

July 14, 2022

**Arizona Veterans' Service
Advisory Commission**

**STRATEGIC
POLICY
OBJECTIVES**

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PREFACE

HISTORY

The Commission was initially established in 1951 as the “Veterans Service Commission” to serve and advocate for veterans and their families. The Governor established the Commission as a separate agency in 1982. In 1999, the legislature separated the Commission from the agency and made the Commission an advisory body to the newly created Arizona Department of Veterans’ Services (ADVS) with its own governor-appointed director. Arizona Revised Statute § 41-602 states, “The Commission shall provide policy advice to the governor and the director regarding veterans’ issues.”

BACKGROUND

In 2005, the state of Arizona recognized the need for a comprehensive approach to issues facing Arizona Veterans, the Arizona Veterans’ Service Advisory Commission (AVSAC) recommended to the governor a special task force be established. Accordingly, the governor established the Arizona Veteran’s Task Force by Executive Order 2005-15 and subsequently, the Arizona Veteran’s Research Council by Executive Order 2007-08. The comprehensive reports and recommendations resulting from these efforts were submitted to the governor and to the legislature in January 2006 and January 2009 respectively.

Many of the specific recommendations previously outlined in the documents were codified into statutes and many needed veterans’ services have been provided or are nearing reality, e.g., two new cemeteries were added, two new veteran homes are opening and an additional home has been approved, new ways to address veteran homelessness are being developed, better suicide prevention measures are being put in place, better access to care and benefits are being made available, etc. Nevertheless, progress towards resolving important and fundamental issues affecting Arizona veterans remains a work in progress. In the effort to build upon the good work generated by the previous executive orders and the ADVS, the Commission has established a set of strategic policy objectives that address five prevailing issues currently facing veterans and their families. This document discusses these objectives including a brief background, the Commission’s position, and recommended actions / advice for meeting the objectives.

Listed below are the issues directly affecting Arizona Veterans that are addressed in this document:

1. Facilitating access
2. Education and employment
3. Healthcare and social welfare
4. Unique characteristics of sub-groups

FACILITATING ACCESS

In the State of Arizona there are over 500,000 veterans. It has been estimated these veterans generate over \$6 billion to the state's economy through Veteran Administration expenditures, disability compensation, pensions, educational benefits, military retiree pay and veterans' employment funding. We need to ensure that the men and women who have served in uniform will always have access to the services and support they have earned.

Veteran Benefits Counselors (VBCs) – The federal United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is a complex bureaucracy which veterans are required to navigate to receive the VA support that they may have earned. Given the complexity, the number of Arizona veteran residents who are potentially affected and the resultant financial gain in federal funding available to augment state revenues, it is in the best interest of Arizona and Arizona veterans to provide proactive assistance in accessing these benefits. Under federal guidelines approximately 60 state veteran benefit counselors (VBCs) can be justified. On June 29, 2022, HB 2862 was passed into law, providing ongoing funding for 20 additional VBC's for rural tribal nations with communities located 100 or more miles from the nearest Veterans Affairs service center.

Current funding provides for 42 VBCs and three support staff. The VBCs need to be deployed to areas of the state where veterans can readily access them when required.

- With the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, the VBCs have transitioned to working remotely with a significant degree of documented success.
- Budgets should protect all the current VBC positions.
- A career ladder concept to help retain VBCs needs to be authorized and funded.
- In addition, a rigorous training program for VBCs and available to veteran's service officers (VSOs) of veteran's service organizations needs to remain in place.

Be Connected Community Network (BCCN) – The network, under the umbrella of the Arizona Coalition of Military Families, is a nationally-recognized effort to connect service members, veterans and their families to the right resources at the right time. It is a public/private partnership focused on building Arizona's statewide capacity to care for and support all service members, veterans and their families and includes military, government and community organizations. The partnership process for organizations is based on [Arizona's Guidelines for CARE](#). Organizations that have completed the partnership process will have this noted on their organization profile.

The Arizona network is divided into three regions: South, Central and North with the respective areas of responsibility exactly matching those of the three VA Healthcare Systems in the state. Each BCCN includes various veteran support organizations (VSOs) within the region.

