

Arizona Department of Veterans' Service Advisory Commission
4141 North S. Herrera Way, Phoenix, AZ 85012

October 12, 2017

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners Present

Peter Kloeber
Arlethe Rios
Matthew Randle (via telephone)
Brett Rustand (via telephone)
Rebecca Villalpando

Advisory Commissioners Absent

Joseph Brophy
Danielle Desmond

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Wanda Wright, Director
Tera Scherer, Executive Assistant

Guests

Director Chris Norton, Phoenix VA Regional
Benefits Office

Call to Order – Chairman Kloeber called the meeting to order at 10:07 a.m.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – Vice Chairman Nelson called for the approval of the July 13, 2017, Veterans Advisory Commission Meeting Minutes. There being no changes to the minutes Commissioner Villalpando moved to approve the minutes as written. The motion carried unanimously.

Agency Announcements and Updates – Wanda Wright, Director of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, gave agency updates since the last meeting:

Director Wright continues implementation of the BeConnected program throughout Arizona. The program was mentioned by Dr. Shulkin, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, in testimony to the senate. Senator McCain's office and the Department of Veterans Affairs are working together to broaden the program. At last count for the month of September, over 100 calls came in for resources.

HeroZona held a week of activities in the Phoenix area leading up to Veterans Day that focuses on veteran economic development, hosted by Checked Flag Run Foundation. NaVOBA (National Veteran Owned Business Association) is holding their conference in Phoenix with a seminar and luncheon scheduled. The Arizona Coalition for Military Families, Department of Economic Security and Arizona @ Work are working together to hold a job fair that week that will match pre-registered veterans with employers. Over 200 veterans will be interviewed for positions that day. Please see the HeroZona event flier located [here](#) for more information.

Skillbridge is a program that connects transitioning active duty military members civilian training opportunities through internships with an Arizona employer, about six months before they are scheduled to separate from their branch of service, while still receiving pay from the Department of Defense.

ADVS continues to make progress in the Arizona Management System, the governor's LEAN Management system. A great example is the increase in the amount of federal dollars coming in from Veteran Benefit Counselors (VBC) filing disability claims. About one and one-half years ago the figure was \$26 million; yesterday the amount was \$40 million. The Veteran Services Division (VSD) collected data relating to the claims processed, analyzed the data, and developed new processes that created better use of time for each VBC.

Commissioner Randle stated that when a veteran's disability claim goes through the legal offices at the University of Arizona for review at the appellate court, 20 percent of the veteran's earnings from the claim goes back to the attorney. Commissioner Randle asked if the VBCs or the Department get that same return. Neither ADVS nor the VBCs receive any financial gain for a veteran receiving disability pay for claims filed on their behalf. Commissioner Villalpando stated that in the short time since a VBC was placed in Black Canyon City (part time) the veterans in that community have already received over \$100 thousand from disability claims filed. Director Chris Norton, from the VA Regional Benefits Office in Phoenix, stated that the total dollar amount is around \$1.3 billion each year in Arizona.

Director Wright spoke of the technology in place at the Department that enables VBCs to visit with veteran clients through web conferencing, allowing veterans in more rural areas of the state to receive services. The VSD just completed their 100th web consultation with an Arizona veteran.

Chris Norton, VA Regional Benefits Office

Chris Norton, Director of the Phoenix VA Regional Benefits Office was present to give an update to the Commissioners. Mr. Norton advised that it has been announced that the best candidate for the Under Secretary for Benefits of the Department of Veterans Affairs has been identified.

In FY17, the VA Benefits division has experienced an increase of 40 percent over the previous fiscal year. It is believed that technological advances such as digitizing records has been the cause of the increase, as 56 regional offices throughout the US were receiving paper documents and filing them until records could be reviewed. In rural areas, files were being reviewed at a rate of 70-80 days after receipt where more populated areas, such as Chicago, would require approximately one year until review. Several years ago, the VA began the process of converting all paper records to digital files. There are no longer any paper files in the Phoenix regional office and a national work que was created that allows claims to be processed timelier out of all the regional offices, no matter what state the veteran lives in. In FY17, the average was 108 days for benefits processing, in 2013-2014 that average was 400 days. They've also been working diligently with claims officers to ensure training is done so that claims come in decision-ready, without the need for more information for rating decisions.

