

**Arizona Department of Veterans' Service Advisory Commission**  
4141 N. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street (North S. Herrera Way), Phoenix, AZ 85012

**March 13, 2014**

**MINUTES**

**Advisory Commissioners**

Jeff Olson, Chair  
Ron Perkins, Vice Chair  
Kara Caldwell  
Wayne Krula  
Brett Rustand  
David Toliver, Sr.

**AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)**

Ted Vogt, Director  
Robert Barnes, Deputy Director  
Dave Hampton, Public Information Officer  
Judy Smith, Administrative Secretary

**Guests**

Jonathan Gardner, Director, Southern Arizona VA  
Medical Center  
Kathleen Mungovan, Business Service Line Chief,  
Southern Arizona VA Medical Center  
William Patterson, Administrative Officer for the  
Business Service Care Line - Southern Arizona  
VA Medical Center  
Justin Smothers, AmeriCorps VISTA

**Excused:**

George Cushing  
Philip Hanson

**Call to Order** – Chairman Jeff Olson called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. There were no corrections to the February minutes. Commissioner Toliver moved to approve the minutes as presented. Commissioner Perkins seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

**Introduction and Welcome of Invited guests** – Before introducing Tucson VA Medical Health Director, Jonathan Gardner, Chairman Olson said he has a great appreciation for the Tucson VA Medical Center and its staff who, a year ago, saved his life, for which he is grateful. Mr. Olson noted that the Tucson VA Medical Center has received its second **Robert W. Carey Performance Excellence Award**, the premier award for healthcare within the VA. He commended Director Gardner and his staff for the hard work they put forth in achieving this award.

The Joint Accreditation Commission is in the Tucson VA Medical Center for a week long survey. Chairman Olson introduced Director Jonathan Gardner and thanked him for taking time away from the survey to address the commission.

Director Gardner said the survey is going well and he is able to take an hour away to address the commission and ADVS staff. He hopes the next time the Advisory Commission meets in Tucson they can take a tour of the VA Medical Center and see the programs it offers.

Director Gardner said the Tucson VA Medical Center is a referral facility that performs open heart surgery and neurosurgery; it has a Blind Rehab Center of which there are only 8 or 12 in the country, and offers a variety of other programs, as well as a Network 18 site for Polytrauma.

One program in particular is the simulation center, a sophisticated training mechanism for nursing staff that was built over the last 5 years. Nursing staff is well trained in the simulation center on how to properly use medical equipment before they are placed on a patient ward, which is a great improvement for nurses in their work.

The training mannequins are quite expensive at six figures each. The Tucson VA is one of the few facilities with a simulation center.

Director Gardner presented a packet of information and noted the Tucson VA Medical Center is a level 1A facility in the VHA healthcare system. The 1A designation indicates the Southern Arizona VA Healthcare System (SAVAHCS) provides the most complex care the VA can offer to a Veteran. There are five levels of facility complexity in VHA; 1A, 1B, 1C, 2 and 3. The Phoenix VA is a 1C and the Prescott VA is a level 3.

Commissioner Ron Perkins asked if the Tucson VA Medical Center has an in-house drug abuse program.

Director Gardner said they have an exceptional pain management program and an extensive mental health program, with a variety of mental health activity programs located in Building 90. Tucson has one of the few in-patient PTSD programs in the VA system.

Director Gardner would like the commission to tour Building 90 that was designed by his staff and houses a variety of programs. Any construction the SAVAHCS does is designed by staff according to their specifications because they work with the equipment and know what is needed to do their jobs.

Commissioner Perkins asked if the Tucson VA works with the Veteran's Court and if the court channels patients to the VA.

Director Gardner noted that General Maxon was in Tucson last year and met with him. The Tucson VA Medical Center was the leader in the Veteran's court program. At present, 402 Veterans have gone through the Veteran's court program. Director Gardner would like the commission to visit with people first hand who have been through the program. The VA has done a lot with the Veteran's Court Program and will continue to expand it.

Commissioner Perkins asked if the Tucson VA kept track of recidivism figures. Director Gardner said they have the statistics but he would need to look up the figure.

Director Gardner has been with the VA Medical Center 20 years and was the former Deputy of Operations at the VHA in Washington, D.C. He is an Arizona native and a graduate of BYU, with some course work at ASU prior to attending BYU.

He referred to the information packet to familiarize the group with the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System (SAVAHCS) and recent awards. Dr. Robert Petzel, the VA's Under Secretary for Health, presented Director Gardner the Carey "Trophy Award" for Excellence, the highest efficiency quality award the VA offers. It is based on the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Criteria. The criteria looks at being involved in lean thinking and working to be a high energy or high quality program. The whole country is involved in this program.

The SAVAHCS was also awarded the state's National Institute of Health (NIH) Pioneer Award, presented by the Arizona Quality Alliance. It is the state's version of the Malcolm Baldrige Award. Every state has a state level program sponsoring this quality award. It is important to Director Gardner and his staff.

Director Gardner noted that Federal dollars are more difficult to justify due to increases in the deficit. He cannot control the congressional appropriations; only how he and his staff do their work. A lot of time is spent studying lean thinking and the whole concept of system redesign. The Tucson VA Medical Center has been doing it for 5 or 6 years.

The Tucson VA Medical Center has received several awards within the network and nationally. Although awards are nice, what the Tucson VA is trying to do is help employees do their work better and assist them when something can be done that the employee has control over, which is their work. He noted that if employees aren't inspired, they won't succeed.

