

Arizona Veterans' Services Advisory Commission
1688 W. Adams Street, Phoenix, AZ 85007

January 31, 2025

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

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

AZ Department of Veterans' Services

John F. Scott, II, Director (virtual)
Julia Gusse, Legislative Liaison (virtual)
Gina Simon, Administrative Assistant (virtual)

Absent

Lupita Santellano, Executive Assistant

Guests

Patrick Lynch (virtual)

Call to Order – The Arizona Veterans' Services Advisory Commission (AVSAC) meeting, via Google Meets: meet.google.com/aok-hova-pjy; Dial-in: (US) +1 470-273-8528 PIN: 560 282 779#
Chairman Cushman called the meeting to order at 4:13 pm.

Chairman Cushman led the commission in the pledge of allegiance followed by roll call.

New Business

Discussion/Possible Action- Arizona Military Museum Updates

Chairman Cushman has a scheduled meeting with the Adjutant General (TAG) regarding the Arizona Military Museum. Chairman Cushman asked all commissioners for their thoughts related to the meeting with TAG. Commissioner Gallowitz suggested and motioned that Chairman Cushman meet with TAG first, gather information, and draft a letter from the Commission to TAG and the Governor's staff. Commissioner Kenney agrees with the meeting between Chairman Cushman and TAG. He cautioned the Chairman to remain within the Commission's scope and provide a briefing related to the meeting with TAG. Commissioner Gibbs' only concern related to the meeting between Chairman Cushman and TAG is that the Chairman remembers the Commission's mission and purpose. Vice Chair Byers, Commissioner Crego, and Patrick Lynch also agree Chairman Cushman should meet with TAG, gather information and then draft a letter from the commission to TAG and the Governor's office. Commissioner Gallowitz amended her motion to include the meeting with TAG. The Chairman will meet with TAG, gather information and then draft a letter for TAG and the Governor's office staff in regards to the Arizona Military Museum. Commissioner Byers second the motion. All commissioners, with the exception of Commissioner Gibbs, approved the motion (six yes; one no). Motion carried.

Discussion/Possible Action – Implications of OMB Memo 25-13 to Arizona Veterans and Their Families

Chairman Cushman asked the commission's opinion on what they believe could be at risk for veteran services. Commissioner Kenney did not have insight into what veteran programs could be cut due to the executive order. If the commission has a voice in the matter, he believes the commission should voice their opinion as it relates to how the executive order would affect Arizona's veterans.

Commissioner Gibbs states the commission should limit its thoughts in regards to the executive order until the federal government provides further information regarding which funding they are looking at cutting. Commission Gibbs did state educational funding is of importance to him. Patrick Lynch agrees the commission should wait for further development.

Vice Chair Byers mentioned, some veteran organizations have written letters of concern related to veteran benefits. He thought there would be problems related to grants for homeless veteran programs but that has not been the case.

Commissioner Crego mentioned the federal government's websites confirms social security remains funded but will be delayed in the month of February. Tricare is also not affected; active duty and retired military are not affected by the executive order. The only group he believes is affected is Be Connected, due to cuts in funding. Representative Greg Stanton sent a letter to the Secretary of the VA to request funding for Be Connected. Julia Gusse states Be Connected is funded through fiscal year 2025. Funding for fiscal year 2026 remains unknown.

Commissioner Gallowitz does not have a unique perspective in the matter. She suggested the commission wait and monitor further development. She expressed concern regarding future funding for Be Connected. She requested Director Scott and Julia continue to monitor this matter and keep the commission updated.

Commissioner Update

Commissioner Gallowitz sent out an email regarding the veteran's housing project ground breaking in Glendale, Arizona.

Commissioner Kenney met with Representative Walter Blackman regarding the Stolen Valor bill. Commissioner Kenney states he is not for or against the bill; however, he would like the commission to review the bill as it moves its way through the house. Julia states the Stolen Valor bill is now with the Senate and the departments' only concern is who will be responsible for completing the verifications. She also met with Representative Blackman.

Vice Chair Byers and Commissioner Crego attended Senator Mark Kelly's Veteran Advisory Council meeting on January 30, 2025.

For the Good of the Order

Vice Chair Byers mentioned there are a number of property tax bills brought forth that have not made it to committee. Four or five of the bills could be consolidated into one bill. He states disability compensation income received by a veteran counts as income threshold for property tax purposes, not for federal purposes, only state. He mentioned a 100% service connected disabled veteran who would like to freeze property tax, cannot freeze it. Legislative Liaison, Julia, mentioned HB2538 would include language that veteran compensation cannot be used for discriminatory purposes as it relates to the income threshold.

Chairman Cushman requested the commission send discussion topics for the March 2025 Advisory Commission meeting agenda.

Director Scott explained the department's action upon receipt of the executive order. He states one of the concerns was the fact that the department could lose funding to potentially all VA services. About 80% of the budget that the department receives comes from the federal government. It was extremely critical the department addressed the executive orders immediately. The director was in contact with the Governor's office the night the executive order was issued. The director worked on a declaration, with the Governor's office and their legal team to provide an injunction to stop the executive orders. The injunction could potentially allow the department to reimburse itself for all the bed stays at the state veteran homes, all of the interments that happened within the state cemeteries and the department's state approving agency (SAA) as well as other agencies funded by the federal government. He states within eight hours of submitting the injunction, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) had submitted a report stating they had reviewed all of their programs, which are unaffected by the executive order at this point. The director confirmed that at one point the department was unable to access the VA's payment management system, which allows the department to reimburse itself for services provided to veterans. He also confirmed that by the following day, the payment portal was open and the department was able to access the system again. He reiterated that at this point, he does not believe the department will be affected by the executive orders.

Commissioner Gibbs mentioned Google Meet is not meeting the commission's needs and would like the department to look into this matter.

Open Floor for Comments from the Public

None.

Adjournment

Chairman Cushman called for a motion to adjourn the Arizona Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Meeting. Commissioner Gibbs motioned to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Gallowitz second the motion. The motion carried unanimously. Meeting adjourned at 4:41 pm.