

Arizona Department of Veterans' Service Advisory Commission
4141 North S. Herrera Way, Phoenix, AZ 85012

May 12, 2016

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

Brett Rustand
Danielle Desmond
Phillip Hanson
Jill Nelson
Ron Perkins
Ryan Peters
Arlthe Rios
David Toliver

Advisory Commissioners Absent

None

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Wanda A. Wright, Director
Dave Hampton, PIO/Legislative Liaison
Bryan Durham, Program/Project Specialist
Michelle Sullivan, MFRF/Veteran Program Specialist
Tera Scherer, Executive Assistant

Invited Guests

Thomas Winkel, Director, AZ Coalition for Veteran Families
Deborah Amdur, Director, Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center

Call to Order – Chairman Brett Rustand called the meeting to order at 10:04 a.m.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – Chairman Rustand called for the approval of the January 14, 2016 Veterans Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. There being no changes to the minutes, Commissioner Perkins moved to approve the minutes as written. Commissioner Toliver seconded the motion and the motion carried unanimously.

Introduction of New Commissioner: Jill Nelson retired in 2014 as a Colonel in the Arizona Air National Guard. She has two sons and volunteers for Soldiers Best Friend, a veteran charity and Mahnah Club, an East Valley charity for children.

Thomas Winkel – Arizona Coalition for Military Families

Thomas Winkel, Director of Community Engagement for the Arizona Coalition for Military Families presented information to the Commission. Mr. Winkel noted that the unique program, the Arizona Roadmap to Veteran Employment, would not be possible without the collaborative efforts of Director Wright and the ADVS staff.

The Arizona Coalition for Military Families (ACMF) received funding from the governor's office for a pilot program that will allow their efforts over the last year to be more robust. ACMF trains employers to be veteran supportive and trains staff to engage with veterans leaving the service to increase retention and hiring rates within the company. The pilot program is a job matching tool that links an employer's open positions with job seekers through software designed to recognize military ratings, MOSs and AFSCs. The software developer, Cisco, is funding three interviewing events, the first to be held on June 30, with more to be added.

Arizona@Work, created by the Governor's Workforce Arizona Council, is found in every county and has increased ACMF's advocacy for veteran employment by 400 people.

The Second Annual Roadmap to Veteran Employment Summit is coming up June 17; at PBS Studios. ACMF will be highlighting practices for employers on how to best utilize veteran employees, as well as

teaching veterans coming out of the service how to can engage with employers and how veteran employees can move up within their company.

The Military Veteran Resource Connection Guide is a tool that helps our veterans get the right resource at the right time. There are 1,500 navigators around the state trained in utilizing this tool, including the VA, the Arizona National Guard and at Luke AFB and Davis Monthan AFB. Other military bases are looking at utilizing the program that will link transitioning veterans with community resources. ACMF is launching this resource, as well as other material and processes online in July, 2016. More people will become navigators and the goal of providing the right resource, service or benefit at the right time can be fulfilled. Information on ACMF's faith-based initiative and healthcare initiatives will also be online.

ACMF will also be expanding regionally to other areas, with key stakeholders in Phoenix, Tucson and northern Arizona. They continue to gather subject matter experts to provide material that will help guide individuals who are looking for services available regionally. ACMF will reach out to southern Arizona communities in the next three months by holding community meetings with mayors and city council members. They will train key stakeholders in those communities to become navigators and their contact information and resources will also be available on the ACMF website.

ACMF has many conferences and outreaches coming up, including one in northern Arizona on July 10-12 at the Third Annual Native American Tribal Summit with the Navajo and Hopi Nations.

Legislative Report - Dave Hampton, ADVS Public Information Officer

Dave Hampton gave a Legislative report of Veteran issues. The effective date for bills passed without an emergency clause will take effect August 6, with the exception of the budget. The Capital Outlay Bill for Budget was comprised of 12 bills; one of those bills was a \$10 million appropriation to build a veteran home in Flagstaff. The governor signed the budget and the Flagstaff Veteran Home will be the agency's next big project.

Mr. Hampton noted that SB 1267 – Military service; postsecondary academic credit was sent to the governor and has yet to be signed. The Board of Regents and universities are already doing this but it will now be in statute.