Director Gardner has 2,400 employees with an operating budget of 400 million dollars. He is requiring all employees to go through "White Belt" training, which is an orientation to lean healthcare concepts. The belt levels are White, Yellow, Green and Black Belt. It is a great way to get people involved.

All six senior leaders at the SAVAHCS are Six-Sigma, Green Belt Certified. This certification allows senior management to understand and practice lean thinking. There is a senior leader serving as a Champion in all of the Rapid Process Improvement Workgroups/Lean Healthcare Initiatives that the SAVAHCS sponsors.

Each year, a cadre of personnel is trained in system redesign with a goal of placing 1 or 2 black belts on the care lines. As projects are developed, we look at areas where greater efficiency is needed or where quality can be improved. People are trained to become involved in that process and to become proficient in using these same concepts.

Director Gardner is Green Belt certified. He expects senior leadership staff to be green belt certified and the service chief staff to be yellow belt certified.

Rapid Process Improvement Workshops (RPIW's) are focus reviews whereby people are brought in to address problems. We look at our responsibilities as senior management and service chiefs as "barrier busters".

Director Gardner would like to share the SAVAHCS strategic planning process and how they go about addressing issues and attempt to empower employees with the commission and ADVS. He would like to invite the commission to the SAVAHCS to recognize some of his employees and conduct a tour of the VA the next time they hold a meeting in Tucson.

The Advisory Commission is welcome to tour the simulation lab and anything else they are interested in seeing. Director Gardner would like the group to tour the Blind Rehab Center. The Federal VA has only 8 to 12 in their system and Tucson's is one of the largest.

Director Gardner referred to the newsletter and examples of projects they have worked on. The newsletter is developed for employees to celebrate their successes.

A Visitor's Guide is given to visitors to help them move around the campus and navigate the SAVAHCS system. When employees see lost visitors, they assist them. We are here to serve and care for our nation's heroes and heroines who expect the best and we are passionate about giving the best care; that starts with the director.

Director Gardner presented a compilation of the history of major programs the VA offers. The Southern Arizona VA Health Care System has been in operation since 1928 and is in its 86<sup>th</sup> year of operation.

At one time, the SAVAHCS owned 116 acres of land and deeded 9 acres to ADVS for building the state veteran home. The VA's central office design wanted to maintain the historical preservation of the area and met with ADVS to choose the design. The VA is grateful ADVS accepted the design, as the Veteran Home blends nicely with the SAVAHCS campus.

Director Gardner is transparent in Veteran care at the VA, whether they need state services or VA federal services, and doesn't want Veterans to feel there is any difference. He has a good relationship and works closely with Jim Ross, Administrator of the ADVS State Veteran Home. Every four months, Director Gardner and his senior staff meet with Jim Ross and the Veteran Home senior staff to discuss issues.

## **Fisher House**

Director Gardner referred to the Fisher House announcement in the packet. Tucson was selected for a Fisher House by Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Eric Shinseki. It is the secretary's goal that all 1.A rated VA facilities become the designated host site for a Fisher House. The Arizona Fisher House in Tucson will serve Arizona Veterans and Veteran referrals from other states.

The flyer tells why there is a need for a Fisher House in Arizona. Families need to be able to stay nearby in support of a family member who is going through treatment at the VA. The Fisher House will consist of 12 to 16 suites. The architects are pleased with the site and that a Fisher House is being built in this part of the country. Planning stages of the project are moving along well and Director Gardner is certain the architects will build to preserve the historical architecture of the SAVAHCS Campus.

Dr. Dana Staggs, a Tucson chiropractor in private practice, has done a great job in chairing the Fisher House Committee and his efforts to raise funds. A variety of people are trying to raise 3 million dollars and Director Gardner is pleased to note that a contribution from ADVS started the campaign. When the \$3 million goal is reached, the Fisher House Foundation will provide a matching contribution to complete construction.

Dr. Staggs has met with influential citizens who have agreed to call President George W. Bush and ask him to headline a fundraising event in the fall. The fundraising group will work toward that goal.

Chairman Olson asked where the proposed site of the Fisher House is located.

Director Gardner said it is just off 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue, inside the main entrance of the VA. The land is visible and accessible to the canteen, retail store and cafeteria. Walking trails have been created and area maps have been added in several areas. The Fisher House Foundation is very pleased with the proposed site.

Commissioner Krula asked if there was a time schedule for the Fisher House construction and how the fundraising is going.

Director Gardner said the committee is hoping to have the money raised this fiscal year with anticipated groundbreaking by November, 2014. The Fisher House is expected to open in 2015, depending on whether the fundraising amount is met. Funding is still short, but the effort has just started. He emphasized this is not a Tucson resource but an Arizona resource. They hope to receive funding from all over the state. At this time, there is no plan to build a second Fisher House in Arizona, which is why the Secretary has championed a Fisher House on the grounds of every 1A facility.

Chairman Olson asked if individuals or organizations want to donate to the Fisher House fund, who do they contact.

Director Gardner said fundraising will not be not done by the VA, and VA staff cannot be involved. He directed commissioners to the brochure in the packet, which notes Dr. Dana Staggs as the contact for fundraising. He brought attention to the article about Maria Herrera who was interviewed and is on the board with Dr. Staggs and is contacting people to help with funding.

After the Fisher House article ran in the newspaper, Dr. Staggs received an unsolicited call from the executive director of the Ronald McDonald Foundation, who wants to advise him of what is involved in fundraising. She agreed to advise and consult with him.

