

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

July 8, 2021

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

Matthew Randle, Chairperson
Joan McDermott, Vice Chairperson
Chris Gibbs
Gene Crego
Kathryn Gallowitz
Edward Logan
Kirk Loving
Michael Noble
Rebecca Villalpando

Absent

Andy Meshel

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Colonel Wanda Wright, Director
Jennifer Harris, Legislative Liaison
Lupita Santellano, Executive Assistant

Guests

Chris Norton, Veteran Affairs Director
Tracie Pinkston, Veteran Affairs Regional Office
Casey Kvale, Veteran Affairs Regional Office

Call to Order – The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission meeting was held virtually via Google Meets, link: meet.google.com/jgg-vm-sc-uux; phone number (US)+1 617-675-4444, PIN: 425 562 6665 6167#. Chairman Randle called the meeting to order at 9:59 am.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – Chairman Randle called for a motion to approve the April 8, 2021, Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. There being no changes to the minutes, Commissioner Gene Crego moved to accept the meeting minutes, Vice Chair, Joan McDermott second the motion. The motion carried.

Commissioner Chris Gibbs lead the commission in the pledge of allegiance.

Department Announcements and Updates

Director Wanda Wright gave the Veteran Affairs Regional Office (VARO) a shout out for joining the Advisory Commission meeting. She explained this is the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS's) opportunity to meet with the Advisory Commissioners who live all over Arizona to collect or exchange information on what is happening in their respective veteran communities.

The state budget has been approved. The tax exemption for benefits, annuities and pensions received by military retirees has also been approved. The state legislature approved the appropriation for twelve Veteran Benefit Counselors (VBC's). Originally, the department requested the appropriation of six VBC's; however, at the last minute the legislature informed the department there was an addition half a million they would be appropriating for an additional six VBC's. The budget appropriation also gave the department additional funds to operate the Arizona State Veterans' Homes in Yuma and Flagstaff. The department was granted 2.8 million dollars to navigate the operations once the homes open. One million dollars were also appropriated to support the Arizona State Veterans' Home – Tucson (ASVH-T). The cost of living is higher there and ASVH-T needed the extra funding to be able to attract the right clinicians.

The department had a great fiscal year (FY2021). Construction continues on the Arizona State Veterans' Homes in Yuma and Flagstaff. Director Wright believes the department will receive the keys for the Arizona State Veterans' Home - Yuma in September of 2021. The department is waiting to hear from the contractors in regards to the Arizona State Veterans' Home in Flagstaff; this home's construction is delayed. The Arizona State Veterans' Homes in Yuma and Flagstaff will need to go through accreditation with Veterans Affairs (VA) and Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS). First, the department will need to hire staff at the Yuma and Flagstaff homes and a few residents will be admitted. The homes will be required to go through inspection by the VA and ADHS, and pass inspection in order for the homes to open up their doors to future admissions. Director Wright hopes to fill the Arizona State Veterans' Home - Yuma in April of 2022, and expects Flagstaff to be open three months later.

The ASVH-T continues to maintain a 5-stars rating while the Arizona State Veterans' Home – Phoenix (ASVH-P) is at a 4-star rating. Both homes are recognized by US News and World Report with the highest ratings and both homes continue to provide excellent care. The ASVH-T and ASVH-P continue to work together to standardize work. When the new homes open there will be standard of work across the board and ready to be implemented. This year the ASVH-T and ASVH-P experienced tough surveys due to infection control and COVID19, both the ASVH-T and ASVH-P did well on the inspections.

Be Connected continues to receive over 1,000 calls a month. The department continues to work closely with Be Connected in response to COVID19, food instability and in response to transportation needs for veterans to medical appointments. The department and Be Connected came up with a nomination process for delivering food to homes. Be Connected received a grant through Bob Woodward and had food delivered to 100 homes for veterans. The department is now working a transportation nomination through the transportation study. The department had over 100 people nominated as volunteers to drive around to different locations whether for appointments or to the grocery store. Director Wright emphasized the importance of proactive projects where people can nominate veterans for services.

ADVS is also working with the state on an Economic Development Initiative (EDI) with the Arizona Department of Administration (ADOA) and the Arizona Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) in order to bring more veterans into state service.

