

Arizona Department of Veterans' Service Advisory Commission
4141 North S. Herrera Way, (formerly North 3rd Street), Phoenix, AZ 85012

May 8, 2014

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners

Jeff Olson, Chair
Ron Perkins, Vice Chair
Kara Caldwell
George Cushing
Philip Hanson
Wayne Krula
Brett Rustand

Excused:

David Toliver, Sr.

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Ted Vogt, Director
Dave Hampton, Public Information Officer
Judy Smith, Administrative Secretary
Yasmin Ramos, Executive Assistant

Guests

Dan Caldwell, Concerned Veterans for America
Justin Smothers, AmeriCorps VISTA
George Thorne, George Thorne Consulting

Call to Order – Chairman Jeff Olson called the meeting to order at 10:06 a.m.

There were no corrections to the April minutes. Commissioner Cushing moved to approve as presented. Commissioner Hanson seconded the motion. Motion carried unanimously.

Introduction and Welcome of Invited guests – Chairman Olson welcomed Dan Caldwell, Issue and Legislative Campaign Manager of Concerned Veterans for America (CVA). Dan is a Marine Corps Veteran who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

CVA was founded in 2012, and is headquartered in Arlington, Virginia. CVA has 50 paid staff across the country and thousands of volunteers. Most of the staff is in the field throughout several states, conducting grass roots education activities on policy initiatives; they are currently conducting registration drives for veterans to register to vote.

Since its inception, CVA has focused on key core policy issues and is advocating for the following legislative agenda:

VA Reform | Dept. of Veterans Affairs Management Accountability Act of 2014 (S.2013, H.R.4031)

CVA's primary focus is the Veterans Affairs Management Accountability Act. As an important first step, this bill will give the secretary the ability to expeditiously fire and remove poorly performing managers at the VA. Right now it is nearly impossible to remove VA staff; it takes over 2 years to remove senior executive service employees from the VA, even for gross misconduct.

There is wide support from 116 co-sponsors and bi-partisan support in Arizona and nationwide. Arizona Congressman David Schweikert, Paul Gosar, Kyrsten Sinema and Trent Franks have co-sponsored the bill.

The companion bill Senator Rubio sponsored in the senate has 11 co-sponsors, all Republican. Senator Richard Burr, ranking member of the Senate EA Committee, is a co-sponsor.

Commissioner Krula asked about CVA's organizational goals and leadership and what is their interface with Congress in trying to make these changes?

Concerned Veterans for America CEO Pete Hegseth is an Army Veteran who served in Guantanamo Bay, Iraq and Afghanistan.

CVA has developed a good working relationship with key people in Washington.

Chairman Olson commended Dan for his fair presentation of the VA budget. Budget increases to the VA were astronomical for quite some time and, during this period of time; it is his understanding that the number of available beds to Veterans in the VA medical system was lowered. Is that correct?

Dan said the wind down of VA facilities did reduce the number of beds. The VA was given more money to accommodate the new influx of veterans; however, the funding was not being allocated to fill staff positions for nurses, doctors and claims writers.

Chairman Olson said people through social media on the internet are saying the VA Medical Centers need to be looked at but it shouldn't stop there and that VA Regional Offices should be reviewed as well. He asked Dan if he had heard this.

Dan said CVA is focused on healthcare as that is where most of the problems are, but the Veterans Administration administrative side needs to be investigated for how they are processing claims.

Chairman Olson heard a CNN broadcast whereby two Department of Defense (DOD) generals and admirals told Congress not to authorize raises for troops because they might have to get the money from somewhere else.

Dan said there is tension within the DOD right now because it wants to cut back on commissary benefits, compensation, and troop pay raises. They are facing a stark choice because of the sequester and the administration's blanket budget cuts.

Chairman Olson said while he is not pleased with the cutting of military pay and no increases, he is more concerned about recruitment and retention.

Dan said the DOD incentivizes people to join the military. Veterans will not join if they don't receive a decent wage.

In the next few months, CVA will hold a "Defending Reform" event in Phoenix with round table discussions of the policies and reforms talked about here today. These are informative, positive and honest bi-partisan discussions. CVA will advise ADVS when these will occur. If anyone has questions or comments or wants to get involved, they should call Dan Caldwell at (602) 999-0888 or e-mail dcaldwell@cv4a.org.