Director Gardner introduced Ms. Kathleen Mungovan, Chief of Business Service Line and the architect of the Compensation and Pension Program. SAVAHCS has one of the best Compensation and Pension programs in the country. The IDES statistics show the Southern Arizona VA Health Care

System is the top performer for the Air Force with Davis Monthan and within the Army, Fort Huachuca. We've worked very hard in devoting sufficient resources to give great examinations that prepare the Veteran and support them in their effort to accurately reflect their service connection. We have good doctors who are devoted to the Compensation and Pension Program. There has been a huge demand in the last two years, and the SAVAHCS has kept up with the demand.

### **Belt Level Training**

Commissioner Krula thanked Director Gardner for sending the monthly Southern VA Medical Center newsletter and asked what the basic steps are for the belt training.

Director Gardner said the Black Belt represents the highest level of training in lean thinking, which means the employee has completed a number of projects and led other employees through them. Black Belt level employees are considered resident experts. To qualify for different levels, it means they are involved in actually doing the work and developing data pieces.

Director Gardner has developed what is called "a weekly meeting of the wall", which is a 15 minute "on your feet" presentation for whatever the system redesign team is working on. One day a month he brings the management team together and their service chiefs to focus on the SAVAHCS strategic plan. He has found that unless you do something on a recurring basis with the strategic plan, it becomes obsolete.

Director Gardner implements a concept called "Return Report" which is critical and has to happen. The "meeting of the wall" group focuses on how the VA is doing on the strategic plan and where we are on conformance and what needs to happen.

This is where the "Barrier Busters" mission for senior management comes in; if we find things that are not taking place, there is a chance to formally address them. We then have a report on what is happening in systems redesign; which particular projects are being worked on as a team, and the results we are getting.

SAVAHCS is a huge working mechanism and is like a city. It has staff ranging from a skilled neurosurgeon to a groundskeeper. Everyone has a mission and every day we conduct what is called the "Morning Report", and these are broken down into First, Second and Third Morning Reports.

"First Report" is what happened last night. We have 40 to 50 people who serve as department heads, service officers or administrative officers attending this meeting.

"Second Morning Report" is where all staff are empowered to request a second report if needed, which means they can ask anyone to stay for a second report. It is empowerment because maybe that person hasn't had progress in addressing a matter and may want someone higher up to hear it. It is a 10 minute meeting to address matters that are impeding progress.

"Third Morning Report" is a meeting which covers leadership and addresses Washington or personnel issues. All three morning reports are centered around our strategic drivers; six of them, and has worked well for us.

These meetings have driven us to be more responsive and accountable to our veterans and employees, because if employees are not inspired, we will not succeed.

A presentation the Tucson VA implements that has worked well is Performance Measures, Outcomes, Quality, and the tool to execute these is System Redesign. It empowers employees and gives them pride in what they're doing. SAVAHCS is interested in people who are passionate about treating our Veterans who have given their yesterdays to give us our todays. That is the standard and we attempt to use that as part of the program.

Commissioner Toliver asked about employee retention.

Director Gardner said retention is doing fairly well; the toughest recruitment in Arizona is primary care doctors. They are becoming more difficult to recruit and salaries have to be increased to remain competitive. Physician recruitment is enhanced by our affiliation with the University of Arizona College of Medicine Academic Affiliation.

Chairman Olson said that throughout the nation there is a common movement in health care to wean some Veterans off pain medications. His experience in talking with Veterans is that there is some kick back to that idea. He asked if Director Gardner was experiencing this.

Director Gardner said the Tucson VA Medical Center has had a very active and sophisticated pain management program with a multi-disciplinary team in operation for some time. The hospital identified the drug abuse of some Veterans as a problem. We have used a variety of methods to assist Veterans with their addiction.

Veterans with a debilitating injury and after post-op surgery, suffer intense pain. The hospital does an evaluation of the pain level but the pain medication is something that has to be monitored or it becomes an addiction.

### **Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACT) Program – Mental Health**

The VA developed its own PACT program in mental health long before PACT came to rule the VA.

Kathy Mungovan elaborated on the SAVAHCS multi-disciplinary approach, which consists of a team with a pain specialist, RN specialist, oncologist, psychologist, and physical therapist. Bio-feedback training, life skills coaching, yoga, acupuncture, chiropractic and aroma therapy have been provided to this group. It's been very successful so they are now applying the same type of care to PTSD and substance abuse groups. The team found that Veterans will go from group to group to get the help they need, so the team has taken this multi-disciplinary approach with each of them and has had a good success rate. Only one team is presently doing this but they are looking at doing this in a broader spectrum.

Director Gardner said they are also looking at something broader than a PACT. They are focusing on primary care through a multi-disciplinary team. VA Headquarters put resources into that across the country, but now the resources are drying up because of the budgets.

We have developed a PACT II with specialty levels and have devoted resources toward it whereby the primary care team becomes more interconnected with the sub specialists. We are working with that and think it is a critical venue, where they can have increased communications and referrals and be much more focused on electronic consults.

We've developed a Triad and placed key nursing staff with sub specialty medicine, sub specialty surgery, and are in the process of setting up a special procedure unit. That is the "barrier buster" concept which means that Triad in sub specialty medicine has a position; a nurse and a business service line person and they manage that group so that if staff have issues with a specialty activity, they go to them. They are empowered to address issues such as scheduling or a situation where things aren't working right and someone needs assistance or advice. It's been quite successful.

A key piece we have developed is called PACT II where teams at special levels are developed that can interact with primary care PACT providers.

Computerization helps and we develop templates that everyone has access to, including the providers. We maintain current templates, which require purging the system periodically. Medicine templates the providers use are pulled periodically and updated so everybody can access them.

Commissioner Perkins asked if there any problems at the staffed southern Arizona clinics?