The department increased eligibility for the Military Family Relief Fund (MFRF). Director Wright states this fund continues to evolve. At first, only post 911 veterans were allowed to have access to this fund; a couple years later the department opened eligibility to pre-911 veterans. Jennifer Harris, Legislative Liaison will expand on this topic.

ADVS administered 189 veteran toolkits; this is a stipend the department offers to newly employed veterans who need something, an item, which is not provided by the employer when they are ready to start their first day of work. During the 2021 Fiscal Year, ADVS provided 38,000 direct services. The department's Fiscal Year 2022 goal is to open itinerate offices for VBC's across Arizona, which will allow VBC's and veterans who do not have access to technology a chance to meet in person. Also, ADVS will hold Women Veteran Expo's in Sierra Vista, Show Low, and Lake Havasu City this fall.

The department is working with the VA on an EDI in September of 2021. In this initiative, the department and the VA are working with vulnerable veterans by helping them with their resumes and to develop the right set of skill for interviews.

Commissioner Logan stated the Governor's office should look at the retirement system in regards to a raise in salaries due to cost of living. Director Wright stated the state has not seen pay raises since 2005. There are cities with \$15.00 minimum wage rates; ADVS cannot compete with these wages. The department has high turnover and bad retention because of the state wages. The wage topic is one that Director Wright keeps bringing to the Governor's attention.

Commissioner Crego states the Unified Arizona Veterans (UAV) meet again in September of 2021, and suggested Director Wright discuss the education topic at the next UAV meeting.

Vice Chair McDermott mentioned she would make an effort to find itinerate locations for VBC's in Northwest Arizona if needed. Director Wright will be in contact with Commissioner McDermott if she finds a need for additional itinerate offices in Northwest Arizona. Commissioner Gibbs offered to search for itinerate locations in Safford, Arizona as well.

Legislative Liaison Update

Jennifer Harris, Legislative Liaison for ADVS updated the commission. The Legislature sine died last week (week of June 28, 2021). The legislature approved appropriations for twelve VBC's. ADVS will also receive 25 million for the construction of a Veteran Home in the Northwestern part of Arizona. ADVS is required to submit the proposed site location information to the Commission for approval and when submitting that proposal, ADVS must provide a feasibility analysis of suitable sites to consider when approving the site location.

Jennifer Harris highlighted approved agency bills. One of those bills is HB2542-veteran suicide annual report, which adds that the report on veteran suicides in this state provided by the ADHS must include utilization and encounter data from a nonprofit veterans' services organization, such as Be Connected, that provides services related to reducing suicides among this state's military and veteran populations. Data from Be Connected can be used to identify trends and see where the effective points of intervention seem to be. ADHS posted the suicide report on their website - [Suicide Report December 2020](#); Veteran information begins on page 15 of the document.

SB 1443 Military Family Relief Fund – The department expanded eligibility criteria to include a service member of an applying family who has established residency in this state and is able to provide proof of continuous physical presence in the state of Arizona for at least twelve months. The financial need must be a result of the service member's military service. The expansion also establishes a deployment date requirement of on or before September 11, 2001, for applications to the Pre-9/11 MFRF subaccount and after September 11, 2001, for applications to the Post-9/11 subaccount. It also allows the Director to allocate up to ten percent of the donations towards administrative costs, which will allow the department to hire a MFRF staff person who can focus on applications and pay attention to high acuity cases.

SB 1802 Establishes August 14 as "National Navajo Code Talkers Day," and requires, if this holiday falls on a day other than Sunday, the Sunday following August 14 to be observed as the holiday.

Jennifer Harris states she posted the [ADVS State and Federal Veteran Legislation Update](#) on the department's website, which highlights all bills that passed and were signed this session. Such as SB 1797 fantasy sports betting and event wagering and SB 1312 veteran's specialty plates overseen by the VFW.

HB 2470 Buffalo Soldiers Memorial extension, which provides an extension from October 1, 2023, to October 1, 2025, for the placement of a memorial dedicated to the commemoration of Buffalo Soldiers in Wesley Bolin Plaza.

Also in the budget bill is the enduring freedom memorial, which allows ADOA the funds to maintenance the enduring freedom memorial.

Commissioner Gibbs asked when the retirement tax exemption takes effect. Jennifer Harris states this benefit is retroactive and applies to tax year 2021. Retired military can take advantage of this benefit come April 15, 2022. For those who submit their taxes on a quarterly basis, please submit your inquiries to asktaxpolicy@azdor.gov.

