

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

June 12, 2014

MINUTES

Advisory Commissioners

Jeff Olson, Chair
Kara Caldwell
George Cushing
Philip Hanson (via teleconference)
Brett Rustand (via teleconference)
David Toliver, Sr.

Excused:

Ron Perkins, Vice Chair
Wayne Krula

Guests (via teleconference)

Ken Sobel, Attorney/VP, Arizona Wellness
Suzanne Sisley, MD,
U of A College of Medicine
Lezli Engelking, Executive Director,
Bloom Dispensaries
Heather Manus, RN,
Arizona Cannabis Nurses Association

AZ Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS)

Ted Vogt, Director
Robert Barnes, Deputy Director
Mike Klier, Assistant Deputy Director
Judy Smith, Administrative Secretary
Yasmin Ramos, Executive Assistant

Guests

Martin Wittstruck, Vietnam Veteran
Suzanne Amari
Marion Cartland, Editor, AZ Veterans Connection Magazine
Nelson Ladd, Korean War Veteran
Angel Juarez, Adjutant-American Legion
Judi Beischel, Dept. Commander-American Legion-Phoenix
Ed Lilley, Asst. Dir. Healthcare-National American Legion
Keari Porejamaas, Acct. Mgr., Salem Communications
Mark Field, Editor, Arizona Veterans Magazine
Don Reams, Vietnam Veteran
Nicholas Catanzaro, Post 9/11 Veteran
Liz Hourican, Patient Advocacy, Medicinal Relief
Channel 15 recorded this meeting

Call to Order – Chairman Jeff Olson called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m.

There were no corrections to the May minutes. Commissioner Cushing moved to approve as presented. Commissioner Toliver seconded the motion which carried.

Introduction and Welcome of Invited guests – Chairman Olson welcomed the following in-house guests:

State American Legion Commander Judi Beischel introduced Edward Lilley, Assistant Director of the National American Legion.

Lilley is chair for the Washington VA Committee that is here for the week in response to the VA Office of Inspector General's site visit and interim report.

Lilley's team is working to address problems and provide assistance to as many veterans as possible during this first visit by offering veterans counseling, enrollment services, assistance with claims, and scheduling visits into the VA. Phoenix is the pilot city and the first to offer the Veterans Crisis Command Center.

Lilley's team is helping veterans file Form 1151, the counterpart for a malpractice suit, if needed. More than 300 veterans were assisted in three days. The team is helping as many veterans as possible in Phoenix before it moves to another part of the country to handle crisis matters.

Commander Beischel said in the last two days, the VA called her office to advise they had openings for appointments that could be filled immediately.

Others attending:

Keari Porejamaas of Salem Communications is here to listen and observe. He is in the process of creating a veteran business directory on his radio station.

Mark Field, Editor/Publisher of Arizona Veterans Magazine.

Chairman Olson explained to guests that the law states the Advisory Commission can only act on agenda items. The commission can listen to public comments and take them under advisement for future agendas, but it does not enter into public issues without an announcement or appropriate notification to the public. The Advisory Commission will not be taking action today, but will listen and will take these comments under advisement.

Suzanne Amari commented that, on June 5th, an administrative law judge advised Arizona Department of Health Services Director, Will Humble, that Arizonans suffering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) should be able to legally use medical marijuana to treat those symptoms.

Amari asked Advisory Commission to endorse the judge's recommendation to the Health Department.

Martin Wittstruck, a 100% disabled Vietnam Veteran, said PTSD is treatable using medical marijuana and that people should be allowed to choose medical marijuana for the treatment of PTSD symptoms.

Wittstruck encouraged the Advisory Commission to recommend to the health department that PTSD be added to the list of illnesses treatable with medical Cannabis.

Don Reams, a Vietnam Veteran, is a medical marijuana patient. A VA psychiatrist diagnosed a mild case of PTSD and prescribed medications for sleep. The medications made his nightmares worse. Today, he takes no prescribed medications, and has used Cannabis for the last three years. He says his health has improved during these last 3 years.