Director Gardner said there are distance issues and occasionally staff turnover issues. They try to stay in contact within tele-health. The VA tele-health program has a recruitment program and we try to supplement with intermittent providers/physicians until someone can be hired. There is more turnover in providers than in nursing staff. Some CBOC's have higher turnover than others. Sierra Vista is down one employee; two were just hired. If face to face meetings are needed for psychiatry or other medical needs, it is contracted out. Psychiatrists make their visits through the tele-health program.

The SAVAHCS has been very aggressive in construction and is up to date in its facilities. Director Gardner felt it was important to hire construction coordinators. The grounds are exceptional and he takes pride and a personal interest and tours the grounds periodically. His philosophy is that if the hospital smells bad or is ill kept, people assume the care is not good.

An agreement has been in place for several years with the Pima County court system whereby they send 15 to 20 volunteer Veterans for 2 or 3 days who assist the six staff groundskeepers. These are young men who are not serious offenders and some are Veterans who, while in the service, were supervisors and know how to handle people. It is working well.

A few years ago an employee, a former Seabee and part of a battalion from Phoenix serving on a detachment in Tucson, came to him with an idea. He said once a month they are sent to do exercises for two days and every summer for two weeks. He wanted to know if they could do something on campus and complete needed work for the VA at the same time.

The VA borrowed heavy equipment from the DMV and over the years, these Veterans built a containment unit for Nuclear Medicine and a sports court, to name a few projects. These Veterans take on a variety of projects and get service credit for it.

We also have what is called a Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) Program whereby Veterans participate in activities on campus. It is rewarding when graduates of that program, who have learned skills and gained employment, recognize Director Gardner when he is out and about and greet him.

Commissioner Rustand noted that Director Gardner has led the Polytrauma and Blindness units and asked if he could speak to the resiliency training and behavioral work he has done at U of A.

Director Gardner said the Tucson VA has been very active at U of A and has been good partners with Dr. Marks. He noted that in the early 1960's, Tucson had no hospital and the University of Arizona (U of A) College of Medicine was started at the SAVAHCS until the U of A Medical Center was opened years later.

We have to find a way to meet the needs of the younger generation, which is a very proficient list, and the older generation with great needs. We have worked hard with the POW group and there are not many left now. We hold a function once a year for POW Veterans to come and tell their stories. We ask staff to hear their stories and lay out artifacts from the wars of those Veterans.

For years we have been treating older Veterans from World War II and the Korean War and the middle aged Vietnam Veterans; now we are treating young Veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. We need to bridge the efforts to meet the needs of the younger generation and older generation of Veterans at the same time.

Before leaving and turning the meeting over to Kathy Mungovan, Director Gardner said he would like to host the commission for a tour of the facility to see their programs. Most of what the Tucson VA is doing is not found at many VA facilities. He marveled at the ADVS State Veteran Home which is a great edifice, they do great work here and it also looks the part.

Kathy said she has served within the VA for 30 years; 15 of those years were at the Phoenix VA and the past 15 years at the Tucson VA Medical Center.

Kathy would specifically like to talk about what the Tucson VA Medical Center is doing at the university. She asked her assistant, William Patterson, Administrative Officer for the Business Service Care Line, to talk about his time as a student at the university in the Support Education for Returning Veterans (SERV) Program, while opening up opportunities for the VA campus.

William served in the Marine Corps. after which he began working at the Tucson VA Medical Center as an Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND) transition patient advocate. Through that work he met Brett Rustand and commended Brett for his efforts to support Veterans. William feels blessed to serve Veterans.

William said the SERV Program is a curriculum that was developed by Dr. Marks and professors at the University which gives incoming students 9 credit hours that go toward their graduation and teaches resiliency leadership and academic adaptations. It takes an instructor formerly in the military and translates them to the academic field so the Veteran gets technical learning objectives (TLO's) and Enabling Learning Objectives (ELO's) that teach them how to work in an academic environment.

The graduation rate is very high; to date, 292 Veterans have gone through the program. That is how William started with a cohort of Veterans in the class. Working at the SAVAHCS opened doors for what they needed on the home campus.

He learned what some of the other Veterans were struggling with at Pima College, U of A South and community colleges in the area. The SAVAHCS set up office hours at the college for eligibility enrollment and patient advocate assistance. We are there a minimum of twice a month and when the Veterans need health care, we enroll them into the VA system and bring health care to them.

Commissioner Perkins asked if the SERV Program occurred within the Veteran's department of the student union at the University.

William said yes, in part, the U of A has a good student Veteran chapter and is organized and they knew what they needed to support themselves. We are working with Dr. Marks to see where the student Veterans need the help.

Commissioner Rustand said the Veteran Center at U of A is outstanding. The SERV Program meets the Veterans at the convergence of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill. We're finding Veterans in the schools and not only training them in coping with transitioning from military to civilian life, but training them for an academic future. It's an outstanding program that Brett would like to see in all Arizona universities.

Kathy said one of the things the Tucson VA has done with the Affordable Care Act, is contact the younger Veterans who don't have health insurance, are independent of their parents, and are enrolling them for VA services. That fulfills the Veteran's requirement under the Affordable Care Act. Commissioner Perkins asked if this was threaded through community colleges

William said it is and there are 7 different campuses at Pima Community College. They don't have good centralized locations as the U of A does. They have a couple of small offices and are trying to build a synergy around Veterans and the community college. The community college is developed differently; it is spread out more. There are more Veterans enrolled at Pima Community College than at the university, but they are spread out and it is hard to get them together.

We conduct the same amount of outreach at Pima Community College. We go to each campus at least twice a month and try to bring every service that the University of Arizona provides. As an organization, the Pima County system is not as embracing.

