

## Arizona Veterans' Service Advisory Commission

### Strategic Policy Objectives – 2010/2011

#### PREFACE

In 2005, recognizing the need for a more comprehensive approach to issues facing Arizona veterans, the Arizona Veteran's Service Advisory Commission (AVSAC) recommended to the governor that a special task force be established. Accordingly, the governor established the Arizona Veteran's Task Force by Executive Order 2005-15 and subsequently, the Arizona Veteran's Research Council by Executive Order 2007-08. The comprehensive reports and recommendations resulting from these efforts were submitted to the governor and to the legislature in January 2006 and January 2009 respectively.

During 2010 the AVSAC conducted a review of these milestone documents and concluded that many of the specific recommendations previously outlined in the documents have been codified into statutes. Nonetheless, progress towards resolving important and fundamental issues effecting Arizona veterans remains a work in process. In an effort to build upon the good work generated by the previous executive order studies, the commission has established a set of strategic policy objectives that reflect the current needs of veterans.

In today's dynamic environment the comprehensive veteran's issues involve:

1. Facilitating access
2. Education, opportunity and jobs
3. Healthcare and social welfare
4. Unique characteristics of sub-groups
5. Incentivization

#### FACILITATING ACCESS

There are well over half a million veterans in the State of Arizona. It has been estimated that these veterans generate in excess of five billion dollars to the state's economy through Veteran Administration expenditures, disability compensation and pensions, educational benefits, military retiree pay and veteran's employment funding. Although the service and sacrifices of Arizona Veterans can never truly be repaid, we need to ensure that the men and women who have served in uniform will always have access to the services and support they have earned.

**Benefit Councilors** – The federal United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is a complex bureaucracy through which veterans are required to navigate in order to receive the VA support that they may have earned. Given the complexity, the number of Arizona veteran residents who are potentially

affected and the resultant financial gain in federal funding available to augment state revenues, it is in the best interest of Arizona and Arizona veterans to provide proactive assistance in accessing these benefits. Under federal guidelines approximately 60 state veteran benefit councilors (VBCs) can be justified. Accordingly, the Arizona Veterans Task Force recommended in 2006 the addition of 40 VBCs and additional supporting staff be funded in addition to the VBCs on staff at that time. Current funding provides for about 37 VBCs and 8 support staff. The VBCs need to be deployed to areas of the state where veterans can readily access them.

- Accordingly, the goal to locate VBCs such that reasonable numbers of Arizona veterans will be no more than one hour away from VBC offices needs to be retained.
- Budgets should protect all the current VBC positions.
- Ultimately the VBC force needs to be increased to at least 40 to 42 with appropriate support staff.
- A career ladder concept to help retain VBCs needs to be authorized and funded.
- And a rigorous training program for VBCs and available to veterans service officers (VSOs) of veterans service organization needs to remain in place.

## **EDUCATION, OPPORTUNITY AND JOBS**

**Education** -- According to the VA, Arizona ranks fourth in the nation in the number of veteran-students attending higher education or otherwise using their earned educational benefits. While most veterans sign up for the Post 9/11 GI Bill, only about 8% nationally use up their benefits that will expire within 10 years. While the bill provides 36 months of benefits, veterans on average use about 17 months of these benefits due in large measure to the significant gap in cultural/maturity/experience level with other students, complexities of the bill and to bill constraints that leave no room for error or schedule conflicts. We need to work closely with our college campuses across the state to build a supportive system for veterans to make sure that they receive the services they earned and to reach their educational goals. A “win-win” scenario is readily achievable wherein the veterans get their earned education and the State of Arizona gets a steady stream of GI Bill funding and an enhanced, mature and educated work force.

- The objective would be to create a comprehensive state level program and guidelines supporting veterans’ education at both the university and community college levels.
- In this light, university programs that actively assist veterans in completing their studies are critically important. Included are needs for priority registration, transition courses and dedicated veteran meeting space.

**Legal** –The extreme rigors of the conflict in Southwest Asia and the growing recognition of the impact of post traumatic stress on our veterans presents a growing need to differentiate between treatable mental health issues and pure punishment within our courts systems. A concerted effort to deal with these issues within the veteran community is required.