The majority of claims processing delays are related to the appeals process. Appeals continue to be delayed, with approximately 500 days to make a first determination on appeal. They've added additional staffing to the appeals department and congress gave more money to address the workforce issues they were facing. Congress recently passed the Appeals Modernization Act that will change the focus on the process for appeals.

Until 10 years ago, each regional benefits office had their own phone number. Since then the call center has been nationalized, with eight call centers in the US. Two years ago, it was discovered that callers had a 50 percent chance of getting through to the call center. One and one-half years ago the call center in Phoenix doubled in staffing size, from 100 agents to 223 and was able to drive down that missed call rate to .01 percent. On average, calls are being answered in under 30 seconds.

The Benefits division has been working hard and drilling down on processes. For example, if a payment to a veteran was stopped because a mandatory form was not received timely due to something such as moving to a new address, payment is resumed immediately once the call center hears back from the veteran.

Commissioner Vilalpando said she is beginning to see veterans in their eighties looking for employment because they are no longer able to sustain their way of living. AARP is over a year out on providing assistance to these individuals and asked if there were some other benefits through the VA for which an elderly veteran may qualify. Director Norton advised that there is no age limit on individual unemployment (UI) benefit if the veteran was previously found to be service connected, but not 100 percent service connected, that may allow the veteran to be paid at that rate. Another option is non-

D R A F T – Until officially accepted by the Advisory Commission

service related pension benefit if income eligibility is met. Director Norton advised that the veteran would need to see a service officer to file for those benefits.

Commissioner Randle asked if a statistic was available for the rate of approval on initial filing, versus a re-filing. Director Norton does not have a current statistic with him, but historically 70 percent is the award rate, and of those about 12-13 percent are appealed.

Director Wright stated that the Quality Review Team connected to the Department's Veterans Services Division has an 80 percent rate of award for initial filings.

Outreach Activities

Commissioner Villalpando attended a veteran's conference in September. Also, in her position with the Department of Economic Security as a DVOP (disabled veteran outreach program), they are seeing a lot of veterans for career and benefits assistance. She said the DVOPs and LVERs (local veteran employment representatives) are utilizing the Department's Veteran Tool Kit, a program ADVS launched that will help unemployed veterans acquire the supplies needed for them to begin their job. She is processing requests for job-specific clothing and shoe requirements and bus passes for transportation.

Chairman Kloeber was able to attend a Northern Arizona Military Community Network (MVCN) meeting and the ribbon cutting of the Coconino County Veterans Center.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order

Commissioner Rios stated it is commonly known that there are 22 veteran suicides per day. Director Wright stated the rate has gone down to 20 per day, according to a recent VA report. Commissioner Rios would like to know what caused the reduction in that number. Although there is no exact answer to that question, Director Wright stated that at the Phoenix VA Medical Center alone, 1,200 new veterans were registered for services in the previous week. She stated that Vietnam Veterans make up about 33 percent of Arizona's veterans population and as they age they are experiencing more issues with their health. Further discussion was held as to the reason for the reduction in the number of suicides and anecdotally the Commission believes that overall outreach to veterans, access to service providers and marketing can be reasons for the decrease.

Chairman Kloeber presented a new regional [map](#) for the commissioners and regional assignments will be made for the purpose of attending the MVCN meetings and other outreach opportunities within assigned areas. Areas of assignment will not preclude a commissioner from attending a meeting or event in a different area. Each commissioner should attend an MVCN meeting and their regularly scheduled advisory commission meeting each quarter. Director Wright asked Commissioners to listen to veterans in their community and at events and bring information back to the MVCN meetings so the group can work together to fulfill gaps in services that may be discovered.