DoD Reform | Audit the Pentagon Act of 2013 (S.1510, H.R. 3184)

CVA has advocated for an audit and acquisition reform of the Pentagon in how they purchase supplies and equipment for the U.S. military. CVA does not advocate across the board defense spending cuts and opposes the sequester and other budgets that arbitrarily cut the defense budget by 5 or 10%. It is not an effective way to manage the defense budget.

CVA believes sensible reforms can be made at the Pentagon that can save money and allow for more resources for the combat arms units. We support a full audit which was mandated in the mid-1980's and has not been completed; we believe significant funds could be found to offset cuts and provide more money for war fighters.

Spending Reform | Federal and State-level Balanced Budget Amendments

CVA believes that the national debt and the deficit are the greatest threat to our national security.

Like other veteran groups, CVA advocates pursuing policies that will reduce the debt and deficit over time. CVA opposes the Ryan/Murray Budget because of COLA cuts to retired military. We did not think it was fair considering that the proposed budget raises overall spending which increases the national debt.

Military Voting Reform | Safeguarding Elections for our Nation's Troops through Reforms and Improvements (SENTRI) Act of 2013 (S.1728, H.R. 3576)

CVA is working to strengthen military voting rights and supports the Century Act bi-partisan legislation that was introduced to improve the time it takes to get absentee ballots to soldiers in the field.

Justin Smothers - Americorps VISTA - Chairman Olson recognized guest Justin Smothers. Justin had no questions or comments for the commission.

George Thorne, George Thorne Consulting – Chairman Olson recognized guest George Thorne who is currently working with Senator John McCain on a project called “Operation American Patriot”.

Communications – An email was received from Jim Piscopo who runs the Bridging Arizona Furniture Bank in Mesa. Jim contacted the Advisory Commission a few months ago when he was setting up a furniture-making training program for Veterans. He asked to be added to the stakeholders list to receive the Advisory Commission meeting agenda. Today's meeting agenda was sent to him.

Agency Announcements and Updates – Director Vogt noted the census for the Phoenix Veteran Home is 171 and 109 for the Tucson Veteran Home.

Veteran Homes

The legislature has adjourned; \$9.2 million was approved for the Yuma State Veteran Home. The City of Yuma and two other entities have offered land for the Veteran Home.

The Phoenix VA Hospital will renovate the CLC building in the fall which will take about a year and, during that time; the Phoenix Veteran Home will receive some of these residents, which will bring our home to a full capacity census of 200 for the period of the VA renovations.

Cemeteries

Last week ADVS received the signed and executed deed from the Dept. of the Army which transfers the Camp Navajo property to the State of Arizona. Cemetery construction on both Camp Navajo and Marana should begin this summer.

ADVS built a chapel at the Sierra Vista Cemetery; the community of Sierra Vista is raised an endowment fund for the upkeep and maintenance of the chapel. The new chapel will be dedicated on Memorial Day, May 26, 2014. Director Vogt will attend the dedication.

ADVS Outreach Activities

Director Vogt will attend Flagstaff's stand down next weekend; Grand County's stand down is the same day.

Director Vogt will attend a Memorial Day event at the Phoenix National Cemetery.

ADVS was a primary sponsor and Director Vogt was the keynote speaker for the first day of the two-day annual Coalition for Military Families symposium which was well received and attended last week.

The ADVS strategic employment plan to deal with employment and under employment issues for Veterans is to be completed by July 1.

Chairman Olson said General Gregg Maxon was invited to today's meeting but couldn't be here. Jeff asked how the interaction with Veteran Treatment Courts is going in Tucson.

Director Vogt said there is good interest in the Veteran Treatment Courts in Tucson. He and General Maxon will be in Anaheim at the end of the month for a drug treatment court symposium; a portion of the meeting deals with Veteran Treatment Courts. He and General Maxon will hold a senior leader level discussion about how to establish veteran courts in the state; what needs to be done at the higher levels, such as dealing with the legislature and executives, as opposed to the practitioner level.

Judge Pollard and General Maxon were at the coalition symposium and in Prescott for an information session on establishing troop courts there. The courts are getting off to a good start with a lot of interest. We are waiting for the legislation that was just passed to go into effect so courts can start organizing regionally. Arizona continues to lead the way in Veteran Treatment Courts.

Vice Chair Perkins inquired if there is a Veterans Treatment Court in Flagstaff.

Director Vogt is not certain but will check and get back with the information.

Legislative Report – Dave Hampton, Legislative Liaison, presented a final legislative report dated April 27. Twenty bills related to veterans and the military passed and 24 did not pass during this legislative session.

Outreach Activities for the Commission – Chairman Olson asked for comments or information on Outreach Activities.

