

Arizona Department of Veterans' Service Advisory Commission

Manzanita Baptist Church Gymnasium

2040 Golden Gate Avenue,

Kingman, AZ 86401.

Saturday – September 10, 2011

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners

Terrie Gent, Chair

George Cushing, Vice Chair

Phillip Hanson

Jeffrey Olson

David Toliver, Sr.

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Col. Joey Strickland (US Army, Ret.), Director

Robert Barnes, Deputy Director

John Dudas, Regional Manager for Northern AZ

Tom Jones, Regional Manager for Western AZ

Aisha Porome, Veterans Benefits Counselor (VBC)
in Lake Havasu City

Mark Doyle, VBC in Kingman

Jose Avalos, VBC in Bullhead City

Gabe Forsberg, Strategic Planner/Women Vets

Katherine Harding, Exec. Asst. to Director

Special Guests

Pastor Peter Ernst, Manzanita Baptist

Susan Johnson-Molina, Women Veterans' Program

Manager for the VA Medical Center in
Prescott

Connie Hall, DVOP – Kingman (DES employee
responsible for finding employment for
veterans)

Carole Young, Kingman City Council

Ralph McKie, Pres. Vietnam Vets of America
(V V A) #975

Dave Stafford, 1st V.P. V V A

Jim Crumly, Com Officer - V V A #975

Mohave High School JROTC Color Guard

Absent

Gary Fredricks

Lionel Sanchez

Call to Order –The meeting was called to order at 10:05 a.m. by Chairperson Terrie Gent. Pastor Ernst offered prayer for the event and the Color Guard presented the colors. The Color Guard was provided by the Mohave High School AFJROTC, Bullhead City, AZ, under the direction of SMSgt Anthony Galvez (NCOIC). Director Joey Strickland provided an overview of the agency's recent activities and recognition. Chairperson Gent provided a brief background of the Commission and asked each Commissioner to give their name and a brief background.

An engraved plaque was provided to John Dudas who was retiring from the Department after 5 years of service, along with two certificates of appreciation from the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services and from Governor Janice K. Brewer. Plaques were presented to Pastor Ernst for hosting the event and to the Mohave High School JROTC Color Guard for their participation.

David Toliver, Sr. and Jeff Olson collected comment cards from attendees and identified those issues that could be discussed to the benefit of all attendees. Those individuals with personal questions were encouraged to come speak with the Commissioners, VBCs, or the representative from the VA Medical Center in Prescott. The attendees were assured that the Commission and ADVS staff would stay as long as necessary to ensure they got answers to all of their questions.

Comment cards are entered into a database in order to tally the types of issues raised at these regional meetings.

Questions from the Attendees

Question: Frontier Communications has a policy of hiring the veteran as a priority. Will local and federal governments do the same?

Answer: There is a statute that requires state government to add points to the over score of a candidate applying for a job. So long as there is a point system used to evaluate candidates, the veteran is given preferential treatment. Local governments may or may not have the same hiring policy in place.

Q: Can you give us a brief summary of the ADVS plan?

A: Director Strickland wants to build additional state veteran homes and cemeteries to serve veterans statewide. He believes a cemetery is needed just north of Tucson. He just acquired 81 acres for use as a cemetery near Flagstaff. Both cemeteries and state veteran home are needed in Yuma, Kingman and Prescott. He asked for assistance finding donated land in the Kingman area before he could apply for construction funds from the VA to build a cemetery and state veteran home.

- Comment (not on a comment card): Arizona isn't receiving as many federal programs as Nevada.
 - Director Strickland recommended that Arizona veterans follow the example of Louisiana veterans and make their needs known to their congressional delegates.
- Comment (not on a comment card): Why does he have a copayment when he makes 11 cents more than the income level that allows him to receive free care? Same gentleman also asked why he isn't provided travel reimbursement when he goes to the VA.
 - Deputy Director Barnes encouraged him to redo the 1010s every year. Medical expenses reduce the income that is considered when the VA Health Services determines a veterans' eligibility to receive care. If treatment is for a service-connected condition, there should be no copayment charged.
- Comment (not on a comment card): The Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) isn't large enough in Kingman. You aren't able to reach anyone by phone 90% of the time you call. It is understaffed. Another veteran complained of not being able to obtain specialty care for his condition in Kingman. Another veteran wanted to know about the availability of the VBCs in the area.
 - The Deputy Director indicated that he would pass along this comment to the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) #18 Director, Susan Bowers. The VBCs were all introduced at that time so veterans would be able to come to them with questions or concerns about their benefit questions.

Q: Why is his retirement pay reduced by the amount of disability pay that he receives?

A: The Deputy Director agreed that this issue affects many veterans, including himself.

Compensation for injuries received during military service should have no bearing on the amount a veteran receives for retirement pay. The gentleman asking the question asked Deputy Director Barnes and the Commission to address this issue.

Q: Why does it take such a long time for the VA to process claims?

A: Regional Manager Jones reported that the top priority for processing claims by the VA Regional Office at this time is for Agent Orange exposure. He is also patiently waiting for a determination for the claim he filed for himself April 2010.