EDUCATION, VETERANS COURT, AND EMPLOYMENT

Education – According to the VA, Arizona ranks in the upper third in the nation in the number of veteran students attending higher education or otherwise using their earned educational benefits. Recent polls show that less than 50 percent of veterans have used the GI Bill, but more than 50 percent of veterans who have used the GI Bill completed their higher education programs. However, the Hechinger report in 2017 reported the graduation rate for veterans at community colleges was typically astonishingly low. The reason being lack of support for the student veterans and their challenges, e.g., juggling families, jobs, service-related disabilities, transitioning difficulties, plus gaps in culture, and experience compared with other students, and red tape of the bill and bill constraints that leave no room for error or schedule conflicts. We need to continue to work closely with our college campuses across the state to build a supportive system for veterans to ensure they receive the services they earned to reach their educational goals and the State of Arizona gets a steady stream of GI Bill funding and an enhanced mature educated work force. So, the challenge is to ensure veterans understand the educational benefits to which they are entitled and receive the necessary support when they do use the benefits.

- Continue to advocate for the Arizona Supportive Campuses certified institutions.
- In this light, university programs which actively assist veterans in completing their studies are critically important. Included are needs for priority registration, transition courses and dedicated veteran meeting space.
- The Arizona Supportive Campuses should provide periodic reports to ADVS that provide the status of the stated needs, ongoing actions, and graduation numbers and rates.

Veterans Court – The extreme rigors of the conflict in Southwest Asia and the growing recognition of the impact of post-traumatic stress on our veterans presents a growing need to differentiate between treatable mental health issues and pure punishment within our courts systems. A concerted effort to deal with these issues within the veteran community is required.

Specifically, we support the integration and establishment of Veterans' Treatment Courts throughout Arizona to ensure veterans receive fair treatment and services they earned through carefully monitored court ordered rehabilitation and counseling to overcome the ill effects of service-related problems such as post-traumatic stress or traumatic brain injuries. Uniquely established Veterans' Treatment Courts can better evaluate and rehabilitate veterans in the criminal justice system. These veterans deserve our community's full support to complete transition to civilian life after fighting for our freedoms.

- We support ADVS continuing to provide financial assistance to Veterans' Courts for start-up costs.
- We support advocating for the existing 10 Veterans' Courts already established in Arizona to assure their ongoing veteran support and stability.
- Additionally, we support efforts by our civilian community to help with legal issues of our veterans such as the establishment by the Arizona Bar of a standing committee for military personnel, veterans, and their families under which several attorneys and other experts have been assigned to subcommittees to include legislation, programs and services, family law, veterans' courts, education, and training.

- We also support the establishment of Veterans' Legal Clinics within our educational institutions for veterans' general civil and consumer legal issues, which is to be expanded to include criminal and domestic law matters in the future.

Employment – The unemployment rate for veterans has improved and is now lower than the national rate. But underemployment continues to be a significant challenge for veterans. In 2020 veteran unemployment across the country was reported to be 9.6%; the U.S. Department of Labor now reports that number to be 2.4% for post 9/11 veterans and almost that low for older veterans. Yet 68% of these veterans are not using educational benefits available to them. Improved employment readiness - better understanding of, and exposure and access to required certification, education, training, etc., could lead them toward more stability and a better quality of life.

- We support the top priority of AZHiresVets! a recruitment effort initiated in February 2022, coordinated by the Governor's Office, the Arizona Coalition for Military Families and the Arizona Departments of Administration, Veterans' Services and Economic Security to increase employment in the state's workforce from 8.5% to 15% by 2025.
- We support the Arizona Roadmap to Veteran Employment initiative and the following three related initiatives/programs under its umbrella:
 - ADVS continuing to work with/for transitioning service members through the "Arizona SkillBridge" program that is part of the DoD SkillBridge program.
 - ADVS continuing in its advisory role to the Arizona Corporate Council on Veteran Careers (ACCVC).
 - Continuation of the Arizona Veteran Supportive Employer program.
- Further, we support hiring preferences for both disabled and non-disabled veterans who apply for state jobs, as well as the establishment of a goal of three percent state contracts to be set aside for Arizona veteran-owned businesses.
- We encourage further exploration of initiatives to incentivize small businesses across Arizona to hire veterans.
- Finally, the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) and the Local Veteran Employment Representatives (LVER), which provides employment assistance, are currently located within the Arizona Department of Economic Security. It is a well-known fact that within every large institution lack of communication can inhibit cooperative actions. We support a review to investigate the viability of more effectively integrating (either organizationally or procedurally) the efforts of these employment assistance agencies with the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services.