Nick Catanzaro, is a Veteran who served in Afghanistan, said the VA prescribed Vicodin, which did not work for him. He is a medical marijuana patient.

Liz Hourican, a civilian, asked those present to look at the science—marijuana is a medicine. Hourican said the Advisory Commission is an important conduit between veterans and the governor and can carry power on this issue.

Nelson Ladd, a Korean War veteran, said when he returned to Seattle after the war, he immediately went to work which, mentally, he was not prepared to do. In order to deal with his war experiences, he turned to alcohol for a few years, but then gave it up and earned a Master's Degree in Physics through the G.I. Bill. He came from a generation that solved their own problems.

Guests Marion Cartland and Angel Juarez had no comments.

Chairman Olson recognized the following guests via teleconference.

Ken Sobel, Attorney for the Arizona Cannabis Nurses Association, said for the past several years other groups have tried to add PTSD to the list of debilitating conditions allowable for medical marijuana treatment under Arizona Law.

On behalf of the Arizona Cannabis Nurses Association, Sobel's firm petitioned the Department of Health to add PTSD as a condition to be treated with medical marijuana. Sobel said there are currently 10 other states that allow Cannabis for PTSD treatment.

Sobel said Director Will Humble of the Department of Health has until July 9th to make a decision and, if he does nothing, the judge's order will go into effect, allowing doctors to legally use medical marijuana to treat PTSD.

Sue Sisley, a physician and a principal investigator on a randomized control trial that is considering marijuana for the treatment of PTSD, spoke via teleconference.

She said the U of A College of Medicine study would be the first and only randomized controlled trial at this time concerning this subject.

Sisley reinforced the comments and frustrations of today's guests who are actively using marijuana to manage PTSD symptoms.

Heather Manus, RN, encouraged the Advisory Commission and the governor to become active in this matter.

Lezli Engelking, Executive Director for Bloom Dispensaries, encouraged the Advisory Commission to do what they can to let the governor know there are many people who support medical marijuana treatment for veterans suffering from PTSD.

Chairman Olson asked if there were any additional guest comments and thanked everyone who participated. Guests were invited to stay for the entire meeting.

The next agenda item, VA Hospital discussion, was addressed in comments from Commander Judi Beichel and Ed Lilley on the progress taking place between the VA Medical Center and the American Legion. The VA Medical Center was unable to have a person present at our meeting today. National legislation did not pass and this item will be discussed at the July meeting.

Communications – Requests were received from Marion Cartland, Editor of Arizona Veterans Connection Magazine and Suzanne Sisley, MD, to be added to the stakeholders list to receive the Advisory Commission meeting agenda. Today's meeting agenda was sent to them.

Agency Announcements and Updates – Cemeteries

Director Vogt presented site drawings of the Marana and Flagstaff Cemeteries. Construction is to start on each site by fall. The drawing gives a better sense of the exact location of the Marana Cemetery on the west side of Interstate 10. He explained the three phases of build out for the site. We are at 95% of the sign off of the plans from the VA.

Commissioner Toliver asked if the capacity number noted is in space, years or plots.

Director Vogt said the capacity number is at least 20 years for Flagstaff. Marana has 50 years of use for a total of 37 acres, after 3 or 4 phases of build out. The phases of build out will come as we near capacity; columbariums, crypts and underground burials will be added in phases.

Chairman Olson inquired about the increased amount of cremations and whether available space is changing because of cremations which take up less space. Mr. Barnes said the statistics from the National Cemetery Association said it offers another option to veterans for in-ground burial vs. columbarium. There was a 60-40 split on cremations vs. full casket burials.

The cemetery will have a scatter garden as well. When scatter burials are done, a memorial will be placed on the wall in the scatter garden to commemorate the veteran.