Q: Why does Prescott VA reimburse Kingman residents for the number of miles between Kingman and the VA in Las Vegas? This seems especially unfair when the CBOC physician refers the veteran to Prescott and believes he does not have the ability to refer the veteran to the Las Vegas clinic. Another issue is that the VA in other medical centers will provide lunch to long-distance travelers along with their travel reimbursement. At the Prescott VA, they will only offer one or the other.

A: The VA in Prescott will need to respond to this question. Susan Molina-Johnson later introduced herself and asked veterans to speak with her after the meeting concluded.

- Comment (not on a comment card): The VA isn't helping with sleep apnea and a broken nose. The travel policy was changed about six months ago without notifying any of the affected veterans. The Prescott VA reports they have always been obliged to reimburse for travel to the closest VA facility that is capable of rendering the care needed.

Q: If the claims for Agent Orange exposure are all approved, will there be sufficient money to pay out these benefits?

A: Yes. The "Super Committee" is a 12-member bipartisan joint select committee responsible with making recommendations for a \$1.2 trillion to \$1.5 trillion cut in federal spending by Thanksgiving. Commissioner Olson recently sat in on meetings where this specific issue was raised, and he learned that veteran benefits are not under consideration for any of the federal budget cuts at this time.

Q: The Kingman CBOC sends far too many to Prescott for labs that could and should be done locally. It is dangerous for those on oxygen or too ill to be required make that 247-mile trip (one way) to Prescott. Also, there needs to be a higher emphasis on readjustment for all returning veterans.

A: The VA Medical Center contact may be able to help him with his concerns.

- Comment (not on comment card): One vet was able to get the VA's permission to be seen on a fee basis locally because he is 88 years old and unable to make the trip.
- Comment (not on comment card): It is not fair that veterans must spend \$76/month for insurance so they can receive local care when the Prescott VA won't provide for local care.

Q: Can you ask for a re-evaluation of disability when you've discovered that your condition may be caused or aggravated by injuries received during military service? How can records be located when the veteran worked in intelligence?

A: You can always ask for a re-evaluation. You are highly encouraged to file a claim. Tom Jones said there is a VA employee with appropriate clearance to request and review confidential records, so there is no reason to postpone filing a claim. He asked her for contact information so that he can get her the name of the contact at the VA who can help her.

Q: Will ADVS or the VA consider buying the Hualapai Mountain Medical Center that will be closing? It would be a place where the VA can provide care and the ADVS may be able to purchase it for use as a state veteran home.

A: Director Strickland said that he would mention this to Susan Bowers, VISN #18 Director.

Q: Arizona doesn't have the property tax break offered to veterans by other states. Where can I get on the website to see what state benefits are available to Arizona veterans?

A: Director Strickland has brought the property tax relief issue up before the Legislature since arriving here, along with making military retiree pay exempt from state taxes. He recommended that all veterans let their state lawmaker know that this is an important issue. Unless veterans voice their concerns, property tax relief will continue to be ignored.

Q: Nobody answers their phones.

A: Jose Avalos reported that the one-person VBC phones are to be answered 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. with one hour off for lunch Monday through Friday. If the VBC is on the phone or with a client, he attempts to get back with the caller within the morning or afternoon it was received. Susan Molina-Johnson represented the VA Medical Center in Prescott and was introduced by Chairperson Gent. Ms. Molina-Johnson indicated that veterans deserve to have their calls to the CBOC answered timely.

- Comment (not on a comment card): The VA doesn't follow its own rules. The CBOC provider tells the veteran that they are not able to refer them out-of-state for followup care; the Prescott VA won't reimburse the veteran for their full mileage because the Las Vegas VA is closer to Kingman.

- Comment (not on a comment card): The VA needs to allow veterans to get tests locally instead of requiring them to travel to Prescott.
- Comment (not on a comment card): The CBOC is short-staff and their phones are not being answered and there are frequently no calls returned.
 - Ms. Molina-Johnson invited them to meet with her following the meeting to discuss their concerns and she will investigate them and get back to them with her findings.
 - Director Strickland assured the attendees that all of these concerns will be documented and he will take these issues to Susan Bowers, VISN #18 Director.
 - Jose Avalos reports that he receives his health care from Las Vegas. Within two weeks, a veteran can transfer medical care from one VA Medical Center to another and the veteran is free to choose where he or she wishes to be seen. He also indicated that a local laboratory has a contract with the VA to draw and process certain lab tests for the VA.
 - Aisha Porome encouraged veterans to voice their opinions about the care they receive and other benefits that do not meet their needs.
- Comment (not on a comment card): Vietnam veterans are dying at an alarming rate. Is it the VA's intention to wait to process claims filed by these veterans until they are gone?
- Comment (not on a comment card): Veterans are treated rudely while standing in line at the CBOC, and the CBOC personnel are not always "on task" when he has been in the clinic.

Q: Are there plans to build a domiciliary or transitional housing to for formerly incarcerated veterans?

A: Ms. Molina-Johnson will find out and report back.

Connie Hall, DVOP working for the AZ Dept. of Economic Security, asked veterans to identify themselves as vets as they apply for employment and suggested that they bring their separation documents with them as they apply. She also suggested that veterans with financial hardship apply for assistance when having difficulty.

Chairperson Gent adjourned the meeting at 12:10 p.m. The next meeting will be held October 13, 2011 at the new state veteran home in Tucson.