

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

October 11, 2018

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

Peter Kloeber
Arlethe Rios (via telephone)
Joseph Brophy (via telephone)
Chris Gibbs
Joan McDermott
Rebecca Villalpando (via telephone)

Absent

Matthew Randle

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

John Scott, Deputy Director
Judy Smith, Admin Secretary III
Joe Dougherty, Central Region Manager

Guests

Chris Norton, Director, VA Regional Office
Chris Olson, Deputy Director, Community Engagement
Casey Kvale, Assistant Director, VA Regional Office

Call to Order – The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission meeting was held at the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services headquarters, Phoenix, AZ. Chairman Kloeber called the meeting to order at 10:04 a.m.

Approval of Meeting Minutes –Chairman Kloeber called for a motion to approve the July 12, 2018, Veterans Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. There being no changes to the minutes, Commissioner McDermott moved to approve the minutes as written; motion seconded by Commissioner Villalpando. The motion carried unanimously.

Chris Norton, VA Director – Director Norton gave an accounting of VA accomplishments for fiscal year 2018, The VA made more than 36,000 rating decisions, not all were for Arizona but are included in the national work queue. Over 90,000 Arizona veterans are receiving compensation benefits. The VA is delivering \$121 million in compensation benefits every month, up from \$108 million the previous fiscal year.

Vocational Rehab works with veterans whose service-connected disabilities prevent them from maintaining employment in their chosen profession. We provide training and education in overcoming disabilities and getting back into the workforce for a meaningful lifelong career and good salary.

The VA wrote 680 rehabilitation plans for Arizona veterans and received 335 positive outcomes from veterans who were either helped back into the workforce or achieved some measure of independent living, if disabilities kept them out of the workforce. Three hundred thirty-five is a record number, up from 295 last year, a 10% increase.

The VA National Call Center in Phoenix is one of eight nationally. There is a good chance veterans calling the 800-827-1000 number will talk with a Phoenix VA employee. There are 226 people on staff with an additional 25 to be added at the Phoenix call center. We answered 1.3 million calls last year. The call volume has increased this year, warranting the additional staff to man the phones.

Previously, veterans calling the 800 number waited an average of 20 minutes and more than half of the veterans who called could not get through at all, which is unacceptable. The VA streamlined its phone system so that veteran calls are being answered in 8 minutes or less.

The Phoenix Regional Loan Center is one of seven nationally. Honolulu had its own small loan center that served Honolulu, Guam, American Samoa and the Pacific Islands. Honolulu was included in the Phoenix Regional Loan Center in 2017.

The VA is guaranteeing about 416,000 home loans throughout Arizona, Nevada, California, New Mexico, Hawaii and the Pacific Islands, as well as \$122 billion dollars in veteran mortgage payments.

There are problems with the VA Rapid Appeals Modernization Program (RAMP). Veterans express frustration with the length of time it takes to process a claim and it usually has to do with appeals.

We are processing an average compensation claim in under 100 days. The time frame has continued to trend down in recent years, but it can still take several years to complete an appeals claim and, after a period of time, it can go through the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA).

Phoenix is one of nine pilot stations in the RAMP Program. The program allows veterans to elect using the new legislation in the current appeals process. Eighteen percent of veterans eligible for the program have opted in. The VA made 1,600 decisions in the last six months, bringing \$6.8 million in benefits to veterans who would otherwise be waiting during a lengthy appeals process.

Mr. Norton noted that the VA historically has an open-ended appeals process. If the veteran disagrees with the VA's decision, they can appeal and submit additional exams and records. The claim continues to grow and the VA is then making a decision based on additional evidence provided by the veteran. New legislation will allow claims to reenter the process to be seen by a larger pool of adjudicators, versus select decision review officers.

Joe Brophy stated that by introducing new evidence and records, it sounds as if the veteran is opening a new claim.

Mr. Norton explained that the process is similar to opening a new claim but the difference is that the effective date of the claim reverts back to the original date the veteran applied. The claim will move through the system more quickly with the added benefit of retaining the original effective date and decision. Currently, the VA is able to make a decision on reopened claims in 95 days; if it goes through the notice of disagreement process, it will take 400 days.

