

Arizona Veterans' Services Advisory Commission
Strategic Policy Update Subcommittee

Virtual Meeting

June 30, 2023

M I N U T E S

Advisory Commissioners Present:

Kathy Gallowitz, Chairwoman

Phil Cushman, Vice Chair

Charles Byers, Commissioner

AZ Department of Veterans' Services Staff Present:

Jessica Roza, Legislative Liaison

Call to Order: Chairwoman Gallowitz opened the meeting at 9:32am.

I. Commissioner Gallowitz informed the subcommittee that the intent of this first meeting is to:

- A. Identify and organize the major issues currently facing Arizona's Veterans, evaluating the "TOP THREE" issue concerns provided by Commissioners at the January 2023 Commission meeting and the Commission's January 18, 2023 policy recommendation letter submitted to Governor Katie Hobbs.
- B. Establish what (if) additional information is needed.
- C. Consider how to format and organize the final document.

II. Commissioner Gallowitz presented a spreadsheet of the issues from 1A. for discussion. Key points/decisions included:

- A. Commissioner Cushman suggested that some of the issue concerns listed are single action, "easy win" suggestions and others have broader policy implications. Making these distinctions is important. We should consider how/who implements the recommendations.
- B. Jessica reinforced that offering administrative and legislative policy recommendations are appropriate and suggested providing specific actionable solutions for each broad issue category.

III. Commissioner Byers reported the priority concerns of Arizona' Veteran Service Organizations as:

- A. Suicide prevention
- B. Amending the statute to raise the income and property tax exemption thresholds
- C. Affordable housing for Veterans - including senior housing and homelessness
- D. Improving access to rural healthcare including tele-health and transportation to VA and community care appointments
- E. Jessica informed the committee that:
 - 1. Funding and a pilot has been approved for suicide prevention training for Veteran Service Organizations leaders and claims representatives.
 - 2. Digital literacy continues to be a concern for Veterans. Advocating for this might be helpful.

IV. Jessica reinforced the Commission's value in providing the Governor policy priorities pertaining to Arizona's Veteran community and shared the Governors priorities as:

- A. Improving Education
- B. Economic Growth and Workforce Development
- C. Immigration and Border Security
- D. Affordability and Housing
- E. Water and Environment
- F. Expanding Health Care

For more information, visit <https://azgovernor.gov/governor/priorities>
Commissioner Gallowitz suggested aligning Commissioner issue concerns with the Governor's priorities.

V. Commissioner Cushman expressed interest in sharing Commission issue concerns with the Governor and suggested we start by meeting with the Policy Advisor. Commissioner Gallowitz asked the committee to consider when it would be most helpful to conduct this meeting, possibly after we determine our top policy recommendations. Jessica reminded that the policy advisor has been invited to attend Commission meetings.

VI. Veteran-community issue concerns aligned with Governor Priorities:

A. Improving Education

Jessica explained that these priorities include increased teacher pay, supporting school repair infrastructure projects and providing adequate funding for public schools, K-12. The Governor's position is that there is not

a teacher shortage but a teacher retention problem due to pay, curriculum and working conditions.

1. One Commissioner listed education as a top three concern in the Issues Report.
2. Commissioner Cushman explained that rural Arizona has a teachers' shortage and would like to see more assistance helping transitioning military become K-12 teachers.
3. Jessica offered the Commission might want to ask for more funding for *Troops to Teachers*.
4. Commissioner Gallowitz explained the goals of *Purple Star Schools* as a K-12 program are to support the identification, support and recognition of military children and is separate from the Military Child Education Coalition. Funding this program is in the best interests of military families.

B. Economic Growth and Workforce Development

1. In the Issues Report, Four Commissioners listed employment as a top three priority concern, describing these specific solutions:
 - Educating employers on Veteran-hiring best practices
 - Supporting
 - Arizona Coalition for Military Family's (ACMF) *Arizona Veteran Supportive Employers (AVSE)* program
 - *DOD Skillbridge*
 - ACMF's "*AZHires Vets,*" to employ more Veterans in state government jobs
 - Creating hiring preferences for able/disabled Veterans in state and local government jobs
 - Drawing Native Americans back to Arizona after their military service
 - Establishing 3% state contract set-asides for Veteran Owned Businesses
 - Attracting Veterans/Military Spouses to Arizona's workforce
 - Developing a State Veteran Employment Council
 - Incentivizing small business and local governments to hire Veterans
 - Expediting military medics into civilian healthcare jobs
2. Commissioner Buyers suggested placing the issue of Property Tax and Income threshold elevation in this section.
3. Veteran Benefit Counselors (VBC): Although aligning VBC and

“Benefit Restoration” could have an economic impact on Veterans’ finances, the committee determined to remove it from this section in the final document and make it a separate item. Jessica explained that:

- All VBC’s have been hired.
- Assisting with Discharge Upgrades is beyond the current scope of VBC services. Changing this would be an administrative and/or possible legal response.
- The VA supports Discharge Upgrades and provides mental healthcare up to 90-days for those with “Other Than Honorable Discharges.”
- We might want to recommend making the twenty Tribal/Rural VBC’s a budget line item.

