

Arizona Veterans' Services Advisory Commission
3839 N. 3rd Street, Phoenix, AZ 85012

August 1, 2024

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

Philip Cushman, Chairman (virtual)
Charles Byers, Commissioner (virtual)
Chris Gibbs, Commissioner (virtual)
Gene Crego, Commissioner (virtual)
Kathy Gallowitz, Commissioner (virtual)
Matthew Kenney, Commissioner (virtual)
Andrew Meshel, Commissioner (virtual)

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Julia Gusse, Legislative Liaison (virtual)
Valen Harris, Admin Assistant (virtual)

Absent

Dana Allmond, Cabinet Executive Officer
Lupita Santellano, Executive Assistant

Call to Order – The Arizona Veterans' Services Advisory Commission (AVSAC) meeting, via Google Meets: meet.google.com/vay-kuni-euo; Dial-in: (US)+1 470-228-6293, PIN: 823 284 836#.

Chairman Cushman called the meeting to order at 4:00 pm.

Approval of Meeting Minutes

The minutes from July 11, 2024, will be added to the agenda for the next Commission meeting on September 12, 2024.

Phoenix OIG Report:

Advisory Commission members reviewed the Phoenix Veterans Administration Office of Inspector General (OIG) Report regarding the death of a Veteran at the Phoenix VA Medical Center in March of 2023. The full report can be found [here](#). Some of the findings of the OIG found unacceptable failures as part of the Phoenix VA. Chairman Cushman proposed the idea of writing a letter to the Governor's office regarding the concerns the Advisory Commission has related to this issue. Commissioner Byers pointed out in the report that Phoenix VA has already made corrective action regarding this issue to prevent any further similar shortfalls. He further elaborated that as an Advisory Commission, they can reiterate the seriousness of the failures of the VA and further advance the need for corrective action as pointed out by the OIG. Commissioner Gibbs elaborated on the latency of sending out a letter to the governor regarding the OIG report, given that the issue occurred back in March of 2023, and corrective actions have already been made since then. Commissioner Meshel, reiterated the latency of discussing the OIG report.

Legislative Liaison, Julia Gusse, proposed alternatively to add the Commission's concerns regarding the OIG report to the annual letter to the governor. Given that the issue occurred back in 2023. Members of the commission can reiterate the need for corrective actions in the annual letter to the Governor. Chairman Cushman agreed to including this in the letter. The commission unanimously agreed to include this matter in the annual letter to the Governor. Commissioner Byers volunteered to assist in writing the letter.

Old Business

September Commission Meeting Planning -

Chairman Cushman led the discussion regarding the upcoming Advisory Commission meeting in Prescott, Arizona, on September 12, 2024. He sent out a memo with information regarding the meeting and the day's events. He recommended the Commission stay in Prescott, AZ for two nights in order to attend the meeting and Patriot Day events. He suggested lodging at Bucky's Casino. Commissioner Meshel and Gallowitz will join the meeting virtually. Commissioners Kenny, Byers, Crego, and Gibbs plan to attend the meeting in person. Chairman Cushman suggested tours to the Northern Arizona VA Healthcare System and the CLC take place a day before on September 13, 2024. He also mentioned the Mayor of Prescott will be one of the speakers at the meeting, as well as Joan McDermott. She will discuss Veterans Court updates. Chairman Cushman invited previous Commissioner Mike Noble to the meeting.

Julia Gusse provided the commission with a speaking request from Justice Involved Veterans group. The group would like to speak with the commission regarding a proposal for a bill they would like the commission to support. The commission agreed to have the Justice Involved Veterans group speak at the meeting in September.

Commissioner Byers suggested the Commission invite Director Steven Sample of the Northern Arizona VA Healthcare System. Commissioner Kenny suggested the commission invite Smokeless Vets, he agreed to confirm their availability for September or a future meeting. Commissioner Crego suggested the commission invite Jerry Ambrose Veteran Council of Kingman. The commission agreed.

Outreach Activities and Updates

Commissioner Crego is purchasing a banner for the commission to use during outreach events. He sent out emails to the commissioners individually for reimbursement.

Commissioner Byers is in need of business cards. ADVS will provide Commissioner Byers the business card template. Also, he attended the Veterans Affairs Department of Defense (VA DOD) Suicide Prevention Conference in Portland, Oregon. He states the suicide numbers showed veterans younger than the Vietnam era as the majority of suicide cases.

Commissioner Meshel had nothing to report.

Commissioner Kenney has been working with Vet the Vote. Vet the Vote has been able to recruit 7,000 poll workers for the state of Arizona. He is also involved in and was able to speak at a national veteran voter registration effort known as Vote for America.

Commissioner Gibbs has nothing to report.
Commissioner Gallowitz had nothing to report.
Chairman Cushman had nothing to report.

Action Item Recap

- Include comment on OIG Report in the Letter to the Governor
- Send Business card template for Advisory Commission

Open Floor For Comments

None.

Adjournment

Chairman Cushman called for a motion to adjourn the Arizona Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Meeting. Commissioner Byers motioned to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Crego second the motion. The motion was carried unanimously. Meeting adjourned at 4:45 pm.

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 25, 2024

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Secretary McDonough:

This week, the Veterans Administration (VA) Office of Inspector General (OIG) issued a report,¹ which found that the tragic death of a veteran at a Phoenix VA facility—a facility with a troubling history of ongoing patient care issues—was due to poor care management and delayed emergency care. We request an immediate briefing from you on how the Phoenix VA will implement the OIG’s recommended policy changes and training standards immediately, as well as ensure lifesaving equipment is available.

As you know, in March of 2023, a veteran lost consciousness in front of the Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center following a routine appointment. A series of cascading mistakes—lack of an automated external defibrillator on site, an operator failing to connect with the Veterans Affairs Police, no staff from the facility performing CPR, and local emergency services taking 11 minutes to respond—resulted in this veteran failing to receive timely care and tragically passing away two days later.

Upon investigation, the OIG found unacceptable failures on the part of the Phoenix VA. The veteran’s vitals were not taken during the routine appointment, despite the fact that he suffered from a chronic heart condition; and reporting issues hid the true risk about the patient’s multiple previous emergencies. The report reads:

“Despite having awareness of the delay in basic life support and the location of the patient’s medical emergency, the patient safety manager did not incorporate that information into the patient safety report investigation or assign investigators with the expertise to examine clinical aspects of the patient’s care; this resulted in an inaccurate harm assessment.”

This incident is a part of a troubling pattern of inappropriate response by the Phoenix VA, whose procedures have contradicted and failed to meet Veterans Health Administration standards.

Our veterans put their lives on the line to protect our freedom, security, and future. They deserve our enduring gratitude—both during and after their service. It is our responsibility to ensure that

¹ <https://www.vaog.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2024-07/vaog-23-02958-203.pdf>

they return home to a nation that cares for them and their loved ones—and that includes receiving quality, timely health care.

We look forward to hearing from you promptly on this matter.

Sincerely,



Greg Stanton
Member of Congress



Mark Kelly
Member of Congress



Kyrsten Sinema
Member of Congress



Elijah Crane
Member of Congress



Debbie Lesko
Member of Congress



Andy Biggs
Member of Congress



Ruben Gallego
Member of Congress



David Schweikert
Member of Congress



Raúl Grijalva
Member of Congress



Juan Ciscomani
Member of Congress