vet Program &
Military Family Relief Fund

* Managers were excused at 11:29

After the Pledge of Allegiance, the minutes of the previous meeting were approved as published.

Communications The Chairman signed two letters on August 12: (1) letter to the Governor informing her that (a) the Commission “concluded that ADVS had made a diligent and good faith effort to address all items of the Auditor General Recommendations” from the November 19, 2009 special investigation report; (b) acknowledged the sunset audit underway at this time; and (c) recommended that ADVS be provided a direct reporting lawyer due to conflict issues cited by the Attorney General; and (2) a cover letter for the Commission’s response to the sunset audit questions posed by the Auditor General’s Office.

Agency Report

State Veteran Home Program:

- Director Strickland announced that the Home has been able to move from a one-star to a four-star quality rating since the latest survey results are published. Colleen Rundell has done an excellent job ensuring that the Home adheres strictly to regulations and meeting survey requirements since coming on board.
- When asked what the biggest challenges will be for 2011 at the Home, Homer Rodgers’ response was to keep quality as a number one priority, controlling costs, and increasing the daily census (how many residents are living at the Home at any given time). Census is currently 181 for the 200-bed facility. All accounts are in the black this year and \$2.3 million in general funds were actually returned to the State from an appropriation made in 2007.
- Homer Rodgers reported that the Tucson Home is on schedule for a June 2011 completion and they will be filling key positions around that time. He intends to start admitting residents in around October 2011, using the 44 names already on the waiting list for the Tucson

Home. He invited the Commissioners to take a tour of the facility when it has been completed.

Other Agency issues:

- Director Strickland toured the Madison Street Veterans Association transitional housing facility co-located with the YWCA at 7th Street and McDowell. The Veterans Donation Fund financed the facility, immediately getting 50 homeless veterans out of shelters.
- Director Strickland also spoke to the Adjutant General Hugo Salazar to see if an unused armory near the state capitol could be used to house homeless veterans. ADVS does not wish to acquire the property itself, but is willing to support Terry Aramon from Madison Street Veterans Association to run the program.
- Director Strickland indicated that many of the Native American veterans will not participate in events or seek assistance outside their own communities; and ADVS has been actively supporting Native American outreach. ADVS is helping host an all-Indian stand down September 25th (see handouts).
- Hispanic veterans have also expressed a keen interest in forming their own organization to support each other. Lt. Col. Ricardo Sanchez is heading up Los Veteranos de Arizona, which will also support Latino and Native American artistic and cultural features of importance to that population. ADVS helped them get established by using the Veterans Donation Fund.
- The Enduring Freedom Memorial is to be dedicated on October 9 to acknowledge the sacrifices of those killed in the Global War on Terror.
- The Department will finance installation of donated carpet for Mary Ellen's Place, in hopes that the facility will be operational by the end of October. This will open 15 low-cost permanent housing units for women veterans.
- Mr. Klier will fill a vacancy in Sierra Vista and re-open the Cottonwood office. Parker is also an area that may require its own office. He adheres to the principal that veterans should not travel longer than an hour to see a professional VBC anywhere in Arizona. Each of the Region Managers described their own outreach efforts and how they worked through their military installations and Yellow Ribbon programs to ensure returning troops knew about their benefits. Many do their own public service announcements on bases and forts and work with their public affairs offices.

History of the Veterans Benefits Counselor Program and Plans for Career Ladder

Chairman Fredricks reminded the Commission of the work done by the Veterans Task Force in 2006, and the assumption of study conducted by the Veterans Research Council afterwards. One of the most urgent recommendations made (which was supported by the Governor and the Legislature) was the addition of 40 Veteran Benefits Counselors (VBCs). Mike Klier talked about how the positions were authorized, but funding was not sufficient to fill all positions. While he would like to increase the number of VBCs, he did not feel that all 60 positions were necessary. There are 35 VBCs now and he believes that 40-42 is a workable staffing number.

