

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

July 10, 2014

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners

Jeff Olson, Chair
Ron Perkins, Vice Chair
Kara Caldwell
Philip Hanson (via teleconference)
Brett Rustand (via teleconference)
David Toliver, Sr.

Excused:

Wayne Krula

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Robert Barnes, Deputy Director
Dave Hampton, Public Information Officer
Judy Smith, Administrative Secretary
Yasmin Ramos, Executive Assistant

Guests

George and Jan Cushing
Gene Crego, State Pres., Vietnam Veterans of America

Call to Order – Chairman Jeff Olson called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m.

There were no corrections to June minutes. Vice Chair Ron Perkins moved to approve as presented. Commissioner Hanson seconded the motion. Motion carried unanimously.

Introduction and Welcome of Invited guests – Chairman Olson welcomed visitors George and Jan Cushing and Gene Crego to the meeting.

Gene Crego said he and four members of Vietnam Veterans of America traveled to Washington, D.C. April 8-10. They met with six House members on Capitol Hill regarding the Senate vote for equal pay for women. They saw the Senate vote on a bill.

Crego also said that on:

April 10 – Members of “Faces of Agent Orange” met with the House Representatives on Capitol Hill. Three Vietnam Veterans and their grown daughters told of their health problems and their children’s problems caused from their father’s contact with Agent Orange and other chemicals used during the Vietnam War and around the world.

June 4 – Congresswoman Kyrsten Sinema held phase one of her meetings with the top VA Medical Center officials and Tri-West regarding medical departments and accounts.

June 7 – Unified Arizona Veterans held a “town hall” with seven candidates who are running for governor at the Phoenix Public Library. It went well.

July 1 – Senator John McCain, Representative Kyrsten Sinema, and Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton held a benefits fair for veterans. Numerous people from the VA Regional office were there and signed up more than 350 veterans for VA benefits.

July 2 – Congresswoman Sinema held a second meeting with VA Medical Center officials.

July 9 – Bill H.R. 1216 was introduced to rename the Prescott Veteran Center as the Dr. Cameron McKinley Veteran Center. The bill was passed by the House and Senate and is going to the president for signature.

Communications – Letters to Chairman Olson and Vice Chair Perkins were received from the Udall Shumway law firm announcing a “Protect Our Veterans” community service seminar on July 18 in the Udall Shumway Conference Center in Mesa.

The secretary received confirmation that a DES representative will attend the September 11 Advisory Commission meeting.

Agency Announcements and Updates – Deputy Director Robert Barnes attended for Director Vogt.

Cemeteries

Mr. Barnes updated on the Camp Navajo Veterans’ Cemetery. A pre-construction meeting is being held today; bids were awarded and a construction company was named. Today’s meeting is to define entrances and exits and when building will start.

Construction bids for the Marana Cemetery are out with an opening date of July 28. The contract will be selected and sent to Washington, D.C., and 6-10 days later we should be able to start construction. Both projects are moving ahead.

Veterans Services Division

In the last two months, Director Vogt and Mr. Barnes have visited many of the veteran services organizations as they’ve held their conferences throughout the state and briefed them on developments in the agency.

A new Phoenix VAMC Acting Director, Glenn Costie, was named. He will be coming on board today or tomorrow. The VA Hospital is reporting to the new director twice a month on the status of their waiting list. Mr. Barnes will try to get copies of these reports for the agency and stay on top of the issue.

Mr. Barnes spoke earlier today with the Secretary of Veteran Affairs, Sloan Gibson about the many challenges in the Federal VA across the U.S. with patient waiting lists. The VA is working to lower the waiting times and bring the lists up to date as soon as they can.

The VA is increasing medical referrals to the community, which used to be called fee-basis. The referrals increased to 80,000 community or non-VA healthcare purchases in the last 60 days.