Chris Olson, VA Veterans Experience Office – Mr. Olson noted that the Veterans Experience Office (VEO) was created under a former VA Secretary in 2015. The Phoenix office realigned people and reorganized priorities to align with the secretary's priorities. The VEO Department works directly for VA Secretary, Robert Wilkie.

The Veterans Experience Office is divided into six directorates with six senior executives overseeing and providing core level training to employees, stressing that every interaction with a veteran matters. Their core mission is to improve the veteran's experience and provide responsive feedback in real time to veterans' needs. We hear the veteran, collect data, analyze the data and get answers to their questions and requests.

Mr. Olson's position in the community engagement of VEO is working with community partners to develop community veteran engagement boards. Pete Kloeber is a co-chair of the northern board of the Arizona Military Veteran Community Network. Thomas Winkel of the Arizona Coalition for Military Families is co-chair for all three boards across the state.

The VA is redesigning its entire va.gov website with a November, 2018 launch. We talked to veterans and learned they have difficulty finding resources and answers for their needs on the current VA website.

The entire Federal Government is under a Business Modernization Plan proposed by the current administration, which leads to Secretary Wilkie's priorities of timeliness, efficiency, greater veteran choice, a modernized system and suicide prevention. Secretary Wilkie understands the family component and recently stated publicly that customer service is his number one priority and that employee engagement is crucial. He tasked the Veterans Experience Office to lead the way in the customer service approach.

The VEO Patient Experience is giving the customer a voice; we are receiving concerns as well as compliments. A recent Veteran Signals survey indicated 73% positive responses from veterans for the VA. Customer medical concerns are relayed back to the medical facility so they can do service recovery with the veteran. The survey tells the VA what veterans think and the VA concentrates on improving concerns it manages.

Veterans expressed concern that they don't know where to start with the VA or how to access care and benefits. The VA listened and developed a VEO Welcome Kit which is now shared with veterans in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

The VEO was directed by the White House to open a VA Phone Hotline to the White House. Calls that come into the White House hotline are triaged for follow up. The White House Hotline is a big success; more than 2,000 calls a week are received and the number is growing as information is getting out to veterans. Most hotline agents are veterans; they can relate to veterans and veteran issues. Further VEO Program information can be found [here](#).

Joe Dougherty, Veteran Services Division Central Region Manager – The Central Veterans Services Division office is fully staffed and new Veteran Service Officers are in training. Computer systems are being upgraded with fiber optics at VARO.

The Southern region office is getting new laptops, allowing the veteran counselors more flexibility; we are awaiting fiber optics in that area. The Central Region received new laptops and will be going to a CAG access so computers can be used for outreaches.

We recently reestablished our presence in the Phoenix, Mesa and Tempe Veterans Courts. A VBC attends Veterans Court three days a week. VBC's from the Northern and Southern regions are also attending Veterans Court. The Southern Region has virtual computer capability for the inmate to talk to a veteran counselor. We are able to provide at risk veterans access to VA benefits that they've earned.

John Scott noted that the Southern Region VBC's go into the Whetstone Prison Unit and conduct proactive outreach for veterans. The Southern Region is working on a web cam virtual connection so the prisoner can talk to a counselor through an internet connection. The Central Region conducts outreach to veterans in the Florence Prison.

Joe explained that when a veteran is sent to prison, their rating drops 10% and often the veteran is not notified until some time has passed. This creates an overpayment the veteran has to repay the VA upon release from prison. It creates a problem when the veterans are released and trying to get a job to restart their lives when they learn they owe thousands of dollars in overpayment to the VA.

Mr. Dougherty asked if there is a way for prison systems to notify the VA when a veteran enters prison to prevent these overpayments.

Chris Norton advised that the VA has explored options with the Department of Corrections (DOC) and part of the problem is veterans can self-identify. Some choose not to self-identify and the DOC does not distinguish veterans from non-veterans so they do not have accurate records of veteran inmates. We need to work with the veteran ahead of incarceration to correct this matter.

The Veterans' Services Division is considering expanding business hours at the Central Region Office. Feedback from working veterans indicates the 7:30 to 4 hours do not work for them to see a counselor. Some are applying for benefits that involve DHA appointments and exams that require time off work. We are gathering data to see if there is a need to change hours so veterans can be seen by appointment after 4 p.m. in the Central Region office.

