

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

**March 13, 2025**

**MINUTES**

**Advisory Commissioners Present**

Philip Cushman, Chair (in person)  
Gene Crego, Commissioner (virtual)  
Chris Gibbs, Commissioner (virtual)  
Kathy Gallowitz, Commissioner (virtual)  
Charles Byers, Commissioner (in person)

**AZ Department of Veterans' Services**

Lupita Santellano, Executive Assistant (in person)  
Julia Gusse, Legislative Liaison (in person)  
John F. Scott II, Director (in person)

**Absent**

Matthew Kenney, Commissioner  
Andrew Meshel, Commissioner

**Guests**

Patrick Lynch (virtual)  
Joshua Rubin (virtual)  
Dana Allmond, DES  
Marcus, Deputy DES

**Call to Order** – The Arizona Veterans' Services Advisory Commission (AVSAC) meeting, via Google Meets: <https://meet.google.com/jgq-vm-sc-uux>; Dial-in: (US) +1 475-222-5532 PIN: 275 244 224#. Chairman Cushman called the meeting to order at 10:07 am.

Chairman Cushman led the commission in the pledge of allegiance followed by guest introductions.

**Approval of Meeting Minutes**

Chairman Cushman called for a motion to approve the AVSAC meeting minutes from January 9, 2025, and January 31, 2025. The commission did not have time to review the minutes and tabled the approval of the minutes until the next Advisory Commission meeting.

**Agency Announcements and Updates**

**Director's Department Update –**

The VA Secretary provided a briefing at the NASDVA conference regarding VA layoffs and the effects of the layoffs at both the federal and state levels. Currently, there are no delays in processing payments for the State Veteran Homes. Where the department may see some concerns is in layoffs affecting future payment processing. However, the

Secretary of the VA mentioned they are not firing front line workers. No further information could be provided, since the information changes on a daily basis.

The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services has hired a new Regional Administrator, Charles Villafranca. Director Scott promoted Gerardo "Gary" Ochoa to the Deputy Director position and William Glennon was promoted to Assistant Deputy Director-Veterans' Services Division.

The Arizona State Veteran Home –Flagstaff (ASVH-F) resumed admissions. The HVAC system repairs will be completed at the end of March 2025. All four wings of the Arizona State Veteran Home Flagstaff are up and running. The department has also purchased spare HVAC parts and storage containers for the extra parts. There are currently four residents at the ASVH-F; the veteran home requires twenty admissions in order to have survey come out for the initial recognition survey from the VA. The VA contracts surveys of the homes to Ascellon, which is currently under review; this may delay the recognition survey at ASVH-F. The ASVH-F is fully staffed for the admission of twenty veterans.

The Arizona State Veteran Home –Tucson continues to be a five star facility and continue to remain full. Arizona State Veteran Home – Yuma is hiring nursing staff in order to open their last wing, the memory care wing.

Arizona State Veteran Home –Phoenix is struggling with census. Their census is currently 67 out of 104. Director Scott has spoken with the Regional Administrator about placing his focus on that facility. Director Scott has heard that Tohono O'odham Nation is possibly looking at opening a Veteran Home. Director Scott would have to speak with the Governor's office about this possibility, as it could be good for veterans in Arizona. However, if the Phoenix Home no longer provides skilled nursing care, that property will revert to the VA, which again could be good for the veteran community as they are trying to expand.

The National Cemetery Administration is going to be in Tucson on April 2, 2025. The Deputy Undersecretary of Field Programs and Cemetery Operations is going to tour the Marana Cemetery. During the NASDVA conference, the Arizona Veterans Memorial Cemetery – Sierra Vista received recognition for being one of the eleven cemeteries out of 122 state and tribal cemeteries to receive an Operations of Excellence Award.

The Veteran Benefits Counselors (VBCs) will be bringing in 100 million dollars in benefits to veterans in about three months, meeting their goal for the year.

The Starlink kits have been rolled out to Tohono O'odham and San Carlos Apache.

ADVS is currently working with the Navajo Nation legal team, and has a meeting scheduled with Hopi on March 19, 2025.

There is an AZ Hires Vets event scheduled at Wesley Bolin Plaza on March 20, 2025.