The VA is looking at four areas of accountability. In addressing all the findings from the I.G.’s report, they suggest there will be a stream of personnel actions coming in the near future to handle those who may not have performed the way the VA would want. They are looking at all the best practices in the private sector to see if there are ways they can improve access to care and they intend to increase staff, space and resources within the VA.

While the VA is sending veterans to the private sector for care, at some point, veterans will have to return to the VA. The VA must have the capacity to care for these veterans when they come back into the VA and there will be one million or more veterans coming off active duty in the next year or two. It is important now to look for ways to care for them along with the current veterans.

It is important for our state directors to be up to date and understand what is going on.

Dave Hampton presented a Capitol Media Services article on the legal use of medical marijuana for the treatment of PTSD, which was discussed at the June meeting, and the Arizona Department of Health’s decision that occurred yesterday.

In response to the article, Chairman Olson heard on the radio that attorney, Ken Sobel from Tucson, strongly indicated his intention to challenge the Arizona Department of Health’s ruling. Chairman Olson said this issue will be a matter for the legal system and is not a policy issue.

Vice Chair Perkins asked if VA decisions were predicated on whether Congress passes a bill for more doctors, more personnel and space, and for removing people who are not performing.

Mr. Barnes said the VA secretary did not say if all of these decisions were predicated on the bill passing, but he has four areas of concern. One question brought to him was contracts and the bureaucracy that's built up in the federal government with contracts having to go through so many offices for approval.

Disciplinary action for those who may not have followed procedures is predicated on the bill passing. He noted that Phoenix, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh employees are still on administrative leave.

VA Secretary Sloan Gibson made a strong statement in that he intends to get it right. He said in the past, money has been provided to fix the problems and, after two years, the money is gone and the problems are still there. He plans to change that; and he wants permanent solutions. He intends to hire advisors to guide the VA on how to be sure fixes are permanent. He intends to make the I.T. people more responsive to the scheduling employees who need the assistance to do the scheduling. He has already taken away senior staff bonuses for the time being. Recently, \$400 million dollars in critical funding was directed to hospitals to pay for immediate staffing and contracts.

Vice Chair Perkins noted that Interim directors of the Phoenix VA hospital are serving for only four months at a time. There has been talk of whether that's productive or not. The commission heard from Sharon Helman several times and, in view of problems that have surfaced in the last few months, the commission would like to hear from one of the directors of what their thoughts are and what is being done to correct the problems. Is it possible to have the new director address the Commission?

Mr. Barnes said Secretary Gibson announced a few days ago that all hospital directors will meet with VSO's every 30 days. As these meetings take place, he will see what can be done to get the hospital directors to come before the commission.

Mr. Barnes noted that he contacted the hospitals and clinics to set a date for this year's Women's Health and Knowledge Fair. The date is September 27th, and he has been in touch with hospital directors asking that they open as many CBOC's as possible to provide services to women veterans on that day.

Commissioner Toliver said due to the negative press about the VA hospital, he has been in a position to defend ADVS or clarify the difference between the Federal VA hospital crises and the State Department of Veterans' Services. He asked if we can get clarity between ADVS vs. the VA Hospital, or a line of demarcation between the two.

Mr. Barnes said ADVS is not part of what's going on at the Federal level, but that a lot of good comes out of the partnership ADVS has with the Federal VA.

It is important to let veterans know that, along with the bad that is coming out of the VA, there is also a lot of good being done. They are helping a lot of veterans and ADVS is there to advocate and provide resources to help veterans who may have a problem at the Federal level. They can seek help through ADVS to help them through that challenge. Veteran Benefit Counselors are a great part of that.

Chairman Olson said the misunderstanding in the difference between the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services and the Federal Veterans Administration has existed since the first day of the very first state Department of Veterans Affairs in the U.S.

What ADVS is doing to rebrand and increase the knowledge of the brand to differentiate the ADVS from the Department of Federal Affairs is the right thing to do and hopefully someday the difference will be recognized.