Vice Chair Perkins will attend an event at the Heard Museum honoring American Indian Vietnam Veterans on Saturday, May 24th. Director Vogt will also attend.

Chairman Olson said American Legion Post #41 is holding a meeting Tuesday evening, May 13. Former hospital director Tom Mollen from Minnesota, VA National Headquarters staff, a media person will be there. Jeff will participate in a conference call with them on Tuesday afternoon.

Chairman Olson visited the U of A Veteran Student office in Tucson; they are doing well with a huge support group. They have a wonderful facility with computers, a place to study and interact and get support from fellow veteran students.

Chairman Olson asked Director Vogt for an update on Pima Community College.

Director Vogt reported that Chancellor Lambert was here last week. April Monthie of the agency's Veterans Education & Training Approving Agency (VETAA) will review their paperwork. They hired 10 people to check records and are making an effort to meet the criteria. This time next month we will have done an evaluation and can report back to the commission.

Tucson Mayor Rothschild will hold a meeting Monday, May 12 at City Hall in Tucson to plan a Veteran's Day Festival to celebrate our Veterans. If commissioners could get this message out to organizations and people they know in the area who would be interested in attending this planning meeting, it will be from 10:00 a.m. to Noon at City Hall in Tucson.

VA Medical Center Investigation - Chairman Olson said everyone here today is concerned and has questions about the health care for veterans. He asked if the commission thought he should write a letter to Governor Brewer to share their concerns that veterans are treated with proper care and that a complete and thorough investigation is done.

Chairman Olson is getting calls from veterans who want to enter the VA Medical system but are now skeptical of doing so. Would also ask if the governor and senior staff might consider issuing a press release.

Vice Chair Ron Perkins noted that because of the news about the VA across the nation and especially the Phoenix VA, it is important that the governor is in support of a fair investigation and that it be expedited as soon as possible. It would be beneficial to hear from the governor on this matter.

Commissioner Rustand said the letter should affirm the commission's support and dedication to the treatment and services for veterans and that those obstacles to treatments be looked at thoroughly and completely and that changes be made if necessary to ensure that veterans receive the best care possible. The investigation will take its course, but we need to affirm our support and dedication.

Vice Chair Perkins made a motion that Chairman Olson, on behalf of the Advisory Commission, draft a letter to Governor Brewer requesting that she support a fair investigation of the Phoenix VA system and that it is expedited as soon as possible. Commissioner Cushing seconded the motion.

The motion carried unanimously.

Commissioner Krula heard there are two VA Hospital investigations taking place and asked if that is true?

Director Vogt said there are two separate investigations of the Phoenix VA Hospital taking place; one is the Office of the Inspector General that may be a two-part investigation. Last fall, the Inspector General was here conducting a preliminary investigation and, last month after the news broke, the I.G. was asked to come back and conduct an in-depth clinical investigation.

A separate House congressional investigation is being done as well as a Senate investigation. The House committee issued a subpoena for Secretary Shinseki to testify. Senators Flake and McCain have also requested an investigation of the Phoenix VA.

Change to Advisory Commission meeting schedule - Commissioner Rustand noted that the AVSAC Charter calls for one annual meeting and the Strategic Plan calls for quarterly meetings. The Advisory Commission has met monthly for some time and Brett proposes to change the meeting schedule from 12 to 6 meetings per year. The benefits to this change are to attract young veterans to the commission.

He proposed that during the off months, commissioners attend outreach activities and report at the next meeting. These could include the American Legion, municipalities or VA Medical Centers.

Commissioner Cushing agreed that bi-monthly meetings would relieve the constraints of current commissioners having to attend monthly meetings and that outreach activities should be done during the off months and reported at the next meeting. Commissioners could also meet with Veteran Benefit Counselors to see how commissioners can help veterans in their areas.

Commissioner Cushing said whether commissioners physically attend or call in to the meetings, it is still a block of time out of their day. There are people qualified to sit on the commission who may feel same restraints of meeting every month. An applicant he knows withdrew his application because his boss wouldn't allow him time off each month to attend Advisory Commission meetings. In trying to attract younger veterans we should be cognizant of these issues.

He noted that when the commission held Town Hall meetings in the past; it became expensive and time consuming and there was little support from the VA Regional Office who needed to be there to answer veterans' questions. This was discontinued in 2012.

Vice Chair Perkins is opposed to the bi-monthly meetings. He thought a solution might be for members to call into the meeting on occasion.