VBC's attended Navigator Training to gain a better knowledge of available resources. Many veterans come to the office needing immediate assistance; getting them in touch with the right resource is difficult. Resources for veterans seem to be a 'word of mouth' network and not advertised publicly.

Veterans typically say they have been to the Community Resource & Referral Center (CRRRC), AMVETS and US VETS and were not helped. It is possible the veteran is not doing what they are required to do to access these benefits. Funding for emergencies is not always immediately available. We are exploring this matter further.

We have had great success with the RAMP Program in speeding up the timeline to get a higher claim review level. Some veterans have apprehension about the program; the older generation veterans feel burned by the VA and don't trust moving their claim to the RAMP Program. We explain that their claim will be processed quicker and some veterans have made the change to the RAMP Program.

Chris Norton reported that the RAMP Program is a more favorable grant program versus the Legacy Program. The grant rate through the RAMP Program is 24%, which is double the rate through Legacy. We hope the apprehension subsides after people know more about and understand the RAMP Program.

Agency Announcements and Updates – John Scott, Deputy Director of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services provided BeConnected brochures and stated the program is doing very well. The call volume is high and they are expanding their hours of operation. More staff is needed to answer phones. They hope to get appropriation in the upcoming legislature to hire more staff.

BeConnected is not just a suicide prevention hotline; the whole purpose behind BeConnected is a resource for veterans and their families. If we can remove some of the problems that precipitate homelessness, veterans won't get to point of crisis. As they hear about the program, more veterans are calling BeConnected.

The VA has supported the BeConnected Program verbally and financially. The VA Secretary and governor have made suicide prevention a priority.

Plans for the Yuma and Flagstaff Veteran Homes are underway and funding has been secured. The size of the homes had to be reduced from 5 to 4 wings due to tariffs on steel, the cost of wood, and availability of contractors in the area, plus we were \$15 million over budget. These changes won't affect staffing or delivery of care to residents, but will decrease the footprint of the buildings. We are moving forward under conditional approval with 180 days to submit drawings for 100% approval by the VA so we can start building.

We expect an issue in hiring qualified nurses. There is a nurse shortage throughout the state.

The Department of Veterans' Services had a significant role in preparing for Senator John McCain's funeral in August. The governor sent out hand written thank you letters to the department and other agencies who participated.

Nursing shifts at the Arizona State Veteran Homes in Phoenix and Tucson changed to 12 hour days, effective August 25th. The change in hours is going well; we are already seeing nurse retention, reduction in overtime and nurse registry use for both veteran homes since August. Nurses are seeing a reduction in child care costs and some are going back to school to become LPN's and RN's. Under the 12 hour nursing change, we have a better continuity of care for veterans. The same nurse is assigned to the same patient each day.

AZDVS and American Legion's power of attorney incoming benefits are just over \$45 million for last month, a significant increase of veterans using AZDVS or American Legion as their Power of Attorney. A few years ago, we were at \$18 million. We are close to the 90% percentile of getting awards continued or the granting of at least one contention on the claims we are providing.

AZDVS continues to roll out the Homeless Action Plan with a regionalized approach to break down the balance of the state continuum of care which is 75 % in Arizona. One of the more difficult areas to work with is homelessness. We are providing more structure and access to resources to smaller communities so they have the same resources that are available in larger metropolitan areas. This includes increasing the footprint of the statewide AZ Stand Downs.

A HeroPreneur event to celebrate and empower American Veterans will be held November 14-16 at the Phoenix Convention Center. The National Veteran Business Summit (NVBS) 3-day event will focus on Entrepreneurship, Employment and Education. Keynote speakers are inspirational speaker and veteran advocate, Lt. Col. Justin Constantine, U.S. Marines (Ret.) and motivational speaker and entrepreneur, Daymond John of the Shark Tank TV series.

HeroZona Foundation, a conglomerate of business enterprises throughout the state, will host the event. HeroZona is interested in hiring and facilitating veterans into leadership roles and helping veterans start and maintain a successful business. They will present the opportunity to network, connect and learn to become a start-up or well-established business.

AZDVS reconfigured its departments under the director and deputy director to four assistant deputy directors who are supervised by the deputy director. They are the Veterans Services Divisions and two veteran home administrators. A new CFO and CPO were recently hired and a new Chief Human Resources Officer will be hired soon.