Commissioner Caldwell questioned the vacant Outreach Coordinator position and how the agency is fulfilling the role of outreach to universities and community colleges and other job responsibilities of that position.

Mr. Barnes said ADVS is constantly providing outreach to veterans and reaching out to the community colleges and universities. All employees, division managers and VBC's are outreaching to veterans. The agency is not necessarily looking for an Outreach Coordinator. A job announcement went out for a Program and Project Specialist in the employment and education arena to oversee the Women's Veteran program, outreach, employment and education initiatives. One hundred ten resumes were received; interviews will be held within the next two weeks.

Before June 30th, Mr. Barnes and Dave Hampton reached out to universities that are on the supportive campus list, to remind them to submit reports of their successes. They are to report these figures every six months and June 30 was the reporting deadline.

Vice Chair Perkins noted that some time ago, while visiting the American Legion and VFW in Flagstaff, he encountered a veteran who was not being treated properly at the Phoenix VA. The veteran was not pleased with the treatment he was getting; appointments were cancelled without notification and he was not aware until he traveled to Phoenix and found that his appointment had been cancelled.

The veteran was invited to attend an Advisory Commission meeting and brief the commission on his VA complaints. He was then invited to address the VA Hospital Board of Directors to voice his opinion about his problems. This was all done through ADVS and its relationship with the VA Hospital. Vice Chair Perkins thanked ADVS for its work on veteran issues and the good job that was done to help this veteran.

Dave Hampton noted that ADVS' ability to help the Flagstaff veteran was largely due to the good relationship the department had with Director Sharon Helman. Now the VA is assigning interim directors for four months at a time and, after those four months, the directors go back to their original jobs. It will be hard to maintain as good a relationship as we've had in the past, but when a permanent director is named, the agency hopes to form a good relationship with that person.

Chairman Olson said there are some good things happening in health care and bringing in 80,000 potential fee basis people and having more community payment sounds like a good thing. His concern is that as veterans are assigned to non-VA doctors, they will be billed for certain procedures the veteran is not aware are not covered by the VA, which will cause confusion. Those bills, if unpaid, will go into collection, penalties and interest will be charged and possible litigation could result.

Chairman Olson hopes as these programs are being developed, someone is paying close attention so this does not happen. At some point the billings will impact not only the veterans but the ADVS Veteran Counselors, as the veterans will turn to the veteran counselors and expect them to help resolve these issues.

Mr. Barnes said Chairman Olson raises a very important point and it happens when contracted care goes beyond what VA specified. The veteran has not always known what care is contracted by the VA and sometimes when receiving treatment, they are asked if they want to receive additional treatment while they are there. Many times the veteran opts to receive the treatment, not realizing the treatment may not be covered by VA contract, which results in the veteran being billed for the additional treatment.

Mr. Barnes will confer with Director Vogt and the three hospital directors today to address how the hospitals will handle these billings through fee basis.

He noted that part of his conversation with Secretary Sloan was how to bring outsourced veterans back into VA care, or is a total medical package provided to veterans as non-VA care.

Veteran Homes – Chairman Olson asked about the census for the veteran homes. Mr. Barnes noted the census for the Phoenix Veteran Home is 170 and Tucson is at 106.

Chairman Olson noted that at a past meeting, ADVS had said the VA would be sending some of their patients to the Phoenix Veteran Home while renovations on buildings at the VA are being done. In light of all that has happened with the VA, will this still be done?

Mr. Barnes said he VA hospital diverted funds to other areas and the renovations for the rehab and living center were put on hold; VA patients will not be coming to the Phoenix Veteran Home this year.

Vice Chair Perkins asked if there is any progress in determining where the Yuma State Veteran Home will be built?

Mr. Barnes said ADVS is still in discussions with the City of Yuma regarding suitable land to build the veteran home. Three or four properties are being reviewed, but we don't have a definite decision.

Outreach Activities for the Commission – Chairman Olson asked for outreach activity comments.