Commissioner Villalpando asked if the suicide annual report differentiates data between women and men. Jennifer Harris states the suicide annual report provides a breakdown of different demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, county, and more.

Old Business

Transportation Survey Update – Director Wright updated the commission on the transportation survey. The transportation survey began last year and was completed at the end of May 2021. The department completed two focus groups in which veterans, stakeholders and community leaders were asked a number of questions developed specifically for the focus groups. The focus groups were held on June 29th and June 30th of 2021. The final meeting is being held tomorrow, July 9, 2021, and the draft report will be finalized by the end of August 2021.

Commissioner Crego mentioned Senator Sinema is drafting a 130-page document with similar information related to transportation issues and suggested Director Wright speak with her office. Commissioner Gallowitz asked if ADVS received the response needed for the transportation survey. Director Wright stated 2,000 veterans filled out the survey and each focus group had 20 attendees; she was pleased with the turnout.

New Business

Chairman Randle requested a motion to postpone discussion regarding the Annual Letter to the Governor to the next Commission meeting. Commissioner Gallowitz motioned. Commissioner Crego second the motion. The motion carried.

Outreach Activities

Commissioner Gallowitz is excited for the work being done with the Arizona Coalition for Military Families who launched the Be Connected Faith Network on the 9th of June 2021. This group will begin hosting quarterly meetings; the meetings will be hybrid.

Commissioner Logan attended Congresswoman Debbie Lesko's Veterans Committee. He gave Keith Forte a shout out. Keith Forte is the new District Director for District 8, which owns Luke Airforce Base. Commissioner Logan attended a meeting for the 2022 Luke Airshow last week (week of June 28, 2021). The Luke Airshow will take place March of 2022; Commissioner Logan will keep the commission updated on this event.

Commissioner Gibbs states the city of Safford hosted the Moving Wall for five days; the event was very well attended. Commissioner Gibbs states he coordinated 342 volunteers in order to keep the wall open at all times. The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and the American Legion recruitment went well during the

Moving Wall event. The VA also had a presence at the event and was able to help veterans register for services.

Commissioner Loving states he stopped by the ASVH-P to inquire about volunteer work; he is a usual volunteer at the ASVH-P. He states the ASVH-P is still not open to volunteers due to COVID19 restrictions; however, they do plan to slowly resume volunteer opportunities at the ASVH-P in the near future.

Commissioner McDermott states she is excited to have projects coming to fruition in Mohave County. [See report.](#)

Commissioner Villalpando states the Golden Gate Community received approval to begin plans on the Veterans Walk, which will be held around 16th street and Buckeye Road near the Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport. Commissioner Villalpando states she was contacted by Senator Kelly's office to help a veteran who was going to be evicted from her home. With Commissioner Villalpando's help and the help of Senator Kelly's office, the Veteran was able to receive an extension for payment and is currently not homeless. Commissioner Villalpando, with the help of other veteran groups, was also able to help a veteran whose home patio collapsed; making it a safety hazard. The veteran organizations were able to safely remove the patio.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order

Commissioner Terms - Commissioner Gene Crego's term expired 7/1/2021, he has renewed his commission. Commissioner Logan's term expires 7/1/2022, he plans to renew his commission. Vice Chair McDermott's term expires 7/1/2022, she will not renew her commission. Chairman Randle's term expires 7/1/2022, he will not renew his commission. Commissioner Villalpando's term expires 7/1/2022, she will not renew her commission.

Chairperson Nominations - Commissioner Crego nominated Vice Chair McDermott for Chair. Commissioner Gallowitz second the motion, Vice Chair McDermott accepted the nomination. Motion carried.

Vice Chairperson Nominations – Commissioner Villalpando nominated Commissioner Crego, Commissioner Gibbs second the motion. Commissioner Crego accepted the nomination. Motion carried.

Comments from new Chairperson – Chairwoman McDermott states she is honored to accept the position. She is excited to continue to be part of the commission and believes the commission is a wonderful edition for the veterans across Arizona.