- Specifically, we support the integration and establishment of Veterans Treatment Courts throughout the state to ensure that veterans receive fair treatment and services they earned through carefully monitored court ordered rehabilitation and counseling in order to overcome the ill effects of service related problems such as post traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injuries. Uniquely established Veterans Treatment Courts could better evaluate and rehabilitate veterans in the criminal justice system. These veterans deserve our community's full support in order to complete transition to civilian life after fighting for our freedoms.
- Additionally, we support efforts by our civilian community to help with legal issues of our veterans such as the establishment by the Arizona Bar of a standing committee for military personnel, veterans and their families under which several attorneys and other experts have been assigned to subcommittees including legislation, programs & services, family law, veterans' courts, education and training and minorities.
- We also support the establishment by the Phoenix School of Law of a Veterans' Legal Clinic for veterans' general civil and consumer legal issues which is to be expanded to include criminal and domestic law matters in the future.

**Jobs** – The unemployment rate for veterans substantially exceeds the national average unemployment rate. Even in a recession, there is no valid reason why any veterans should go jobless.

- We support expanding the Troops to Teachers and the Helmets to Hardhat programs which help veterans reintegrate and transition back into civilian society.
- Further, we support hiring preferences for both disabled and non-disabled veterans who apply for state jobs as well as the establishment of a goal of 3% state contracts to be set aside for Arizona veteran-owned businesses.
- Finally, the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) and the Local Veteran Employment Representatives (LVER) which provide employment assistance are currently located within the Department of Economic Security. It is a well known fact that within every large institution stovepipes exist which inhibit cooperative actions. We support a review to investigate the viability of more effectively integrating either organizationally or procedurally the efforts of these employment assistance agencies with the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services.

## **HEALTHCARE AND SOCIAL WELFARE**

**Healthcare** – Veteran healthcare is fundamentally a federal responsibility. With few exceptions the State of Arizona has adequate federal veteran health care facilities. One area of concern is the bureaucratic boundaries established which in some cases cause Arizona veterans to have to travel excessively to reach facilities to which they are assigned. For example, Yuma veterans travel to Tucson, rather than the nearer facilities in Phoenix, to get treatment.

- We encourage a review of the federal policies that drive these inefficiencies to our veterans.

- We support proactive claims processing by our VBCs and trained VSOs from recognized veterans service organizations as well as an expanded veterans' long term care program as described elsewhere in this paper.

**Homeless** – The VA , through its annual CHALENG Report, estimates that there are approximately 107,000 homeless veterans nationwide with over 4,000 residing in Arizona. Over half are in the Phoenix-Metropolitan Area. General Shinseki, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, launched a 5-year Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness Among Veterans in November 2009. The ADVS echoed the call with the creation of the Homeless Veterans Division in December 2009. The office is responsible for the development and implementation of the Arizona Action Plan to End Homelessness Among Veterans. The plan synchronizes community partnerships with federal plans including Open Doors: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness published by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, a 19 Federal Agency Collaboration including the VA.

- The Commission is fully supportive of this initiative and committed to assisting the ADVS to build capacity, support and assist in implementation of the specific goals, strategies and objectives outlined in the Arizona Action Plan.

**Community Care Facilities (Homes)** – The Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act requires the VA to prescribe for each state the number of nursing home and domiciliary beds for which grants may be furnished. VA data and methodology confirms the need for nearly six 180 bed veteran nursing homes in Arizona. The state currently has a 200 bed facility in Phoenix and is nearing completion on a 180 bed facility in Tucson. Because each client in each home receives federal funding through Medicare/Medicaid, the VA or Social Security, they ensure employment of hundreds of healthcare workers and providers.

- The enhanced management, quality and professional care posture of the Phoenix facility needs to be continuously monitored and supported as well as being implemented in the new Tucson facility.
- Start up cost of the new facility in Tucson will be significant until adequate training has been accomplished and residential occupancy reaches the financial breakeven point. The state should provide one time funding to accomplish this.
- Additional facilities should be placed so as to serve the veteran communities in the Flagstaff, Yuma and Kingman areas and potentially Sierra Vista.
- As soon as the state budget crisis abides, funding of the 35% state share of the estimated \$30 million costs of each of these facilities needs to be programmed.

**Cemeteries** – Federal guidelines for veteran cemeteries provides for approximately six veteran cemeteries in Arizona. Whereas the veteran cemetery located near Cave Creek is a federal facility, state and local roadblocks exist which inhibit the successful expansion of the facility to meet its intended capacity.