### **Legislative Update –**

Representative Blackman and Representative Marquez developed a Veteran Caucus board; each picked three veterans from their parties. They have selected six veterans total. They held a meeting to potentially create a mission statement.

America 250 is the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Julia is a Liaison for the America 250 committee, led by Secretary Fontes. The committee is being formed in order to spread the word regarding this celebration, which is happening across the United States of America. The efforts begin this July 4, 2025, through July 4, 2026. The celebration will be held on July 4, 2026.

Julia Gusse provided her legislative report found [here](#).

### **Old Business**

#### **Commission Meeting Planning – Kingman**

The Commission has moved the Advisory Commission meeting originally scheduled for May 8, to May 22, 2025. This meeting will be held in Kingman, the location is still to be determined by Chairman Cushman. Chairman Cushman proposes the commission keep the same agenda as other meetings held out of Maricopa County. He would like to hold a Commanders call for local veteran service organizations (VSOs), a lunch with local town managers and dinner with local dignitaries. He suggested the Commissioners plan to stay two nights in Kingman to allow for travel time and to tour local facilities. Vice Chair Byers will reach out to Pat Farrell to tour a local facility. Commissioner Crego will reach out to local VSOs to host the commander's call. Commissioners will reach out to ADVS to make hotel reservations.

#### **Commission Positions and Recruitment Update**

There was no response from Boards and Commission in regards to the status of Patrick Lynch and Joshua Rubin's Advisory Commission applications. No response regarding Gene Crego and Kathy Gallowitz's renewal application.

#### **Strategic Policy Objective Issues, Inquiries, and Answers**

- a) Update re: data on Veteran Demographics**
- b) Update re: data on Veteran Suicide**
- c) Update re: data on Veteran Employment & Unemployment**

The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services provided the Advisory Commission with data regarding Veteran demographics in Maricopa County, as well as a few data reports related to suicide, Veteran employment and unemployment statistics, and an annual report on homelessness. Commissioner Gallowitz would like the commission to read the data provided and summarize the information.

Commissioner Gallowitz requested an updated census report that contains veteran's age, gender, ethnicity, and county. Julia will pull a report from the 2020 census with the demographics requested by Commissioner Gallowitz.

The Advisory Commission would like Col. Wanda Wright to attend a future Advisory Commission meeting to discuss women veterans' issues within Arizona. Commissioner Gallowitz will reach out to schedule Col. Wright to speak to the Commission at the September 2025 meeting.

### **New Business**

**Discuss Vision Statement for Arizona Veteran Community** – The Veteran Caucus board would like to create a vision or mission statement for the Arizona Veteran Community. The commission believes the focus should be in the vision statement for the state of Arizona. Commissioner Gallowitz will draft a vision statement with aspirational themes. Commissioner Gallowitz would like to see ADVS' strategic plan.

**Implications of Federal Cost Cutting Measures on Arizona Veterans** - Vice Chair Byers is concerned about the VA cutting jobs and implementing a hiring freeze. He also mentioned the vetting process is terrible. He would also like to see more community care. Commissioner Gallowitz believes the commission should wait to hear more information from the VA.

### **Executive Session**

**AVSAC Chair Meeting Update** - The commission ran out of time and did not go into executive session. A separate meeting will be scheduled within March 2025, to hold the executive session.

### **Outreach Activities for Commission**

Commissioner Gallowitz reminded the commission the Arizona Coalition for Military Families annual Symposium is scheduled on April 16 and 17, 2025. The commissioners should have received an email to register free of charge. Vice Chair Byers is hosting a Symposium on March 22, 2025, at the American Legion Post 2 with the VA to assist the aging veteran population navigate healthcare. He also mentioned Senator Kelly and Senator Gallego are holding a panel in Tucson on April 3, 2025, which is also targeted at the aging veteran population.

**For the Good of the Order**

None.

**Open Floor for Comments**

None.

**Adjournment**

Chairman Cushman called for a motion to adjourn the Arizona Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Meeting. Vice Chair Byers motioned to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Gibbs second the motion. The motion carried unanimously. Meeting adjourned at 12:11 pm.