SCR 1024 – Arizona Wall Project; recognition, passed the Senate unanimously, with 28 co-sponsors. The bill recognizes the building of the Veterans Welcome Home Park in Gilbert that will have an 80 percent scale model of the Vietnam Wall. Unfortunately in the last moments of the legislative session the bill did not get heard in the house.

Mr. Hampton said the recent Military Family Relief Fund (MFRF) bill only eliminates the phrase "after September 11, 2001". It would not have opened funds to any other veterans because of the statutory requirements and direction of where that money is distributed. For example, a Korean War Veteran would not be able to show that his current financial problem is due to a deployment. The Military Family Relief Fund is distributed according to the legislation that defines the fund and how it is to be distributed. The agency's fund that supports all veterans of all areas in the state is the Veterans Donation Fund (VDF). MFRF does have a sunset clause that will revert monies in the fund to the VDF in 2018.

Chairman Rustand hopes that SB1212 – National Guard; Peace Officers' appointment will be used as a model for the state licensure for military veterans coming out of the service with training and experience in law enforcement.

Deborah Amdur, Director, Carl T. Hayden Medical Center

In her first five months as administrator, Ms. Amdur said the collaboration and support of Director Wright and the Arizona State Veteran Home (Phoenix) has been phenomenal and is looking for more ways the two organizations can collaborate in the future.

Ms. Amdur has 25 years of experience within the VA; both in Washington, D.C. doing national level programs at the medical center level, and recently as the Medical Center Director at White River Junction VA Medical Center in White River Junction, Vermont.

Director Amdur is focusing on stabilizing leadership within the Phoenix VA Medical Center. New leadership consists of the appointment of new chiefs of pathology, physical and rehab medicine, a chief of medicine, a chief of surgery and a new chief of HR.

The VA hospital has provided servant leadership and customer service training for all staff, of which 40 percent are veterans themselves. Outside trainers were brought in to provide education and support as she moves forward in a positive way and is encouraged by what she sees as a result of the training.

Access continues to be a challenge for the facility. The facility treats about 85,000 veterans each year. Last year there were nearly one million outpatient appointments at the facility and at the community-based clinics. Veterans can get a primary care appointment within an average of about 15 days and specialty care is an average of 11 days. The most important statistic is that mental health care appointments are about 3 days out. To improve some of the access challenges they've added about 500 additional staff; the majority on the clinical side.

New spaces are being built that includes a new dental building. The Community Resource and Referral Center that deals with homeless veterans in the community was relocated. Two large community-based clinics will open in September and the Scottsdale clinic opened last year. The emergency department is being expanded from 18 beds to 38, which will reduce wait times in the emergency department.

Another area that has grown in the facility is Telehealth services. Specialty care to veterans in rural areas through a clinic in Show Low allows veterans such services as hearing tests and hearing aid adjustments by an audiologist in Phoenix via Telehealth.

Primary care clinics now set aside a certain amount of time each morning and afternoon to accommodate walk in clients. Patients are escorted from the ER to the hospital's primary care clinic when it has been determined through triage that emergency room level care is unnecessary.

The facility now has social worker coverage 24/7 in the emergency department and is recruiting to have psychiatrist coverage available onsite 24/7 as well, including nights and weekends, to assess patients. Nurses have also been trained in mental health assessment and have two mental health nurse practitioners in the ER.

Director Amdur said the hospital has a VA Community Advisory. The board is new and has held two meetings. Angel Juarez, Adjutant for the American Legion, and Thomas Winkel, Director of Arizona Coalition for Veteran Families, are co-chairs. There are about 15 people on the committee and she encourages the Commission's involvement in these meetings.

Stand Down Report – Bryan Durham and Michelle Sullivan, ADVS Program Coordinators

Bryan Durham, ADVS Program Coordinator, serves as the community liaison outreach program oversight and Michelle Sullivan oversees the Military Family Relief Fund and outreach programs presented an overview to the Commission on one of the Department's initiatives, the Arizona Stand Down. ADVS has an agreement with various partners throughout the state that formed the Arizona Veterans Stand Down Alliance (AVSA). The AVSA is a group of non-profit organizations, governments and private organizations that administer stand downs by county. The intent was not to have so many competing groups, but to form a unified group with this alliance that distributes resources to veterans in all counties. The Maricopa County Stand Down was held in the Coliseum at the Arizona State

Fairgrounds the last week of January. The demographics of the January Stand Down indicate 1,850 veterans were served.