Commissioner Rios moved to adopt the realignment of the regions. The motion carried unanimously.

Chairman Kloeber stated that there are two open positions on the Veterans Advisory Commission and commissioners are welcome to recruit members. The link to apply to the positions can be found online on the boards and commissions [page](#).

Chairman Kloeber asked Col. Wright about open VBC positions. Currently there are only two open positions. The Department continues to work to fill clinical positions in both of the veteran homes.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:29.

EMPOWERING AMERICA'S
VETERANS IN ARIZONA

NaVOBA
NATIONAL VETERAN-OWNED BUSINESS ASSOCIATION

Conference

National procurement conference & business fair focused on connecting corporate supplier diversity programs with Veteran Owned Businesses, which includes: matchmaker event, seminars, workshops, business expo, Vetpreneur of the Year award & more!

Nov 9-10

Armed Forces Business Panel

A special luncheon panel featuring top business professionals who have also bravely served our country, including: Jason Rowley, President of the Phoenix Suns, and Edward J. Robson, Founder of Robson Communities

Fri Nov 10

Arizona Roadmap to Veteran Employment

A hiring event where job seekers can be pre-matched with jobs & interviews.

Fri Nov 10

Veteran Incubator

Introducing a robust platform that serves as an incubator to develop veteran owned businesses.

