



Script Usage Note: This document contains the basic script used to produce the interview video. Some variance is natural during a live interview; however, the majority of topics in this written script match the content that was discussed live. We hope you will enjoy the video update.

INTRODUCTION

HOST: Welcome to the State of the Department update for the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services. Today we have department director Col. Wanda Wright and assistant deputy director John Scott. Thank you both for being here.

HOST: Col. Wright, congratulations on completing your first year with the department.

COL. WRIGHT: 1 April marked **my one year anniversary** as the Director of our Department. When I walked into my office over a year ago I didn't know what a VBC was nor did I understand the complexities of what our Department provided to support the over **600,000 Arizona Veterans**. What a difference a year makes.

HOST: Can you tell us a bit about what's been happening in your department this year?

COL. WRIGHT: Today, I speak to you with that one year of experience and a plan forward of what I think we as a team can still do to support our Veterans. We accomplished so much over the last 12 months and I am proud to have been part of all of the work we have done.

HOST: I understand that your Counselors have seen an increase in claims processing and that turns into real value for Arizona's veterans.

JOHN SCOTT: In FY16, the year just ended, the Veteran Service Division through its Veteran Benefits Counselors **filed over 19,000 claims** which equates to **\$23.3m per month**. That's **\$2.8b annually**. This is a **2% increase over last year**. The Division reorganized and worked on becoming more effective.

In March, we **launched a survey process** to ask our veterans how we're doing and to find out how we can improve our processes. During the year we **changed the pay structure and the daily work hours for our VBC's** to help the team members have more efficient days.

We were able to **move several offices to combine with other Veteran supportive organizations** throughout the state. This creates for veterans **one-stop opportunities** to get services. In all that we do, we must keep in mind how to make access easier for our veterans. We are absolutely doing what it takes to make this happen.

HOST: Will you speak a bit more about the customer surveys you're doing?

JOHN SCOTT: Veteran Services also **launched a customer survey program**. In every VBC office there is an **iPad with a customer service APP** that gives the opportunity to every veteran who comes through the door for service to comment on the service provided. **The feedback has been very positive and constructive criticism** affords us the chance to do things better.



HOST: Thanks for that. There's been a lot of interest in your two new veterans' cemeteries.

COL. WRIGHT: Yes. We opened two new cemeteries. These cemeteries offer a beautiful final resting place for our veterans. John, will you speak to the details please?

JOHN SCOTT: The **Cemetery in Marana** was dedicated on 26 March. Since opening the Marana cemetery in we have completed over **140 veteran interments**. Families are visiting the cemetery on a daily basis to **tour the facility and complete the documents** for their loved one's future spot.

The **Cemetery on Camp Navajo** was dedicated on 11 June. **The first interment was a Navajo Code Talker**. We were so very honored to host that ceremony.

COL. WRIGHT: With regard to completion of these cemeteries, **special thanks goes to Victor Daniels**, our project manager, **Robert Barnes** – our assistant director, and the **Arizona Department of Administration** for completing the construction of these two facilities.

HOST: It seems you're a hands-on Director, and that you're willing to walk a mile in another's shoes.

COL. WRIGHT: Yes, I recently had the **opportunity to work at the Marana and Sierra Vista cemeteries**. The teams at both our cemeteries, indeed all three locations, work very hard to honor and respect the veterans laid to rest and the families of those veterans. I really appreciate that and I know the families do too. Their dedication is evident in everything they do, and it's infectious.

HOST: They are indeed some kind, caring folks. Changing the subject a bit, can you give an update on veterans education programs your department looks after?

JOHN SCOTT: Sure. The **SAA (or State Approving Agency)** evaluated over **80 schools for compliance** with veteran education requirements this year. The review process is arduous but it keeps our veterans safe from educational institutions that might take advantage of them.

COL. WRIGHT: During the same period we also established the **Arizona Veteran Supportive Campuses Advisory Council** that will serve as a conduit to discuss veteran education issues and a forum to distribute information. This council **includes 10 big name state universities, community colleges, and technical training schools**.

HOST: Beyond education, what's new to support our veterans?

COL. WRIGHT: Veteran Services **added Veteran Programs to its organizational chart in March**. Veteran Programs includes **outreach, minority programs, veteran supportive program, veteran homelessness and employment**.

In 2015, Veteran programs **created a Women's working group** that has been studying the needs of veteran women. Through the work of this group, **the Department held four women's events**. We were able to meet the **needs of over 400 women** in four key locations: Tucson, Tempe, Glendale and Flagstaff. They all were very successful.



HOST: We've also seen that you recently signed a partnership agreement with the Navajo Nation. Can you tell us a little about that?

COL. WRIGHT: When the **Navajo Nation passed the Veterans Act**, we supported the newly named **Navajo Department of Veterans' Affairs**. We will continue this partnership through **training and accreditation** of the Veteran Service Officers and support for the new organization. John, can you speak to the **specifics of the MOU**?

JOHN SCOTT: **(specifics of the Navajo MOU) (speak to other Tribal Relations)**

HOST: We understand there's a lot going on around partnerships with other state agencies, especially in support of veteran employment?

COL. WRIGHT: Through our outreach efforts we have partnered with the **Department of Economic Security and provided joint training for the Veteran Benefits Counselors and the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) and Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (LVER)**. This collaboration has resulted in much more cohesive support to our veterans for claims and employment.