Michelle stated that every veteran who attends the stand down is enrolled in the VA that day or they are verified through the VA eligibility system and can receive health care benefits. If they are classed as “other than honorable” discharge or in a humanitarian category, they are eligible for certain benefits such as housing, but not healthcare.

The Stand Down for Maricopa County is held every year in January or February. Every county has its own stand down planned a year advance. A schedule of stand downs is posted on the Arizona [Veterans Stand Down Alliance website](#).

Agency Announcements and Updates-Director Wright

Several Veteran Services Division (VSD) offices have moved; Prescott will be moving its office closer to the Prescott VA; Flagstaff has moved closer to the veteran clinic; and Yuma will move closer to a veterans center that is a VA auxiliary organization. Director Wright noted that the plan is to move the VSD offices closer to the VA, DES and Social Security offices so veterans do not have to travel to so many places, and it will also afford each of these organizations the ability to interface and create synergy in the community.

The agency held four Women’s Veteran Expos this year and all were successful. Surveys show that we met the needs of the women who attended and they would like to see the event continue. APS sponsored a great deal of it. ADVS provided various breakout sessions and services such as benefits counseling, spa treatments and haircuts. It was about finding women veterans and creating access to healthcare, benefits and services with ease.

Director Wright introduced James Dugger, the new administrator at the Phoenix State Veteran Home. James is a veteran of Desert Storm who came to ASVH as a trainee in March 2012, later becoming Assistant Administrator before accepting the administrator position in August, 2015. He volunteered at the VA for two years and has worked with the Phoenix VA since 1991. He is very familiar with the health care needed for our veterans and is dedicated in providing the best life possible for veterans at ASVH, who are his first priority.

ADVS was able to fund more than \$700,000 in large grants through the Veteran Donation Fund (VDF). The fund is supported by the sale of veteran, freedom and female veteran license plates. The funds are used to solicit proposals from non-profit organizations that support veterans in many ways such as animal services, furnishings, and education programs to name a few.

The Veterans Cemetery in Marana opened and was dedicated March 26. The Flagstaff cemetery will be dedicated on June 11.

ADVS is working with the Department of Corrections in Tucson to create a prison block with the potential to house up to 125 veterans. There are currently 120 veteran prisoners in Whetstone block who are within two years or less of being released. The goal is to ensure that, upon their release, those veterans have housing, benefits, and services so they are prepared for the transition back to civilian life. The Department is currently working with Perryville Women’s Prison to set up a block dedicated to female veterans to assist with their transition upon release.

The Department is working with Vietnam Veterans of America Arizona Chapter this year for a 50 year commemoration for each of its chapters. A dinner has been funded for the last five years in Maricopa County that only benefitted about 300 veterans. The goal with the VVA is to reach all Vietnam Veterans in the state.

The first ever legislation in the Navajo Nation for the Veteran Navajo Act was signed in earlier this year. It affords them to have a Department of Navajo Veteran Affairs. ADVS will be training their benefits counselors and it is believed it will offer more opportunities for Navajo veterans to get their services and benefits. Chairman Rustand asked how this will affect the building of the Chinle Veteran Home. Director Wright stated that the home is on the construction list, but we don't know the timing as of yet. Becoming a veteran department will help support the infrastructure and the Navajo Nation will have more power and influence in the process. It is the first ever veteran department for Native Americans; no other tribe or nation has done this.

Veteran Benefit Counselor training was held last month. ADVS has about 28 veteran benefit counselors across the state. Any veteran can walk into a Veterans Services office and inquire about disability, pension, community resources or healthcare. Veteran Service Organizations were invited to attend the training as well, although we are unable to accredit them, they now have the proper training needed and can refer veterans to ADVS counselors.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order

Chairman Rustand commended the speakers for a very informative meeting. It is now the commissioners' role as members of different veteran organizations to go to those organizations and let them know the good things that are going on in the Department of Veteran Services and in the Phoenix VA.

Director Wright encouraged the commission to invite Director Deborah Amdur to speak at their VSO meetings. She wants people to know the good things that are being accomplished at the VA Hospital.

The meeting adjourned at 12:10 p.m. The next Advisory Commission Meeting will be held July 14, 2016, at the Phoenix Arizona State Veteran Home.