Commissioner Rustand said in addition to Polytrauma and a lot of great things going on here at the Tucson VA, this is something that should be highlighted because it was pioneered here at U of A and the Southern Arizona VA. The majority of Post 9/11 Veterans are going to be found in schools.

Younger Veterans are not joining Veteran associations. In past generations, the best outreach to find Veterans was through AMVETS, VFW, and other organizations. Now the majority are found through schools, *i.e.*, trade schools, community colleges and universities. Many Veterans leave the military and go directly to school. It is a critical program that is being promoted by Dr. Marks.

Kathy said her staff has gone on road trips to Cochise County, Yuma, community colleges and other places to provide onsite enrollment. They send out a packet ahead of time to the directors of admissions and ask them to post the notice with contact information.

Commissioner Perkins asked if there is anything like this at the VA hospital in Phoenix?

William said the Arizona State University initially was a little behind in their programs. They recently established the Pat Tillman Center. Their Transition Patient Advocate does outreach to the community colleges and Arizona State University (ASU). He is not aware if their eligibility enrollment staff goes out to campuses to provide onsite enrollment.

Commissioner Tolliver happened to see a Veteran Center near his home at Estrella Mountain; he had no idea it was there. He asked what is being done to announce or publish the fact there is a Veteran Center in the area. It's not far from Luke Air Force base, which is a source of advertisement, but couldn't it be more widely advertised?

Kathy offered to reach out to her counterpart at the Phoenix VA to ask that question. She will get back to ADVS with an answer.

Chairman Olson said for those who may not know, William Patterson has been a guest of the commission in the past; once when he was with the Tucson VA Medical Center for just a month and was named Employee of the Month. He went on to become Employee of the Year and also received the "Man of the Year of Tucson's 40 Under 40" Award.

Chairman Olson recently attended an informal homeless Veteran gathering in Tucson and talked to a young Veteran, a methadone user, who had been in the Veteran treatment program but was discharged for failure to comply. Jeff asked him if he was getting any help or trying to get help, or if he was referred to any other program or a caregiver outside the VA system. The Veteran said no, he is now on the street.

Kathy said substance abuse behaviors and personalities are difficult. As long as the Veteran understands and follows the treatment plan, they will be housed in Hud Vash. They are eligible for the entire program, but if they decide this is not what they want and they no longer follow the program, they will be discharged from the program. If this happens, they are not sent away without a resource referral. It is up to the individual to seek that assistance.

The new Tucson mayor has been proactive in Veteran homelessness and established a very good initiative and has worked in the VA Homeless Veteran Program. VA social workers go out into the community and find and engage homeless Veterans; sometimes they are camped in the desert, but the social workers find them and offer assistance. The homeless Veteran has to want to be engaged in the program.

Kathy reverted back to a question Commissioner Perkins had asked earlier about a resident mental health substance abuse program.

At present, the Tucson VA has a resident substance abuse program whereby the Veterans are on campus all day; they go to classes and are housed in groups in the community. The program is on campus; the lodging is not. The VA is currently building housing on campus and treatment will be residential. The building will look like the other campus buildings. It will consist of a day room, lobby, pods and individual rooms off the pods, a laundry room and kitchen.

The Tucson VA has a building designated for homeless Veterans with a clothing room and showers so homeless Veterans can shower and have access to clean clothes. A washer and dryer are provided and the VA offers haircuts and dog food that has been donated for pets. If the Veteran chooses homelessness as a lifestyle, the VA still provides for them as much as they can.

Commissioner Krula asked what percentage of Veterans prefer to remain homeless.

Kathy doesn't work directly with the Homeless Veteran Program, but can get that information by asking the social workers who manage the program. They report every contact.

Commissioner Krula asked if social workers go where the Veterans are who can't come into the VA.

Kathy noted that the Tucson VA Medical Center provides in-home health care through a home-based primary care program. It is a burden for the elderly and severely infirmed patients and their families to come to the VA. Nurse practitioners, nurses, social workers and physical therapists provide in-home visits and services. Their whole program is to bring services to the community, especially the rural areas.

A physician started recently at the Safford veteran clinic. Safford has been a challenge and it has been difficult to keep a physician in that rural community, but the new physician plans to stay. It takes a special person to live in a rural community and serve its Veterans.

Chairman Olson said Phoenix VA Hospital Director, Sharon Helman, had asked the commission to intervene on her behalf in getting better Veteran Clinic signage. Is Tucson experiencing problems with Veteran Clinic signage?

Kathy said there would be highway signage for a trauma center or hospital, but there wouldn't be a sign stating there is a Veteran Clinic in the area. The Tucson VA is visual and has not had issues of Veterans not being able to find the hospital or Veteran clinics. The appointment reminders sent to Veterans contain an address and map to find the Veteran clinic, which has been very effective.

Chairman Olson said when the commission travels to communities; they meet with Veterans and hear their concerns. He asked if there are any plans for new CBOC's in the area.

Kathy said there are no plans for new CBOC's, but they are expanding existing space. The Northwest clinic off Ina Road has been busier than projected and they are out of space. Other CBOC's have audiology services and we want to provide those services at the Ina Road clinic, but we don't have the room that is needed. It is leased property and the Federal Government has regulations regarding contracting and leasing, however, we are going to more than double that clinic's space.

Yuma opened a new CBOC last year. It is a large beautiful space which was needed to accommodate the increased winter visitor population.

Chairman Olson said the commission would appreciate being notified of a re-grand opening at the Ina Road CBOC so they can set up a table top display and visit with Veterans.