C. Affordability and Housing

1. In the Issues Report, Four Commissioners listed housing as a top three priority.
2. Jessica explained that 70% of homeless Veterans are over 55 years old and that homelessness is a major concern in Arizona.
3. Commissioners agreed that supporting the *Arizona Veteran Homeless Action Plan* is a priority.
4. Affordable housing options and overall financial stability of military families are broad issue concerns.

D. Expanding Health Care

1. In the Issues Report, Five Commissioners listed suicide prevention as a top three concern.
2. In the Issues Report, Three Commissioners listed mental health as a top three concern.
3. Committee adopted Jessica’s recommendation to broaden this Veterans’ issue to “mental and healthcare access.”
4. Commissioners agreed to include these aspects:
 - Broad support of suicide prevention strategies.
 - Expanding tele-health into rural communities, including extending broadband and fostering digital literacy.
 - Offering Veterans paid transportation to healthcare appointments, especially rural Veterans.
 - Support Veterans Treatment Courts, to include:
 - Increased funding
 - Develop more of these courts and share best practices

- Support organizations that provide legal assistance to Veterans
- Simplifying credentialing of health care providers as TRICARE providers.
- Fund *Star Behavioral Health* to educate civilian behavior health providers about military culture and learn evidence-based intervention best practices.
- Advocating for *Fisher Homes* in Phoenix, Prescott and Tucson even though all the funding is federal.
- Support the needs of Aging Veterans to include:
 - Veterans' widows, by providing better communication and coordination of benefits.
 - Foster collaboration of Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS) and Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) to better support Veterans aging in rural communities.
 - Protect and grow the cemetery trust fund with the intent to build more Veteran cemeteries across the state.
 - Provide memorial grants for private and municipal cemeteries.

VII. Other Veteran issues:

A. Remove these concerns from the list:

1. Organizational support from younger Veterans for VSO's because the committee did not view this as a legislative or administrative policy.
2. Free special license plates for Purple Heart recipients since it was recently passed by the state legislature.

B. Keep "*Ask a Veteran: Have you or family served in Armed Force?*" as an administrative recommendation to see what is feasible for agencies. This is an important suicide prevention strategy.

C. Support funding of *Be Connected*.

D. Keep needs of Veteran subgroups top of mind, including:
Minority, Native Americans, Women, Disabled, Rural

VIII. Other sources of information:

- A. Jessica will provide committee members the recently updated ADVS Strategic Plan and Director Allmond's priorities.
- B. Jessica provided the "Violent Death Report" link during the meeting for committee members to review.
- C. Jessica reported that the State Legislature's Veteran's Caucus priorities are:
 - Housing

- Suicide
 - Access to Services and Benefits
 - Employment
- D. Jessica reported that the Community Housing Coalition report is dated 2017 and that it's important to support the Arizona Veteran Homeless Action plan. For additional information contact State Veteran Homeless Program Administrator, Nisha Dorsey.
- E. Commissioner Gallowitz will follow up with the Arizona Coalition for Military Families to obtain survey results.
- F. Should the Commission like updates on issues, Jessica encouraged Commissioners to invite subject matter expert speakers to Commission meetings.
- IX. Final document format considerations:
- A. Commissioner Gallowitz asked the committee if we wanted to describe the current state of broad issues and if so, how that would be accomplished. Jessica reported that these descriptions are not part of the updated ADVS Strategic Plan. That if we wanted data, ADVS staff could facilitate connections to experts.
- B. Commissioner Gallowitz asked whether we wanted the final report to contain Commission positions on issues as well as specific policy recommendations for each broad issue, similar to how the current document reads.

Next meeting: September 8, 2023 from 9:30am-11:30am.

Adjournment: Commissioner Gallowitz concluded the meeting at 11:12am.



Kathryn L. Gallowitz
Chair, Arizona Veterans Service Advisory Commission
July 4, 2023