Commissioner Toliver, as President of the Arizona chapter of Tuskegee Airmen and a member of the ADVS Advisory Commission, was asked to be the keynote speaker at last year's veteran's court graduation.

He noted that the veteran's court is charged with trying cases of minor offenses that involve veterans, especially those diagnosed with service-related illnesses. The goal of the veteran's court is to allow veterans to be rehabilitated into society as law-abiding citizens.

This year on June 12th, Commissioner Toliver was invited to the Phoenix veteran's court graduation. Fifty veterans had completed a program of intensive supervision of probation by the VA and the courts and they had to navigate four phases of the program with no time constraints.

It is important to note that in the State of Arizona, felonies can be set aside, not expunged, from a Veteran's record in Veteran's Court. After completion of court, court fees are sometimes waived. Commissioner Toliver said it is a great program that gives the veteran one more "lift up".

Commissioner Toliver said Veteran's Court is a good outreach opportunity for commissioners.

Vice Chair Perkins said the AZ Veterans Hall of Fame Society has a program to provide bus tickets and credit cards for groceries and gas to veterans in the veteran court system. As veteran courts are spreading throughout the state, the Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame Society is planning to provide these passes and cards to the veteran's courts. If the court has the bus passes or credit cards, they can give these to veterans on the spot and make a great difference for the veteran.

Vice Chair Perkins said he received a good comment about ADVS Veteran Counselor Melvin Morris who attends the veteran court proceedings and works with veterans who have VA issues.

Chairman Olson asked about the Veteran Benefit Counselor complement and whether the department is fully staffed at this point.

Mr. Barnes said vacancies have been kept at a minimum. Mike Klier is hearing from veterans in other states who want to work in Arizona. Many are already trained benefit counselors. They must also go

through the agency training. Our newest veteran counselor started with the agency last week, comes from Wisconsin with over 12 years of experience. There are no VSD staffing vacancies at this time.

Commissioner Toliver said he and Commissioner Caldwell, as the Region 4 team, hope to establish a relationship with the veteran counselors in their region and ultimately the relationship would be such that the VBC's will inform them when certain organizations are holding functions that they can attend.

Commissioner Toliver asked if there was a listing of commanders of Veteran Service Organizations and contact information the commissioners could access. The secretary advised of the Veterans Service Organization (VSO) Directory on the ADVS website.

Chairman Olson noted that on August 2nd, he will attend the Sierra Vista United Veterans Council meeting. Vice Chair Perkins said he will also try to attend this event. He noted that the Veterans Hall of Fame Society is holding a meeting that same day and Senator John McCain is scheduled to speak.

Chairman Olson gave "The Chairman's Review of the Year". He is pleased that the commission started the year with a report to the governor prior to the legislative session, stating what the commission thinks of the programs taking place in ADVS. Chairman Olson said the intent was to assist the governor in making decisions about funding programs for Arizona veterans proactively, rather than waiting until the legislature was in session and the budget was developed.

Chairman Olson noted that the commission had a positive relationship with the directors of the VA Regional Office and the VA Hospital. Both directors attended Advisory Commission meetings in the past year. We hope to continue a good relationship with future directors.

A month ago, the commission held an interesting meeting with about 20 guests, heard testimony and was able to conduct the meeting within the guidelines of the Open Meeting Law.

The Advisory Commission Guidelines were updated. Monthly meetings were changed to bi-monthly, with at least two meetings to be held outside Maricopa County. Information on setting up a mentoring program, or a more structural education process for new commissioners was added to the guidelines.

The goal is to have a full commission of members as soon as possible. Chairman Olson said they cannot do business without a full commission. Chairman Olson will continue to push for a full commission.

Chairman Olson said he has enjoyed working with everyone on the commission and looks forward to remaining one more year and working with the commission on behalf of Arizona veterans.

Chairman Olson called George Cushing to the front of the room and presented an engraved gold clock in great appreciation of his six years on the commission, with one of those years as Chairman.