Kathy explained that RPIW stands for Rapid Process Improvement Work Group and in the belt program, the white belt states general information about why you want to do process improvement. The yellow belt means you have been involved in an RPIW.

The RPIW is focused on one thing; process improvement for a specific issue. We are always looking for Veterans who want to participate in these work groups. If we're going to spend time and effort to improve something, the end user should be included.

A Veteran Family Advisory Council was formed, of which Kathy is a member. A work group convenes in a conference room for a week and is focused on commitments to Veterans. Members don't want to leave the room without deliverables for Veterans. It is a lot to ask a Veteran to commit to a weeklong conference, but the teams with a Veteran involved have been more meaningful; the voice of the customer is heard first hand. The group hears the front line staff frustrations and the information flows more freely.

Vice-Chair Ron Perkins asked what the waiting time is for getting an appointment on campus.

Kathy said a new patient primary care appointment is within a week and appointments with CBOC's are within 30 days for non-emergency care. Emergent issues allow the Veteran to be seen that day. Mental health care is readily available. There is a backlog in some sub-specialty G.I. services such as Urology which we expect will be back to normal in six weeks. Three full time staff were hired and two additional clinics were opened. It is about a two week wait for new patients to be seen and patients who have already been seen by a doctor will be seen sooner.

Commissioner Perkins asked if patient sub-specialty care is contracted out.

Kathy said health care is contracted out for rural and Yuma Veterans. Local Veterans come to the VA hospital for care.

Chairman Olson asked what the impact is of the increasing number of female Veterans discharged into the community after their hospitalizations.

Kathy said the women's clinics have grown; they now have two nurse practitioners and a full time gynecologist. All CBOC primary providers have gone through a mini-residency on women's health. The Tucson VA gives a female who is established with a doctor outside the Tucson area, the choice of being seen in her community or coming to the Tucson VA.

The VA pays for maternity care benefits and the Veteran does not have to be seen by a VA doctor, however, the VA needs to know who their provider is before the birth.

William noted that a new clinic is being built in building 81 specifically for women's health.

Chairman Olson asked if a female Veteran requires admission, is there an adequate number of doctors to care for women Veterans.

Kathy said, yes, there is and, over the years of refurbishing the VA, they now have large private rooms with a private bath, which has become the standard.

Commissioner Toliver asked how the Veteran would know they can go elsewhere or nearby for treatment; how do you get the word out?

Kathy said this information would come from their primary care provider. The VA has to purchase the care for them. The VA has regulations about how much they will pay for the care. The VA has found that the community providers will treat Veterans like any other patient. They charge a co-pay, which is against the law, and bill the Veteran for any balance after the Medicare rate has been applied. This is also against the law. We don't want this to happen.

Provider information is part of the Veteran's enrollment and eligibility packet. We tell them non-VA coordinated care or fee basis care is not covered. They should come to the VA first.

Quite often Veterans request care their provider determines they don't really need. The VA does not pay for that care. Hydrotherapy is usually the care the Veteran is seeking. Although VA regulations have changed, hydrotherapy care it is not a covered service at this time.

Chairman Olson thanked Kathy and William for their time in addressing the commission.

Before departing, Kathy remarked to Director Vogt that the father of a nurse care manager at the Tucson VA is a resident of the Tucson Veteran Home. She raves about the great care he receives and the friendly staff.

**Justin Smothers - Americorps VISTA** - Chairman Olson recognized return guest Justin Smothers of Americorps VISTA, a veteran's outreach organization.

Justin said he is also involved with the VITA Program through the Mesa United Way. They provide volunteer tax preparation services for low or medium income veterans at no cost. A great benefit for veterans is that the Mesa United Way can prepare taxes back to the year 2000. They are the only VITA site in the state that offers this service. They try to complete the bulk of back taxes after May 1.

Justin provided a flyer with this information that was distributed before the meeting. It is a unique service and he is trying to get the word out. Dave Hampton asked Justin to send the information to him and he will send it out to his veteran email list.

Justin is out in the community and tries to attend all the east valley VSO meetings. Team foreman research is coming along. He is going to start a survey of VSO's and engage members in the east valley. There are constraints, as was mentioned earlier, in the generational gap in using the smart phone or social media usages, as opposed to an online or in person survey.

Commissioner Krula asked Justin how he would disseminate this information to VSO's.

Justin said he is conscious of privacy concerns as he is a guest at veteran meetings and not a member. His will be a 3-4 page in-person survey to be filled out, front and back.

Commissioner Krula said he is a member of the Korean War Veterans and they have several chapters throughout the state. He offered to help get the word out about Justin's surveys through his chapter.

Justin has attended the Korean War Veteran VSO meeting in Sun Lakes and thanked Mr. Krula for his offer.

**Communications** – The secretary reported that the email from Justin Smothers and attachments regarding subjects he discussed were received March 11<sup>th</sup> and distributed to all commissioners and ADVS staff for today's meeting.

**Agency Announcements and Updates** – **Veterans Services Division** - ADVS Director Ted Vogt reported that beginning in March, Quality Assurance was implemented at the Phoenix Veterans' Services Division. As claims come in from field offices, two QA staff review them for correctness before they are sent to the VA for processing.

Director Vogt and Mike Klier, Assistant Deputy Director, made outreach visits to Yuma, Lake Havasu, Bullhead City and Kingman. In Yuma they talked with people about the proposed veteran home. The community is supportive and there have been tentative offers from people interested in donating land for the veteran home.

ADVS will see what the legislature does with the land appropriation and then look for a possible site.

Tommy Sowers, the VA Assistant Secretary for Public & Intergovernmental Affairs was in Phoenix for a press conference and an event at Victory Place last week.