We launched the "**Circle of Hire**" in November. This grassroots action will bring together **government, private and non-profit teams to place veterans into employment** to cross feed information and create a larger placement pool for veterans seeking employment.

The **Roadmap to Employment** continues with statewide training, collaboration with state agencies and other private and non-profit organizations.

November was proclaimed by the Governor to be Veteran Employment month. It was supported by a large event in December that recognized several large and small businesses as **Arizona Veteran Supportive Employers**. We are established as part of the **Arizona@Work plan and have membership on the WAC**. This prioritizes our commitment to assist veterans with employment.

We work with the **Department of Economic Security** to support our veterans in their endeavors for employment. **We have agreed to train together** to provide full customer service for our veterans.

HOST: Was there something with the Department of Corrections, too?

JOHN SCOTT: Other partnerships include the **Department of Corrections through the Regaining Honor program** that serves veterans when they leave the prison system to reintegrate into civilian life, and also the **Community Services Advisory Committee**.

We also worked with the **Vietnam Veterans of America** in support of the **50th Commemoration of the Vietnam War** events. We held one event in Sedona this fiscal year and expect 9 more next year.



HOST: On the topic of veteran homes, we hear there's potential for a new state veterans home in the future, beyond the existing Phoenix and Tucson homes.

COL. WRIGHT: The construction of the **Yuma Veteran Home** is awaiting federal dollars. I hope to see that new home on the funding list in the next federal fiscal year. We also have plans for a **future home in Flagstaff**. It's exciting to contribute to the beginnings of plans and designs for what will eventually provide even more options for veterans who need long term care.

Our two existing State Veteran Homes **continue to thrive despite significant maintenance issues**. We are accomplishing a **feasibility study to determine how we can best renovate the Phoenix Veteran Home**. My hope is to renovate in the next few years to bring the home in line with the current design of skilled nursing homes. Both homes have passed their audits and inspection (VA and CMS regulatory inspections) and I know we will continue to see even more improvement as they drive innovative solutions to improve some process inefficiencies.

HOST: Did we hear wedding bells a few months ago?

COL. WRIGHT: (Yes.) For the first time in the history of Arizona State homes, **the Phoenix home had a wedding**. The event was wonderful. Full of family and friends as we watched two of our residents (**Curtis and Susan**) take their vows to spend the rest of their lives together.

I also **took the opportunity to work in both Homes** this year. I was able to see the hard work being accomplished by our CNAs. They are caring and efficient, and it was a pleasure to spend time with them.

HOST: Sounds wonderful. Will you speak a little bit about the charitable, non-profit partners the department has and what's been going on there with VDF and MFRF?

COL. WRIGHT: Sure. Through the **Veterans Donation Fund (VDF)**, the Department supported **23 non-profit organizations with over \$700,000 to provide needed services and accommodations**. From providing furniture to homeless veterans when they move into their new apartments, to providing free legal services to veterans who have infractions. It is so **important that we continue to support the agencies that support our veterans**. We also **supported 43 organizations through our small grant process**.

JOHN SCOTT: (discuss **MFRF and also the tax deductible and state tax credit aspects, along with \$1m cap** on MFRF donations.)

HOST: This is about the 4th or 5th video your department has produced and of course we've seen you both on PBS a few times. Is this the wave of the future?

COL. WRIGHT: Yes. To market our Department we've produced several videos and plan to do more over time. Our very first one was my state of the department report in Summer 2015. Then we began to **look at our internal divisions**: The first of those videos provided information about the **Veteran Services Division** and the second and third reviewed



each of our **two state homes**. We have some pretty good actors in the Department. We're excited about the value of all our videos, and we feel **they represent well what the Department is about: transparency and progress**. We're not gonna be shy!

HOST: On Memorial Day 2016, a new veteran medal was announced. Can you tell us a bit about that?

COL. WRIGHT: Through state legislation last year, the **Arizona Gold Star Military Medal** may be awarded by our Department on behalf of the people of the state to a member of the Arizona National Guard, U.S. Reserves or Regular **Armed Forces member who was a legal resident of Arizona at the time the member was killed in action or died in the line of duty**. This is a wonderful way to recognize those we have lost and to honor their families.

HOST: Your department seems to have developed quite a program going forward. What's up next in the transformation?

COL. WRIGHT: We will absolutely continue throughout the coming year to work on **homelessness prevention, suicide prevention and minority veteran concerns**.

We will spend a great deal of time **transforming our Department to be a leader in the state and nation in Veterans' Services**. We started this process last September with the Executive team but this year I will need everyone on our team to participate. **Engaged employees are more productive, they are more customer-focused, and they are more likely to stay**.

As we go through this transformation process, I offer this as an opportunity for each member of our department's staff to have input in the way we **provide service delivery, customer service, advocacy for our veterans and education to the public on who we are and what we do**.

HOST: Well, we've reached the end of our allotted time. Do you have any final comments for our viewers?

COL. WRIGHT: I can't do this alone. I need all our staff, all our partners, and everyone's ideas to make this Department great! We must think big! We accomplished so much this past year. And we were able to accomplish it all because of the greatest asset our Department has: Our people. John?

JOHN SCOTT: (John's parting thoughts)

COL. WRIGHT: Congratulate yourselves. The state of the Department is Strong! And it is on the rise. Let's continue to aim high!

Thank you.

HOST: Thank you both for your time today. We'll see you again soon.