

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

February 1, 2018

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

Peter Kloeber
Joseph Brophy (via telephone)
Matthew Randle (via telephone)
Brett Rustand

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Wanda Wright, Director
Bonnie Dudelston, Administrator
Gary Ochoa, Regional Manager
Robert Tunila, Administrator

Advisory Commissioners Absent

Arlenthe Rios
Rebecca Villalpando

Guests

Bill Caron, Southern Arizona VA Health Care Services (SAVAHCS)

Call to Order – The Advisory Commission Meeting was held at the Tucson State Veteran Home. Chairman Kloeber called the meeting to order at 10:17 a.m.

Southern Arizona Veterans Affairs Healthcare Service (SAVAHCS) – Director Bill Caron gave an overview of the Southern Arizona VA Health Care Services, a levelone teaching hospital that provides a full range of patient care services, utilizing state of the art technology, as well as offering graduate medical education and research. See that presentation [here](#).

Chairman Kloeber stated that Secretary Shulkin spoke to a group last year in D.C. and one priority of his was the requirement for accountability among federal employees. Chairman Kloeber asked Mr. Caron how that priority has impacted the SAVAHCS. Mr. Caron stated that it has not affected them, as performance standards have been set and employees are well aware of the expected standards.

Bonnie Dudelston, an ADVS employee, asked about the contract that SAVAHCS has with the National Memorial Cemetery in Phoenix to take care of deceased indigent veterans, rather than the local state veteran cemeteries. Mr. Caron is not aware of any contractual obligation, but will look into it to see if there are any statutory or contractual reasons this is happening.

Veterans Services Division Southern Region Update – Gary Ochoa, Southern Region Manager, spoke to the Commissioners about upcoming events in southern Arizona that ADVS will be attending:

February 4 – Four Chaplains 75th Annual Memorial Service
February 7 – Veterans fair and town hall in Yuma
February 10 – ADVS Women Veterans Expo
March 15-17 – Stand down at the Grand Lux Hotel
April 18 – 11th Annual Gathering of the Indians

Mr. Ochoa spoke to the Commission about metrics the region is tracking as part of the Arizona Management System (AMS) and problem solving to figure out how they can do better. In 2017, they provided direct services to over 14 thousand veterans and are on track in 2018 to reach their goal. The goal per region (central, northern and southern regions) is to make about 252 contacts on average per week. Gary stated he is accomplishing this goal in the southern region with 10 VBCs (veteran benefit counselors) currently on his staff. Last week alone they served 366 clients.

The southern region has begun to make home visits to veterans on a case-by-case basis, based on an individual's circumstances. The Virtual VBC program uses computers, web cams and signature pads to enable a VBC to sit down in front of the veteran on the other side of the computer. The program is going well and ADVS IT department continues to set up sites throughout the central and southern regions. The primary use in southern region is for appointments on the Sells reservation, working with workforce employees to actively set up appointments.

Arizona State Veteran Home Tucson Update – Robert Tunila, Administrator, spoke to the group about his 120-bed facility. Of those 120 beds, 30 beds make up the memory care unit and 12 beds are dedicated to skilled nursing care. Most of the residents are considered long-term care. Mr. Tunila states the facility is very data driven and consistently performs at a 5-star rating.

CMS (Centers of Medicare/Medicaid Services) rates all facilities using an overall quality rating; a health inspections rating, a quality measures rating, a staffing rating, and an RN staffing rating. It's really a snapshot in time, dependent on the people that are observing the facility and is very subjective.

The quality measures for the Tucson Veteran Home are consistently a five. Each area has a long term and a short-term quality measure that are consistently ranked above the national average. All the measurements tie into a composite score and use major indicators like falls with major injuries, pain, pressure ulcers, UTI, loss of bowels and bladder, etcetera as a means of trying to find a way of how each facility is really doing. They've taken 16 indicators and narrowed it down to the most important to give each facility a snapshot. Many of the indicators are based on state and national averages as well as population.

Arizona has an incredible composite score because of the number of short-term care facilities that only accept Medicare and only provide rehabilitation services, so they don't register in that composite score. If they have two or three people that manage to stay long enough to be considered long-term care, they get zeros on all those scores and it skews the numbers. Their goal is 12 best in class out of the 16 measures, and they average 11. If you look at the national average for short term facilities, the average is 78 percent, and the Tucson home scores in the 100th percentile.

Mr. Tunila and staff is working with ADVS IT to enable their system to allow CNAs to chart as they go. The facility already has this capability for the RNs. The activities program at the Tucson Veteran home is outstanding, with a lot of large events for the residents.

Commissioner Rustand asked about the census. Mr. Tunila stated the average is around 118, but that number average is off due to a flu breakout causing them to not admit new residents. There continues to be a waiting list to be admitted to the facility.