The Federal VA is kicking off a year-long effort to educate veterans about their benefits and the services that are available to them. Many veterans don't know that VA benefits and services are available to them and what those services are.

Within the next year, the Phoenix VA intends to hold events and touch every county in Arizona; the Phoenix area kick-off was yesterday. A mobile van from Prescott, a highlight of the event, was supposed to be here with information but did not make it.

### **Fisher House**

Director Vogt has been working closely with Dr. Staggs to be sure the Fisher House becomes a reality. Jim Click has been instrumental in promoting the Fisher House. Director Vogt and Doctor Staggs had meetings in Phoenix with Rick Romley and others.

Director Vogt corrected the information in the Arizona Daily Star article about the initial grant ADVS provided toward the Arizona Fisher House Project. The correct amount is \$300,000. The conditions are that the community has to raise the other 90% and then ADVS will donate the last 10% after which, Fisher House will donate the remaining amount.

Fisher House representatives have remained in constant contact with ADVS. They are sending project people and progress notes to Mr. Barnes and are certain the project will be built. They look forward to making it happen.

As Director Gardner pointed out, this is an asset for the state of Arizona; those who live within 50 miles of the Fisher House cannot use the facility, so it's really for Phoenix, Sierra Vista, Prescott and areas away from Tucson. We want to be sure Arizona steps up and does so quickly and enthusiastically in case the state is ever on the list for another Fisher House, the foundation will know Arizona supports veterans and veteran families.

Commissioner Caldwell asked what the plan is for raising funds.

Director Vogt said the Fisher House Foundation allowed the community to start raising money in February of this year. They initiated a tight time frame for raising the money and there needs to be a main fundraising effort to get large donors together to make this happen.

### **Veteran Homes**

Operations are going well. The census at both veteran homes is good.

Commissioner Krula asked about land acquisition for the Yuma State Veteran Home.

Director Vogt said we are at the preliminary level; the legislature has not approved the budget. The governor's announcement in support of the veteran home has generated interest and some districts in the Yuma vicinity have offered land. As we go further along, and the project becomes a reality, we will get more concrete offers. We still must have legislative approval.

### **Veteran Certified Support Campuses**

Two community colleges have become veteran certified and one private college in Prescott has become a veteran certified support campus. We should now see more interest from community college districts. We have received several calls and an article in the Arizona Republic about what Glendale Community College is doing generated a lot of interest.

ADVS sent out a press release about the two community colleges that became certified and will present a plaque stating that these are certified veteran support campuses.

Commissioner Krula asked what the certification includes.

Director Vogt said the schools must meet eight conditions under Arizona Revised Statute ARS Section 41-608 before they become certified by the department as a veteran support campus.

A steering committee on campus determines through a survey that the veterans' needs are being met. They meet at the Pat Tillman Center at ASU and the steering committee determines the special classes that are available to veterans.

Commissioner Krula asked if the veteran's court figures into this certification.

Dave Hampton said it does not.

Director Vogt said there is legislation pending to overcome jurisdictional issues that has passed in the House. Regional veteran courts are consolidated into one court so the veteran has one stop to get their record cleared. It's left to the discretion of the judge in the different jurisdictions whether they want to send them out to various courts.

### **Veteran Cemeteries**

Deputy Director Barnes said after the master plan is received, Marana will go out for construction bids in June and, with that complete, ADVS will receive final grant funding from the VA, with construction to start in August or September.

Flagstaff could be on the same track as Marana.

**Legislative Report** – Before the meeting, Dave Hampton presented two handouts; one addresses questions Chairman Olson asked him to address and the second was an updated legislative report.

Dave said there is no current law in Arizona that addresses the Service Connected Disabled Veterans Property Tax Exemptions. The exemption that does exist in statute is **ARS 42-11111, a property tax exemption for the property of widows, widowers, and disabled persons**. The amounts in the statute are so low that it makes it virtually useless.

Chairman Olson explained where the question came from that was posed to him a year ago when the commission was at an event. There were 160 people there and about 60 of those were from other states; most were 100% disabled. In the state they came from, they got property tax relief or a complete property tax exemption. They are now living in Arizona and expressed concern about a property tax exemption.

Jeff said this issue was also addressed in the two task force reports in 2006 and 2008. Both reports said this issue should be reviewed.

Dave said this question comes up at the legislature nearly every year.

Dave was asked to address **HB 2457 Mental health, Veterans courts; establishment;** in the hand out that was distributed before the meeting. This week, the bill was given a due pass recommendation in the Senate Judiciary Committee. It is moving forward and he doesn't see obstacles in it passing.

**HB-2303-Permits or tags; transfer; veterans;** hunting and fishing complimentary licenses for veterans. Dave said HB 2303 was given a due pass recommendation in the Senate Natural Resources and Rural Affairs Committee. The bill will permit the Department of Game and Fish to transfer a big game permit or tag from a person who has one and is not going to use it, to a veteran to use. Dave doesn't see obstacles in this bill passing.

**HB 2443 Hunting and fishing licenses; military;** has passed the house and was first read and assigned in the Senate. It would allow military members on permanent assignment or TDY in Arizona to immediately apply for hunting or fishing licenses without a 30 day waiting period. Right now, the current statute requires a 30 day waiting period.

**Free License Plates for 100% Service Connected Disabled Veterans;** Dave said there is no current legislation to do that.

**State Income Tax for Retired Military.** The current statute exempts \$2,500 from pension per year from retired military. There was a bill that would have extended the exemption to \$5,000 per year, but it was not heard in committee and therefore the bill is dead in the Senate.