AZDVS is pleased to announce that the veteran home's quality scores through CMS Medicare and Medicaid are very good. There are 16 criteria used to determine the quality of care being provided at the veteran homes. A 6% or below rating is considered in the top 10% in the nation in quality delivery of care. AZDVS scored under 6% on both components.

Phoenix had been at 13-14% in years past and under new leadership, we were able to improve that percentage. We are certain the 12 hour nursing shift change contributed to the good rating.

Dave Hampton, ADVS Legislative Liaison, retired in September. A new Legislative Liaison starts with the department in 2 weeks.

The bell tower at the Marana Cemetery was installed and sounds beautiful. The cost of the bell tower is not included in the NCA grant and funds were raised locally. Along with other donations, a single \$60,000 private donation brought us to the total needed.

The governor's Arizona Management System (AMS), a derivative of lean management for all state agencies, was rolled out in 2016. Mr. Scott would be happy to explain the Tier three metrics board to anyone who is interested in knowing how the agency conducts business in the state. Management meets twice a week to discuss metrics and overall goals for the department.

AZDVS is forming a chair group from around the state for the Hyperberic Oxygen Therapy program that treats PTSD and TBI. This group has a vested interest in Hyperberic Oxygen Therapy and will make recommendations of who will receive monies donated to this fund and what criteria will be used for referral into the Hyperberic Oxygen Therapy Program.

Legislation was signed for Pre-9/11 Veterans to receive funding from the ADVS Military Family Relief Fund. The criteria are the same as for Post 9/11 Veterans experiencing hardship due to deployment to a war zone. The fund is a tax credit; donors must designate whether their donation is for Pre or Post 9/11 veterans or a 50/50 split between the two. January 1, 2019 starts the new donation year, with the fund still capped at \$1 million. Currently there is more than \$6 million in the Post 9/11 fund. Funding for the Pre 9/11 fund starts January 1. We are now able to accept online credit card transactions.

The new Client Relationship Management (CRM) System portal to connect with veterans in Arizona goes online in November. After a learning curve, CRM will benefit the veteran counselors and we expect to see great results. Veterans can connect virtually with the veteran counselor and it will cut down on the back and forth between the counselor and the veteran as the veteran will be able to upload claim documents after their online user profile and password are established.

Chairman Kloeber asked about staffing at the Camp Navajo Cemetery. Judy Dillman is the Administrator with Eric Hermann as the Interment Caretaker. One additional person is to be hired.

Mr. Scott noted that the Bullhead City Veterans Services Division office moved to another location earlier this month.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order - Chairman Kloeber stated that each of the three Arizona Military Veteran Community Networks holds a summit once a year. Thomas Winkel, Director of Community Engagement for the Arizona Coalition for Military Families, is co-chair of all three networks which are aligned directly with the areas of responsibility in respect to the VA healthcare system. Chairman Kloeber noted that AVSAC regional assignments are aligned with MVCN networks.

Chairman Kloeber received an update of the 2015-2016 VA National Suicide Report indicating an immediate need to focus on women veteran suicides. There is an alarming increase of suicides in women veterans aged 18-34 and former service members who were never federally activated in the guard or reserves. Chairman Kloeber asked if this is late breaking news that was just released by the VA.

Chris Norton had not heard this information. Chris Olson reported there has been an uptick in women veteran, guard and reserve suicides. In the Mission Act of 2018, the National Guard and Reserves were named, as well as veterans with less than honorable discharges to be eligible for mental health care and treatment from the VA for 12 months after discharge.

Chairman Kloeber noted that the BeConnected Program is gaining national notoriety in veteran community networks since its beginning in April 2017. BeConnected offers good information for commissioners to take to their veteran communities. Thomas Winkel provided a new BeConnected presentation to Chairman Kloeber that he will share with commissioners and present at future regional meetings he attends.

Commissioner Villalpando reported that the State of Arizona is proposing a Memorial Initiative for a Veterans Hall of Fame Walk to showcase veterans from Arizona and those who earned the Purple Heart. The memorial would be located between 16th and 18th Streets in Buckeye, AZ.