- We should help to facilitate the removal of these roadblocks and to ensure adequate burial space for the heavy concentration of veterans in the Phoenix metropolitan area.

- The current state cemetery in Sierra Vista requires adequate funding for operations, maintenance, renovation and expansion. Operation and maintenance should be partially self-funded with some financial support from the state general fund for key staff. Renovation and expansion projects are currently rated “priority one” to receive \$1.3 million in federal funding.
- Planning for additional cemeteries in the Flagstaff, north Tucson, Yuma and Kingman areas are categorized as “priority two” for federal funding. Planning for land acquisition for these projects as well as replenishment of the state veteran cemetery fund which is used to provide preconstruction costs that are reimbursed by the federal government need to be priority actions.
- Finally, we should provide technical assistance to the Navajo Nation in their efforts to build their own cemetery on Navajo land.

## **UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUB-GROUPS**

**Disabled** – Given the significant incidence of post traumatic stress syndrome and traumatic brain injury being experienced by our newer veterans, the traditional view of disabled veterans needs to be fundamentally expanded. We recognize that many of the issues that affect disabled veterans overlap other areas discussed herein. Among those are homelessness, legal aspects, aspects peculiar to rural areas, education and jobs.

- We believe that the disabled veteran merits special attention over and above our recommendations for veterans in general.
- Among those areas, we support increased exemption of property taxes, special set-aside programs for disabled veteran run small businesses and VBC outreach for claims processing.

**Women** – The percentage of women veterans in the state is approaching 10% and is anticipated to grow with the increasing percentage of women in the active and reserve forces. There are many issues which pertain to women veterans which overlap other areas discussed herein. However, some aspects present unique issues for women veterans. For example, homeless women veterans are more likely to be responsible for children. Additionally, physical and traditional differences imply a need for separate consideration of health, counseling and living accommodations.

- We support a concerted review of any new veteran’s initiatives to ensure that any and all differences are fully accounted for.

**Rural** – Whereas most Arizona veterans, like other Arizonans, reside in Maricopa and Pima counties the percentage of the population who are veterans is much higher among rural veterans. Veterans in all parts of Arizona deserve equal consideration and support. Transportation for remote veterans has long been a recognized issue as has been proximity to veteran’s health and counseling support. The large American Indian communities of Arizona with their unique cultural and geographic aspects, including the fact that the Navajo Nation spans three states, also offer unique challenges.

- We support the continued deployment of significant VBC assets to these rural areas in an effort to bring appropriate outreach services to them.
- Further, we support efforts by the Native American communities to overcome administrative restrictions within the VA that inhibit the establishment of adequate health care facilities boundaries across state borders.

## **INCENTIVIZATION**

The Arizona Veterans' Service Advisory Commission recommends that the State of Arizona place a high priority on "Veteran's Issues", because these issues represent powerful economic and financial elements for Arizona's current and future development and growth. Arizona is home to approximately 600,000 military veterans. Currently, estimates of Federal funds coming to Arizona solely due to earned veteran's benefits approximate \$2.5 billion per year. The economic impact on Arizona is minimally estimated to be \$5 billion per year due to the velocity of money – money coming to Arizona is re-spent in Arizona. Significant amounts of federal veteran's funds are available to the states for goods and services supporting our nation's veterans. If Arizona fails to attract veterans and fails to attract the follow-on funds, these funds can and will be spent in other states.

**Incentives** – Military recruiting statistics show that only the top one fourth to one third of the volunteer recruits actually qualify for service, and all service members receive extensive education and training as well as experience unfound in the civilian community. Accordingly, veterans represent a mature, educated and disciplined element of the workforce. Additionally, veterans bring with them a substantial stream of federal funding, made available due to their service, in the form of retirement pay and VA benefits. It is in the best interest to induce as many veterans as possible to return to their native state of Arizona or become Arizona residents following their period of national service. Wherever feasible, the state should create incentives for veterans to want to live in Arizona following their tours of service in the military.

- We suggest that following the above strategic principals and policy objectives will contribute to this incentivization.
- Additionally, as the state budget crisis subsides, strong consideration should be given to increasing the state income tax exemption for military retired pay. As a minimum the exemption should be corrected for the inflation that has occurred since the origination of the exemption.