HEALTH CARE AND SOCIAL WELFARE

Health Care – Veteran health care is fundamentally a federal responsibility. The State of Arizona has generally adequate federal veteran healthcare facilities. One area of concern is the established boundaries, which Arizona Veterans have to travel excessively to reach assigned facilities, e.g.; Yuma Veterans travel to the Tucson VA, instead of the Phoenix VA, which is the nearest facility; Mohave County veterans travel to the Las Vegas VA, rather than the Northern Arizona VA in Prescott.

- We encourage a review of the federal policies that drive these inefficiencies.
- We advocate for expanded telehealth services, facilitated by AZ HB2454, signed into law in 2021
- We support proactive claims processing by our VBCs and trained veteran service officers from recognized veterans service organizations as well as an expanded veterans' long-term care program as described elsewhere in this paper.

Homelessness – The Secretary of Veterans Affairs, launched a 5-year Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness Among Veterans in November 2009. The ADVS echoed the call with the creation of the Homeless Veterans Division in December 2009. Homelessness across the nation had dropped by 10% and among veterans by 50%. A new strategic plan will be published in 2022 by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, a collaboration of 19 federal agencies, including the VA. [See The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness.](#)

The advent of the pandemic, coupled with the lack of affordable housing, has led to an uptick in the number of veterans at risk of or being homeless. The increase to 637 homeless veterans in 2021 made Arizona one of 10 states where more than 15% of people staying in homeless shelters were veterans during the 2021 point-in-time count. An uptick is expected with the January 2023 count.

- We support ADVS continuing to build capacity, support, and assist in implementing the specific goals, strategies and objectives outlined in the Arizona Veteran Homeless Action Plan.

Community Care Facilities (Homes) – The Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act requires the VA to prescribe for each state the number of nursing home and domiciliary beds for which grants may be furnished. VA data and methodology confirms the need for nearly six 180-bed veteran nursing homes in Arizona. The state currently has a 200-bed facility in Phoenix and a 120-bed facility in Tucson. Additionally, the dedicated work of the ADVS obtained approval and funding of 80-bed facilities for Flagstaff and Yuma; both facilities will be open in 2022. A fifth veterans' home has been approved for Mohave County. Because each client in each home receives federal funding through Medicare/Medicaid, the VA or Social Security, they ensure employment of hundreds of healthcare workers and providers.

- The enhanced management, quality and professional care posture of the Phoenix facility needs to be continuously monitored and supported.
- We support the construction and operation of a Fisher House near the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Phoenix, which will provide a 'home away from home' for families of veterans receiving medical care at major military and VA medical centers.

Cemeteries – Federal guidelines for veteran cemeteries provides for approximately six veteran cemeteries in Arizona. Whereas the veteran cemeteries located near Cave Creek and the VA Hospital in Prescott are federal facilities, state and local roadblocks exist which inhibit the successful expansion of these facilities to meet intended capacity.

- The current state cemeteries in Sierra Vista, Marana, and Flagstaff require adequate funding for operations, maintenance, renovation, and expansion.
- We support protection and growth of the Cemetery Trust Fund to provide for operation and maintenance of the state cemeteries in perpetuity in the absence of state funding.

Suicide – According to a 2015-2019 study by the Arizona State University found that Mohave, Yavapai, and Coconino Counties have suicide rates well above the Arizona average rate. Statewide, one in five suicide victims in Arizona are veterans. And women veterans are twice as likely to die by suicide than their non-military counterparts.

The Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans (SAV) Act is a federal law signed into effect in 2015. There were several states identified as pilot sites. While Arizona was not on the original list, the Office of Senator John McCain advocated for Arizona to be added as a pilot state.

Arizona, through a partnership of VA, ADVS, Arizona Coalition for Military Families, Arizona National Guard, TriWest and the Arizona Healthcare Cost Containment System, in April 2017 launched a suicide prevention initiative titled “Be Connected.” The program is more than a suicide prevention campaign. It focuses on how each of us can make a difference in the lives of those around us by being trained and prepared to reach out or respond in a moment of need. By embedding support deep in our community, we bring the ability to help to trusted individuals in the lives of our veterans and their families. It brings together partners from across different sectors to focus on statewide suicide prevention and intervention.