Chairman Olson said a few months ago, Mike Klier reported there was an issue with Game and Fish about what the definition of a 100% disabled veteran is, and he was working to get a more standardized meaning.

Mr. Barnes said Game and Fish was presented requests to add verbiage to define 100% disabled veterans, but nothing has come from Game and Fish.

Commissioner Rustand inquired about **SB 1040 – Auxiliary Members Leave of Absence** and asked if the bill applied to auxiliary organizations only, because it already exists for military organizations.

Dave said that is correct. Two years ago, the legislature removed the word “auxiliary” from the statute and the Civil Air Patrol and Coast Guard Auxiliary alerted them this year that it affected them, so the legislature added the word “auxiliary” back into the statute. Dave noted that Arizona does have a Coast Guard Auxiliary.

Chairman Olson asked about “probable striker” and is this veteran related?

Dave said “probable striker” means the bill will be a vehicle for a strike everything amendment. A strike everything amendment will change a bill into anything the sponsor would like it to be.

Brett asked about **SB and HB 2185 Prohibited Governmental Compliance 2012 NDAA** and if these are veteran related or military related.

Dave said they are military related; he only put them in the legislative report because they refer to National Defense.

Commissioner Perkins asked Dave if **HB 2204 Military Applicants; Commercial Driver’s Licenses** would be approved? Dave said it will be approved

Commissioner Perkins talked with a homeless veteran at the stand down in February and a commercial driver’s license is one of the things the veteran wanted to get. His driver’s license expired because he wasn’t able to pay for the physical they are required to get periodically. One of the driving schools at the stand down said they could help him and that he could get a grant from a VA organization to go to school and become re-certified.

There are veterans coming back from Afghanistan that have commercial driver’s licenses. It would be good if they could come home and step right into a job because they already have the experience. There are numerous truck driving jobs to be had.

Commissioner Rustand remarked that the veteran has to have been driving within 90 days, as opposed to 12 months.

Dave Hampton said the requirement conforms to federal regulations.

**Outreach Activities for the Commission** – Chairman Olson was not able to get veteran organizations to attend today, partly because they are employed and two veterans couldn't come to the meeting because they are volunteering at the hospital today. We will work at getting veteran association members before the next meeting in Tucson.

Jeff attended a veteran community health fair in Green Valley on Monday, and in the course of two hours he met with 40 veterans who saw his name badge and asked what the commission does.

The number one issue veterans are interested in is the Marana Veterans' Cemetery. The average age of veterans that day was about 70 so the cemetery is on their radar screen. It was a great place for the commission to be set up with the table top display as about 1,100 people came through the health fair in three and one-half hours. There were a number of non-profit organizations there and it was busy.

Commissioner Krula believes he and Commissioner Toliver should consider another trip to Yuma in the next few months.

Commissioner Rustand said he would like to see the commission meet in Tucson at least twice a year. With a large veteran population and the VA facility, there are a lot of veterans to reach.

Commissioner Perkins complimented Director Vogt and ADVS staff in supporting the stand downs across the state. The Phoenix stand down served 1,700 veterans and General Maxon said 900 legal issues were resolved in the veteran courts during the stand down. The motor vehicle division that was set up was expanded this year with more people offering assistance.

There was an article in the Bullhead City newspaper noting that the stand down served 301 veterans. It was an outstanding job by ADVS staff and the Arizona Coalition of Military Families.

Director Vogt said the Stand down Coalition, which is the umbrella organization, has instituted the Tucson, Bullhead City, Phoenix and Prescott stand downs.

Director Vogt will attend a stand down in Flagstaff in May. He wasn't able to be at the Bullhead City stand down; it was the same day as Tucson's and he and Sean Price, ADVS Homeless Veteran Coordinator, attended the Tucson stand down. It was an impressive event for everyone in the department as well as the community partners. Director Vogt was impressed to see veteran's court volunteers from the county defender's and prosecutor's offices.

Commissioner Perkins said the number of volunteers who help out is amazing and the best advertising is that homeless veterans are spreading the word that they can get help in many different areas and attendance is growing each year.

Director Vogt said the number of homeless veterans is declining and more vulnerable veterans are showing up. As we succeed in ending veteran homelessness we are seeing there is still a vulnerable population. This is a mission we still need to do for them.

Ron Perkins asked if ADVS is sponsoring a job fair again this year at the fairgrounds. If so, he wants to attend and set up the commission's table top display. He attended last year with Veteran Benefit Counselor, Ron Shackle and talked with many veterans; it was a huge hiring affair. A separate private area was set up for veterans to talk with prospective employers.

Director Vogt will check to see if there is a job fair at the fairgrounds and if there is, ADVS will have staff there. Ron will email the dates of the notification he received to Director Vogt.

**Open Discussion for the Good of the Order** – Chairman Olson asked for open discussion from members.

Commissioner Toliver agreed that the commissioners need to make a trip to Yuma in the next month or so and visit counselors at the Veterans Services Division and veteran organizations in Yuma to see if there is anything the commission could get involved in. He and Commissioner Kula were there two years ago and their trip was successful.

Mr. Barnes said if anyone is interested in a tour of the Veteran Home today, he will arrange it with Jim Ross. Lunch is set up and will be served across the hall.

Chairman Olson said the April meeting will consist of a discussion of veteran center signage with a representative from ADOT. We hope Sandra Flint of the VA Regional Office will be in attendance in April.

Chairman Olson adjourned the meeting at 12:07 p.m. The next Advisory Commission meeting will be held April 10, 2014, in Room A-107 of the Phoenix Veteran Home.