Mike Klier also briefed the Commission on a career ladder concept that was proposed to help retain VBCs. It takes 2 to 5 years to become a proficient VBC, in spite of training efforts by the VA and the department. We lose VBCs because there is no hope for promotion or increased salaries. The new pay plan intends to correct this situation and is in the Governor's office now awaiting approval. ADVS will fund the increases itself and will not ask for any additional general funds to implement the salary plan. The work of our VBCs brings in \$70 million and the cost to the state is minimal.

Region Meetings/Schedule of Meetings through December 2011

The Region 2 Meeting scheduled for March 12, 2011 will be held in Flagstaff or Chinle and will be coordinated by Lionel Sanchez and Phil Hanson. The Region 1 meeting scheduled for September 2011 required further discussion. Otherwise, the list of scheduled meetings presented was approved (see attached).

Agenda Items for Future Meetings

Homer Rodgers is now responsible for construction of the state cemeteries in addition to new state veteran homes. He reports the US Department of Defense has not yet conveyed the property at Camp Navajo to the State. The Corps of Engineers requires at a minimum a boundary survey to begin the process.

Near-term Commission Goals

The long-term objectives spelled out in the strategic plan are relevant, but the Commission needs to prioritize and focus on issues of importance to veterans. Some concepts discussed:

- Engage younger veterans and learn more about their needs
- Review progress of the Veterans Clinic/Veterans Court initiated by Gen. Gregg Maxon (R-ANG and former ADVS Director) and identify ways the Commission can support this effort statewide.
- ADVS plans to build new state cemeteries and state veteran homes statewide.
- Transportation and other issues of importance to rural veterans.
- Two of the 3 State universities have established veterans' centers on campus. Director Strickland suggested that the Commission may want to encourage ASU to follow suit.
 - Corey Harris reports that ASU has a new veterans' liaison on staff. He also reports veterans without a community face a 5% retention rate (while studies show there is a 90% retention rate for those who have a veterans center on campus).
 - Co-Chair Gent suggested that a future meeting might be held where the Commissioners can tour a well-established veterans' center on a state university campus.
 - Community colleges are an opportunity to reach more recently discharged veterans.
 - ADVS did offer funds to help Armezzilla study what veterans need to ensure a higher retention of post-secondary education programs. Deputy Director Barnes offered to provide a copy of the study for a future meeting.
- Commissioners should come to the next meeting prepared to talk about priorities for short-term objectives.
- Review the Veterans Task Force and the subsequent Veterans Research Council recommendations. Identify which initiatives have been implemented, abandoned, tabled, etc. Chairman Fredricks will meet with Gabe to sketch out recommendations and status.
- VetBiz is a VA initiative to support veterans starting businesses. The program may be placed under Travis Schulte.
- Heroes to Hometown is a US Department of Defense initiative to help returning troops with severe injuries return to civilian life. Kathy Pearce has been in charge of the local program and reports the program will no longer be funded. ADVS has asked Ms. Pearce to continue her good work as a contractor and it will be funded through the Veterans Donation Fund.
- Social networking is critical to reaching younger service personnel and recently discharged veterans. The website needs to be improved and donations need to be accepted by credit card. The military women's conference must be advertised on Facebook at a minimum.

Open Discussion / For the Good of the Order

Corey Harris provided a legislative brief, outlining issues of interest to the veteran community initiated by Congressman Mitchell. He will be working to re-institute the suicide prevention program funding. Mr. Harris also warns that the presumptive for Agent Orange will place an even higher demand on VA claim processing, which has targeted a turnaround time at 120 for the past few years. Cong. Mitchell also obtained Congressional funding for a veterans education center in the east valley that should prove helpful schools and students in that area. Mr. Harris is also reviewing the Patriot Express Loan program (where vets can receive up to \$50,000 from the Small Business Administration). He also mentioned the Veterans Chamber of Commerce. There has been one meeting held so far, but holds great promise for veterans interested in starting their own businesses.

The three new Commissioners would appreciate a tour of ADVS before or after the October 14, 2010 meeting. Col. Strickland said he would make the arrangements.

Adjournment – Chairman Fredricks adjourned the meeting at 12:26 p.m. The next meeting will be at 10:00 p.m. on Thursday, October 14, in the Director's Conference Room - Suite 209, 3839 N. 3rd Street, Phoenix, AZ 85012.