Former Chairman Randle asked for additional comments from the commission before the meeting adjourns. Commissioner Gallowitz asked that moving forward guests introduce themselves and state why they are joining the meeting and any goals they are trying to achieve. She would also like to request the opportunity to provide a five-to-ten-minute presentation in a future meeting on the Be Connected Faith Based Network. Commissioner Crego asked that all Commissioners wear their name badges during outreach activities. Commissioner Logan states veteran organizations are starting to get involved in Veterans' Day activities. He will provide a list of activities at the next meeting. Former Chairman Randle asked the commissioners to please remember they serve as advisors to the department; their role is informational in nature. Commissioner Gibbs requested information regarding the women expos and requested proper notification of the expos in all three rural areas. Commissioner Gallowitz thanked former Chairman Randle for his Chairmanship over the past year.

Chairman Randle requested a motion to adjourn the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Advisory Commission Meeting. Commissioner Gene Crego moved to adjourn. Commissioner, Chris Gibbs second the motion. The motion carried. Meeting adjourned at 10:56 am.

`REPORT TO AVSAC:

8 July 2021

***In the general population, the northwest portion of Arizona has seen a distinct surge in Corona virus cases in all age groups, including children, in the past month, especially in Lake Havasu City. And Mohave County has represented more than a quarter of the Delta variant in the whole State, while being one of the counties with the lowest percentage of vaccinations. I am not aware of statistics for just the veteran population in Western Arizona.**

***The 2022 budget for fiscal year 2022 was signed by Gov. Ducey to include the \$25 million (35% State/65% Federal) for a veterans' 100-bed assisted living facility in Mohave County. Locations in Kingman and Lake Havasu City will be assessed to determine the feasibility of each possible donated location.**

***ACMF-Be Connected. Their volunteer transportation program is underway in Mohave County. I am the only volunteer driver in Lake Havasu (there are others elsewhere in the area), so far, but Havasu is launching its 3-part transportation system: Flex – July 1st – cashless fare system (free in July - \$2 to \$3 one-way); Direct – September 13th – like Uber or Lyft (\$3 to \$5 one-way); Bridge – October 4th – fixed route bus system, which will ultimately have 3 routes (\$1.50/ride – seniors get a 50% discount).**

***Veterans' Treatment Courts (VTC) in Mohave County: All 3 cities have viable VTC's. The Bullhead City VTC now has a VTC Coordinator, Jim Consolato, the previous Mentor Coordinator. The 3 courts continue to share ideas and program enhancements. Each court has established an 'Alumni Group', meant to keep in touch with graduates. The Lake Havasu VTC will graduate 7 veterans on 9 July and will hold its annual Family Day on 17 July from 1130 to 1430. Everyone associated with the program and the Veterans Resource Team – and any veteran or family member – in the area are invited to attend.**

The Jerry Ambrose Veterans Council/VFW District 8 co-hosted Veterans Resource Fair/Stand Down in Bullhead City was held, as rescheduled, on 25 June. The BHC Veterans Resource Fair was held on the 25th It is considered a success as 39 veterans registered, 41 resource providers were on hand and 263 encounters with 114 assists were completed. The send out a big 'thank you' to the Arizona Department of Veterans Services Colonel Wanda Wright and newly appointed Arizona Stand Down Alliance Association leader Andre Matthews for attending. The Lake Havasu City Veterans Resource Fair will be held on Saturday, October 2nd at the Aquatic Center starting at 10:00 AM.

***The City of Kingman approved a resolution to accept a Community Development Block Grant in the amount of \$2,000,000 to finish construction of Arnold Plaza, which will ultimately provide temporary housing and services for veterans in need. Meanwhile, 'Operation 6' continues to offer temporary housing for up to 25 veterans at the Kingman Rodeway Inn.**

***The Wall That Heals: As reported at the last meeting, the Mohave Shrine Club of Bullhead City has signed on as a lead sponsor to bring the Wall to Bullhead on 21-24 October. Mohave High School students, led by teacher and Student Council Faculty Advisor David Lipinski, along with sponsor Vietnam Veterans of America 975, are driving forces for the project.**

***Lynxx Gaming & bingo in AZ clubs and posts: The legal process has continued to work its way through the courts. Bingo machines and associated ATM's are back in place.**

***The Northern Arizona Chapter of MOAA continues with assistance programs for veterans and is undergoing an increased outreach for new members.**

***Arizona At Work: Todd Baldwin continues to find good jobs for veterans in the area. Without his persistence and vast knowledge of the the area and people, there would be a 'big hole' in our ability to help veterans in Western Arizona.**

Respectfully Submitted By:



Joan McDermott

Commissioner

AVSAC