Deputy Director Robert Barnes presented Mr. Cushing a plaque from the Department of Veterans' Services, in appreciation for his six years of service on the Advisory Commission and his dedication to and work for veterans.

Chairman Olson asked for nominations for Chairman. Commissioner Toliver moved to nominate Ron Perkins as Chairman. Commissioner Caldwell seconded the motion. There were no other nominations and the motion carried unanimously.

Chairman Olson asked for nominations for Vice Chair. Ron Perkins moved to nominate Commissioner Brett Rustand. Commissioner Toliver seconded the motion. There were no other nominations and the motion carried unanimously.

Commissioner Olson turned the gavel over to Chairman-elect Perkins for the remainder of the meeting. Chairman Perkins noted that he has requested through the Governor's Boards and Commissions his membership renewal and is waiting for the renewal letter. He thanked the commissioners for their confidence in him to lead the commission for the next year.

He thanked Commissioner Olson for an outstanding job as chairman for the past year through his dedicated leadership and deep concern for our veterans. Chairman-elect Perkins asked Commissioner Olson to serve on the Executive Committee with Vice Chair Rustand and himself.

Chairman-elect Perkins hopes that in working with ADVS, the commission can do an outstanding job of serving veterans in Arizona and that it will be able to work with the governor on important veteran issues and continue to make the commission more visible through the outreach program.

One concern Chairman Perkins has, as does Commissioner Olson, is the number of commissioners. Right now the only 4 out of 6 commissioners who are in good standing are Commissioners Olson, Toliver, Hanson and Rustand. Both he and Commissioner Caldwell have submitted applications for reappointment. Commissioner Krula will not continue on the commission.

Chairman Perkins would like the September meeting to be held at the Phoenix veteran home. It is important for new members to see where the commission normally meets and they can take a tour of the veteran home and ADVS headquarters.

Chairman Perkins asked for suggestions on where to hold the first outreach meeting. August will be an Executive Committee meeting, which would make October the first outreach meeting. Commissioner Caldwell suggested northern Arizona since the last outreach meeting was held in southern Arizona.

Flagstaff, Kingman or Bullhead City were suggested. Commissioner Toliver said travel costs to the extreme northern areas should be considered.

Commissioner Toliver suggested choosing an area that allows travel to and from in one day.

Commissioner Hanson suggested holding the meeting in Prescott, Payson or Globe. Commissioner Toliver chose Prescott. Commissioners were in agreement to hold a meeting in Prescott on the second Thursday of October.

Chairman Perkins noted that Prescott is in Region 2 and asked if Commissioners Toliver and Caldwell would secure a meeting site, hopefully at the Prescott VA Hospital. This would be a one day trip and not require overnight accommodations.

Chairman Perkins asked Commissioner Toliver to contact the VBC's and find out when would be the best time for the commission to come to Prescott for a meeting, either on a Saturday or if there was a function going on. We would need to know well in advance in order to announce to the veteran community.

Commissioner Toliver will talk to Dave Mosier, Veterans Services Northern and Western Regional Manager, and find out when would be a good time to hold a meeting in the area.

Chairman Perkins said the Northern Arizona VA presented an access update he believes was prepared by the congressional staff. He asked Mr. Barnes if all the hospitals do this on a periodic basis.

Mr. Barnes said most of the hospitals issue a news bulletin or periodic update; there are a lot of new reporting requirements the directors must meet. He will look into seeing that Chairman Perkins is added to the mailing list to receive this hospital update.

Gene Crego said he had sent the Prescott VA report to Mike Klier and the Chairman when he received it from the Pat Farrell, Chairman of the Jerry Ambrose Veterans Council of Mohave County. He was unaware that ADVS does not get the report and, in the future, he will be sure to send it to Chairman Perkins.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order –

The meeting adjourned at 11:22 a.m. The next Advisory Commission meeting will be held September 11, 2014, in Room A-107 at the Phoenix Veteran Home.