Dr. Juan Gurule had asked the commission to write a letter of support for the Father Albert Braun O.F.M. Memorial District Initiative. The commission voted to provide a letter of support, which was sent in August. Chairman Kloeber received a thank you letter from Dr. and Patricia Gurule, stating the letter of support helped them greatly toward their initiative.

According to the AVSAC statute, election of a new Chairman and Vice Chair is done at the July meeting, but was not done in July. Chairman Kloeber called for nominations for chair and vice chair. Commissioner Gibbs asked if Commissioners Kloeber and Rios were willing to continue serving in their positions.

Chairman Kloeber is open to remaining as chairman, but would like anyone else who is interested to be considered. Commissioner Villalpando motioned that Pete Kloeber continue as Chairman. Commissioner Gibbs seconded the motion. Commisisoner Rios is in agreement to remain as vice chair. Commissioner Villalpando motioned that Arlethe Rios continue as vice chair. Commissioner Brophy seconded the motion. Motion carried unanimously.

Outreach Activities

Chairman Kloeber attended the Northern Military Veterans Community Network meeting at the Prescott VA last week.

Commissioner McDermott attended Navigator Training in Bullhead City through the Veterans Resource Team. An Agent Orange Seminar is being planned for Lake Havasu and Mohave County next month.

A Veterans Resource Fair for all veterans will be held in Lake Havasu Nov 3rd. There are around 8,000 veterans in the community.

The Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) will provide scholarships to the Mohave Community College, or donate funding for education. Ms. McDermott visited the college campus in Kingman and talked with students as a way to reach out to younger veterans and connect them to VA benefits. Ms. McDermott is reaching out and connecting with college students at the campuses in Lake Havasu and Bullhead City.

Mr. Scott advised Ms. McDermott to ask the colleges if they are an AZ Veterans Supportive Campus. It's a state statute with designation toward campuses that provide certain accommodations for veterans. Many campuses confuse the AZ Veterans Supportive Campus, a state program, with the federal G. I. Bill program. The AZ Veterans Supportive Campus program is administered through AZDVS. Our office visits colleges to be sure they have dedicated space for veterans. A list of these colleges is located on the AZDVS website. A link to the AZ Veterans Supportive Campus is provided [here](#).

Commissioner McDermott reported that housing for homeless veterans in Lake Havasu City is lacking. The Veteran Center is seeing clients, but can only do so much for them.

Kingman received a grant for renovations of a building that, when completed, will provide temporary housing for homeless and at-risk veterans and families. It will contain meeting room space with a kitchen. Kingman hospital physicians who assist opioid patients are negotiating for space in the building. Catholic Community Services and Mohave Community Services will occupy space in the building. More funding is needed to complete the project. They have applied for a grant from the Arizona Community Foundation.

John Scott advised of the VA Grants and Per Diem Program for capital projects as a possibility for getting project funding and to sustain operations through a grant per diem.

Commissioner Gibbs noted that the United Way could be contacted for a funding grant if education and health for veterans is included in the request. The United Way is generous in funding those projects.

Vice Chair, Rios shared the Father Albert Braun OFM Veterans Memorial District support letter with other veteran associations and county elected officials. Some county officials also wrote support letters on behalf of the project.

Chairman Kloeber announced that the Northern Arizona Veterans Coalition Meeting has been moved to Friday, October 19th at VFW in Flagstaff.

Commissioner Villalpando met with Walter Strong, VA Vocational Rehab officer while attending the Prescott Stand Down in September. Veterans have said they are not able to reach benefit counselors. Mr. Strong assured her that benefit counselors will be providing better customer service and returning phone calls.

Commissioner Villalpando presented the Father Albert Braun OFM Veterans Memorial District information to the Black Canyon VFW. She asked about holding a future AVSAC meeting in Black Canyon City at the DES office. Chairman Kloeber will consider the possibility.

Chairman Kloeber proposed that future meetings be held at ADVS headquarters; commissioners were in agreement. The next meeting of the Arizona Veterans Services Advisory Commission will be held on January 10, 2019, at ADVS headquarters. John Scott will see that future AVSAC meetings are Web Ex so callers can join live and see the presentations given by guests.

Commissioner Gibbs motioned to adjourn, seconded by Commissioner McDermott. The meeting adjourned at 11:43.