He noted that a few years ago, a similar problem arose; the commission changed to meeting every other month until interest waned and then the commission met only 4 or 5 months out of the year. A new person came in and said the commission should be more proactive, visible to veterans, and assist ADVS by meeting once a month. The commission has met once a month for several years.

Vice Chair Perkins hopes to see four new commissioners join the commission in July. He noted that when he joined, it took a few meetings before he understood how the commission worked and felt comfortable making a statement or contributing to the conversation. Vice Chair is concerned if the commission only meets every other month, it may not have cohesiveness with new members. He would like to see the commission continue meeting every month, but will abide by what the commissioners decide.

Commissioner Hanson's concern is bringing in members and it is easier for working Veterans to make the meetings bi-monthly, with the opportunity in the off months to engage in local activities or with veteran groups.

Chairman Olson said the comments here are all well taken. He believes we need people from all over the state who are working and recently discharged veterans with good ideas.

The chairman believes an Executive Committee should be established that would continue to monitor veteran issues and, if needed, the Executive Committee could call a special meeting or be sure the subject is on the agenda for the next meeting.

The chairman wants new commissioners to feel they are a part of commission as soon as possible. We need a mentoring program to give new commissioners details and to educate them so they realize the VA is Federal and ADVS is a state agency. In the past, there were commissioners who didn't realize there was a difference. We want to be sure they are as knowledgeable as possible of the commission's responsibilities.

Chairman Olson suggested that no more than four meetings be held in Phoenix and two elsewhere in the state, thereby making the commission more attractive to employed veterans. He determined that a sub-committee is needed to review the AVSAC Strategic Plan and Guidelines and make updates.

Commissioner Krula said as a proactive group, he is concerned about an effective relationship with Veteran Benefit Counselors and the geographic areas. Meeting every other month should be with the understanding that commissioners make personal visits to the VSD offices in their regions to increase viability with VBC's. It is important that VBC's know that commissioners may visit every other month to inquire how things are going and if they have problems to share; the commissioners can get back to the Executive Committee for results.

He asked Director Vogt's perspective and input for commissioners when they make those visits.

Director Vogt said commissioners who visit the Veteran Benefit Counselors will see that they are meeting and assisting veterans; he encouraged commissioners to visit Veteran Benefit Counselors.

Commissioner Caldwell inquired if the commission would remain productive by holding bi-monthly meetings. She suggested creating a matrix of what the commission wants to accomplish and to set goals. The matrix would include attending a certain amount of meetings, establishing an Executive Leadership Committee which would help determine what the commission wants to accomplish.

Retention and recruitment of members would be included; putting together a plan and spending time with new members is imperative.

Commissioner Caldwell said having quarterly or yearly results driven goals to work toward and projecting what we need to change is imperative for commissioners.

Commissioner Rustand said retention and recruitment of members is important; we need diverse commission members from outside Maricopa County. It is more effective and efficient to have bi-monthly meetings and supplement with VBC visits, and focus on goals and initiatives at the executive meetings.

He suggested that the commission hold meetings every other month beginning in July, alternating with visits to local VBC offices. Commissioners will make visits to local VBC offices on the alternate months. The Executive Committee should meet separately when formed.

Chairman Olson said the Executive Committee will meet separately and, visiting VBC offices is to be included as outreach activities.

Chairman Olson called for a motion. Commissioner Rustand moved that the Advisory Commission change to a full meeting every other month with four of those meetings held in Maricopa County and two outside Maricopa County. During the off months, commissioners will conduct outreach activities in their assigned regions and report back at the next full meeting. An Executive Committee will be formed that meets during the off months.

The motion was seconded by Commissioner Hanson. The motion carried.

Chairman Olson asked if Commissioner Cushing would help with updating the Strategic Plan and Guidelines. The sub-committee will consist of Chairman Olson and Commissioners Caldwell and Cushing. The secretary will send an electronic copy of the Strategic Plan & Guidelines to the sub-committee.

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

Commissioner Hanson said UAV and the Veterans Hall of Fame Society are co-sponsoring an event at the Burton Barr Library on June 7th. Democratic candidate Fred DuVal who is running for the governor's office along with Republican candidates Ken Bennett, Doug Ducey, Christine Jones and Scott Smith, will be there.

Commissioner Perkins said it is a major event and if veterans don't show up, it sends a message to the candidates that they may not have veteran support.

Chairman Olson adjourned the meeting at 11:51 a.m. The next Advisory Commission meeting will be held June 12, 2014, in Room A-107 of the Phoenix Veteran Home.