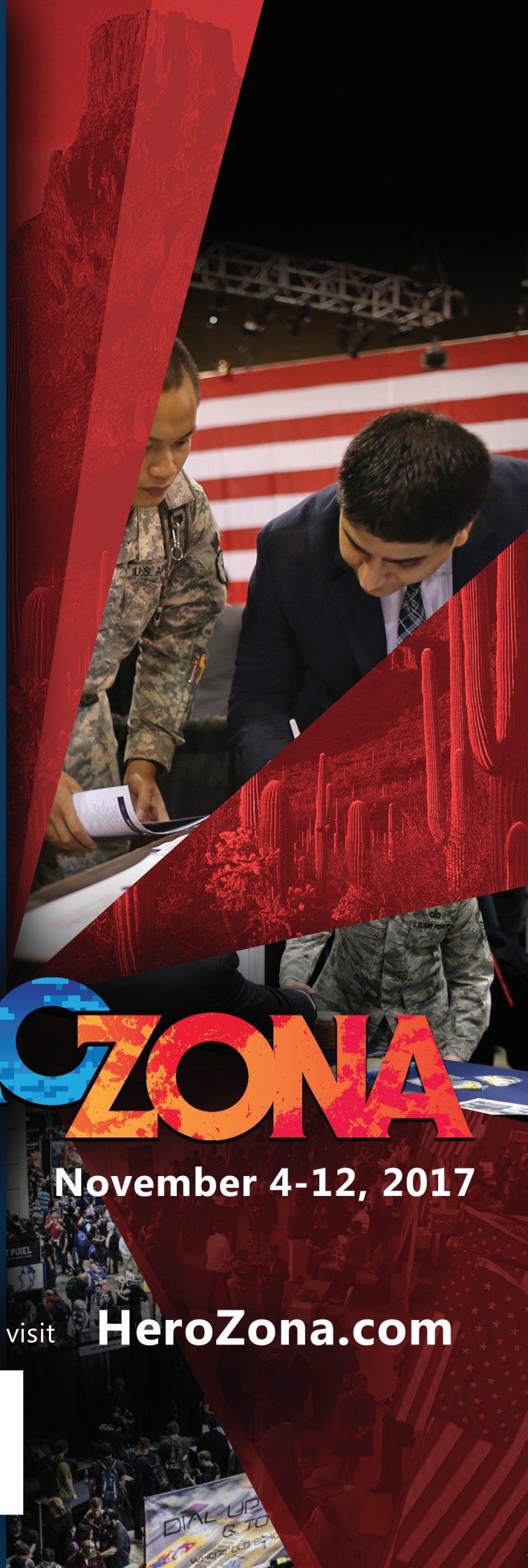
Fri Nov 10

Phoenix Convention Center

For registration, event details and schedule, please visit

November 4-12, 2017

HeroZona.com



HEROZONA

**CELEBRATING AMERICA'S
VETERANS IN ARIZONA**

Salute to Service

NCAA Football game

Colorado vs Arizona State University

Sat Nov 4

Sun Devil Stadium

Charles Schwab Cup

Golf Championship Pro-AM

Wed Nov 8

Phoenix Country Club

HeroZona NBA game

Orlando Magic vs Phoenix SUNs

Fri Nov 10

Talking Stick Resort Arena

21st Annual Veterans Day Parade

presented by Honoring Arizona's Veterans

Salute to Veterans Festival

Live Entertainment from
American Hitmen, GIs of Comedy
food & fun with a Lifetime Service Award
honoring U.S. Senator John McCain

Sat Nov 11

Downtown Phoenix &
Steele Indian School Park

Honor Walk

Sun Nov 12

Talking Stick Resort Arena

NASCAR Can-Am 500

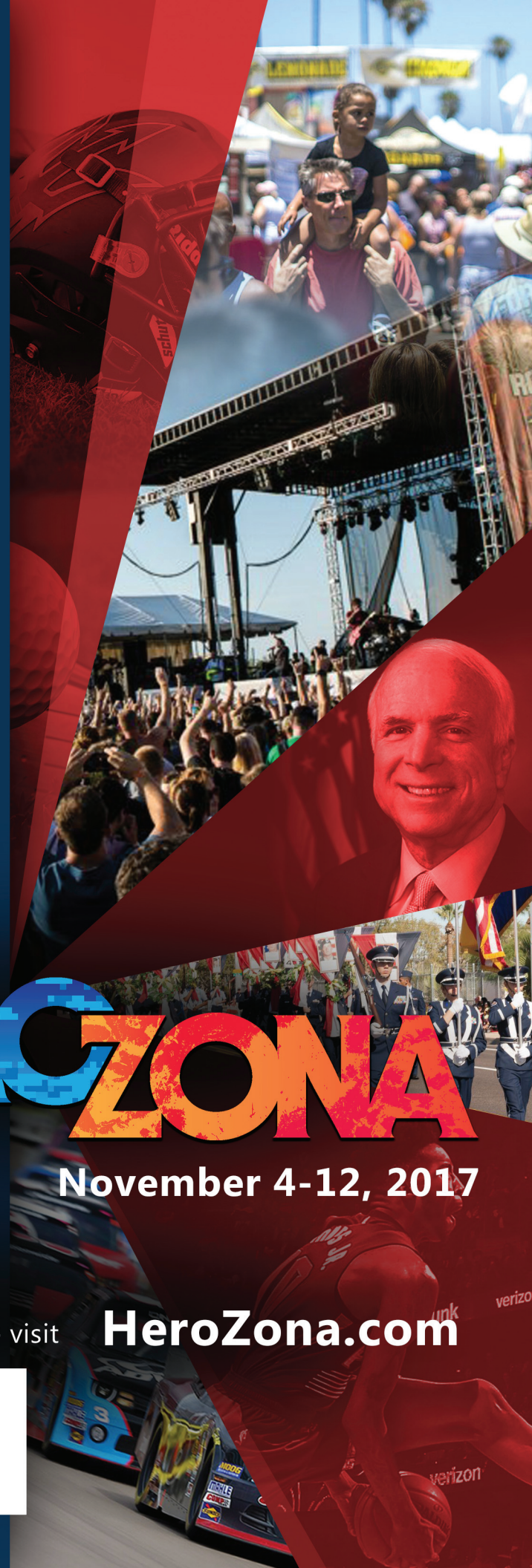
Sun Nov 12

Phoenix International Raceway

For registration, event details and schedule, please visit

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HeroZona.com



AVSAC Regional Map