Commissioner Rustand asked Mr. Caron about long-term care availability at SAVAHCS. Mr. Caron does not have many long-term beds, but has been challenged to work towards establishing more beds for this purpose and will begin strategic plans to accomplish this in the future.

Chairman Kloeber stated his concern of the smaller state veteran homes planned for future construction in Yuma and Flagstaff at 60 beds each.

Arizona Veterans' Memorial Cemetery at Marana Update – Bonnie Dudelston, Cemetery Administrator, briefed the Commission. The Arizona Veterans' Memorial Cemetery at Marana (AVMC-M) had its first interment on March 14, 2016 and as of January 31, 2018, there have been a total of 940 interments. Of those, 168 were casket burials with 34 dependent burials; 634 urns placed with 104 dependents. In total, only 14.6 percent of the decedents at the cemetery are veteran dependents.

At the current rate of cremation at AVMC-M, the remaining 1,395 niches available will leave the columbarium at full capacity within five years.

The Missing in America Project has held two full honors funerals for 45 veterans at the AVMC-M with the next mission being held in April.

The cemetery has received 1,358 approved applications to date, which is a small number when compared to the 125 thousand veterans in Pinal and Pima Counties. Statistically, less than 20 percent of veterans know about their burial benefits. Ms. Dudelston would like that number to increase and continues to provide outreach to the area to make people aware of available veteran burial benefits.

Recently, through a generous donation, a carillon was purchased and installed. They will be holding a dedication ceremony in March. Additionally, Rotarians from the area have donated 90 trees as well as a landscape designer to provide design concepts and tree care.

Ms. Dudelston is having difficulty finding students to volunteer under a work study program and has contacted both the University of Arizona and Pima County Community College.

Pinal County is investigating the possibility of constructing a highway exchange and roadway off the I-10 for access to the Pinal Airpark, which will also benefit the cemetery by providing a more direct route to their location.

Agency Announcements and Updates – Wanda Wright, Director of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, gave agency updates since the last meeting. She recently briefed committees at the legislature of the ADVS mission, as she normally does at the start of each legislative session.

The BeConnected program has had upwards of 1,000 calls. In the first week of January, over 90 calls were received. Due to the number of calls, a second full time employee joined the BeConnected incoming call team. As the program continues to be marketed, the number of calls will continue to increase.

The Veteran Tool Kit program continues to work well. Department of Economic Security Workforce employees that work directly with veterans to find employment will also assist the veteran in completing an application for up to \$750 to be used towards the purchase of things like clothing, steel toe shoes, tools and transportation, as examples, that are obstacles for the veteran in securing employment.

Over 100 veterans have been seen through the Virtual VBC program in the northern region. ADVS IT personnel are working to deploy the technology in the central and southern regions. Those 100 veterans represent a \$20,000 savings so far, not counting the VBC costs. The VBCs are working hard to build trust within the sovereign nations so Native American veterans utilize the program.

Since the inception of AMS (Arizona Management System) at ADVS, the human resources department has been able to drive the rate of hiring nurses down to just 21 days, from about 130 days. This includes background and licensing checks. AMS continues to force people to get away from the mentality of "the way we've always done it" and continue to seek improvements to processes.

The department continues to work in collaboration with the VA on the Veteran Women Expos to bring more women in attendance.

There will be a nationwide Vietnam Veterans Day on March 29th. ADVS will be hosting an event at Wesley Bolin Plaza and Governor Ducey will be in attendance.

Last week Maricopa County held a stand down where over 1,000 veterans were served. With the homeless numbers going down, Director Wright is questioning whether the same services will still apply. The majority of the veterans in attendance are near the poverty level as opposed to homeless.

Veterans Donation Fund applications were reviewed and scored, with organizations being notified on February 6 of the award or denial.

In November ADVS, with ADOA, will be holding an event to acknowledge 100 years since armistice day in 1918.

Outreach Activities – Commissioner Rustand attended the Military Veteran Community Network (MVCN) meetings and back in December attended the Summit at the University of Arizona that was greatly attended. He continues to work closely with the Veterans Court in Tucson.

Chairman Kloeber attended the Northern MVCN meeting. February 16 is the next southern Arizona MVCN and February 23 is the Central MVCN meeting.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order - Chairman Kloeber said of the nine commission positions there are currently three vacancies. He has been actively recruiting and is hoping to find someone to fill one of the positions in northeast Arizona.

Commissioner Villalpando reviewed the advisory commission's guidelines. They agreed that some strategic planning in small group would be necessary going forward to review the program. Commissioner Kloeber really likes that the MVCNs align with the commission's purpose. He stated that commissioner regions were realigned to tie directly to the ADVS and VA regions of *Northern, Southern and Central*.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:54.