In March 2019, Arizona was selected by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the U.S. Veterans Affairs as one of only seven states to participate in the inaugural *Governor’s Challenge to Prevent Suicide among Service Members, Veterans and their Families*. Arizona’s interagency team has provided the framework for identifying priorities, organizing efforts and contributing to a national focus on veteran suicide prevention. Arizona was invited due to efforts and successes of the Be Connected program.

- The Commission supports and encourages the state to support funding requirements for the Be Connected program and for ADVS to continue in its role as a lead advocate and partner in the program.
- The Commission will continue advocating and for the Be Connected program and educating the public, veterans, and their families during outreach activities.

UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUB-GROUPS

Disabled – Given the significant incidence of post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury being experienced among veterans, the traditional view of disabled veterans needs to be fundamentally expanded. We recognize that many of the issues that affect disabled veterans overlap other areas discussed herein. Among those are homelessness, legal aspects, aspects peculiar to rural areas, education, and employment.

- We believe that the disabled veteran merits special attention over and above our recommendations for veterans in general.
- Among those areas, we support increased exemption of property taxes, special set-aside programs for disabled veteran-run small businesses and VBC outreach for claims processing.

Women – There are over 50,000 women veterans in Arizona (almost 10 percent of total veterans) and that number is anticipated to grow with the increasing percentage of women in the active and reserve forces. There are many issues which pertain to women veterans which overlap other areas discussed herein. However, some aspects present unique issues for women veterans. For example, homeless women veterans are more likely to be responsible for children. Additionally, physical and traditional differences imply a need for separate consideration of health, counseling and living accommodations.

- We support a concerted review of any new veterans' initiatives to ensure that any and all differences are fully accounted for.
- Continued support for the Women Veterans program of ADVS.

Rural – Whereas most Arizona veterans, like other Arizonans, reside in Maricopa and Pima counties the percentage of the population who are veterans is much higher among rural veterans. Veterans in all parts of Arizona deserve equal consideration and support. Transportation for remote veterans has long been a recognized issue as has been proximity to veteran's health and counseling support. Additionally, the lack of access to electronic/digital means of communication networks continues to limit that form of outreach and communication to veterans in such rural areas. The large American Indian communities of Arizona with their unique cultural and geographic aspects, including the fact that the Navajo Nation spans three states, also offer unique challenges.

- We support the continued deployment of significant VBC assets to these rural areas in an effort to bring appropriate outreach services to them.
- Further, we support efforts by the Native American communities to overcome administrative restrictions within the VA that inhibit the establishment of adequate healthcare facilities boundaries across state borders.

INCENTIVIZATION

The Arizona Veterans' Service Advisory Commission recommends that the State of Arizona place a high priority on "Veteran's Issues", because these issues represent powerful economic and financial elements for Arizona's current and future development and growth. Arizona is home to more than 500,000 military veterans. Currently, estimates of Federal funds coming to Arizona solely due to earned veteran's benefits approximate \$2.5 billion per year. The economic impact on Arizona is minimally estimated to be \$5 billion per year due to the velocity of money – money coming to Arizona is re-spent in Arizona. Significant amounts of federal veteran's funds are available to the states for goods and services supporting our nation's veterans. If Arizona is not considered "veteran friendly" and fails to attract veterans and the follow-on funds, these funds can and will be spent in other states.

Incentives – Military recruiting statistics show that only the top one fourth to one third of the volunteer recruits actually qualify for service, and all service members receive extensive education and training as well as experience unfound in the civilian community. Accordingly, veterans represent a mature, educated and disciplined element of the workforce. Additionally, veterans bring with them a substantial stream of federal funding, made available due to their service, in the form of retirement pay and VA benefits. It is in the best interest to induce as many veterans as possible to return to their native state of Arizona or become Arizona residents following their period of national service.

Wherever feasible, the state should create incentives for veterans to want to live in Arizona following their tours of service in the military.

- One example of incentivization is the 2021 subtraction for benefits, annuities and pensions as retired or retainer pay of the uniformed services increase from a maximum of \$3,500 to 100% of the amount received means that those benefits are no longer taxable in Arizona.
- We suggest that following the above strategic principals and policy objectives will contribute to this incentivization.