Chairman Olson asked if there is an area available for honor guard members to prepare for burials. Robert Barnes said part of the maintenance building is designated for honor guards. There are showers and rooms to change uniforms for male and female members, and an area to rest and relax.

Commissioner Hanson asked Director Vogt if there are plans for landscaping on both cemeteries as part of the overall cost.

Director Vogt said landscaping costs for both cemeteries are part of the design and will be included in the overall cost of upkeep.

Veteran Homes

ADVS is waiting for the City of Yuma to announce suitable land to build the veteran home. We have some time and are waiting for the priority list of veteran homes to come from the Federal Government in October. We will have more to report in the fall.

Veterans Services Division (VSD)

Chairman Olson asked if the agency is at full complement with veteran service counselors. Mike Klier, Assistant Deputy Director reported that by July 1, VSD will have a full complement of veteran counselors.

VSD is waiting for the D2D, to close the loop on the electronics side of our claim submissions. Quality Control is going well; we have an employee with 40 years of experience doing quality control work. Having worked for the VA, he is very knowledgeable.

ADVS Outreach Activities

Chairman Olson asked about the Outreach Activity Cards; Commissioner Caldwell distributed cards to each member. The secretary will send activity cards to commissioners who were unable to be here today.

Chairman Olson said the activity cards will be used to report veterans' concerns as they attend community meetings and will allow commissioners to see and discuss where trends are going. He encouraged commissioners to use the comment cards as records to see if there is anything they'd like to change, as well as reach out to the veteran if there are questions. These will be a historical document to help work on policy issues, as well as get back to the veteran who would like a response.

Chairman Olson asked Director Vogt if another table top display case could be purchased and stored at the Tucson Veteran Home. Director Vogt said this will be ordered in the fiscal year end purchases.

Outreach Activities for the Commission

Chairman Olson noted that he attended an event at the Southern Arizona VA Hospital in Tucson. He talked with at least 20 veterans in the lobby. The patient satisfaction in the Tucson VA Hospital is high. Patient satisfaction has been reported in the newspaper but he was glad to hear it in person from the veterans.

AVSAC Strategic Plan and Guidelines

Chairman Olson reviewed the proposed changes to the Strategic Plan and Guidelines.

1. Moved commissioner names, addresses phone numbers and e-mail addresses out of guidelines because it is a public document. If a veteran wants to contact a commissioner they can still do so.
2. Records of past regional meetings was moved. It is good information, but doesn't need to be in the guidelines.
3. The Checklist and Timeline of regional meetings was removed for separate storage so that when people read the Strategic Plan and Guidelines they see a shorter, easier to read, and understandable document.

Page 1 – Changed date and Chairperson signature block

Page 2 – Guideline Index is revised to reflect what is in the document.

Page 3 – No changes (Arizona Revised Statute)

Pages 4 & 5 – Strategic Plan – no changes

Page 6 – Commission General Operating Guidelines – Language in red reflects the commission's decision to meet every other month.

Commissioner Hanson noted that during the May meeting a motion was made to hold four meetings in Maricopa County and two in other areas. The guidelines state three meetings in Maricopa County, which is not in accordance with the motion at the May meeting. Can we make that change?

Chairman Olson said the change will be made to read that four meetings will be held in Maricopa County and two meetings in areas outside Maricopa County.

During the months of Executive Committee meetings; commissioners will conduct individual outreach with veterans in their assigned areas or in their home areas.

Item 5 on page 6 – Moved the mailing address for clarity.

Page 7, Item 6a – Is the beginning of the program to mentor new commissioners. As new commissioners are appointed, we will take this further and make a more structured matrix. We need to talk about what goes on in the Federal Government, the Department of Veterans' Services, and in Arizona with new commissioners and get them up to speed as soon as possible.

Pages 8 and 9 – No changes

Page 10 – Establishes an Executive Committee of three commissioners and continues the chairperson's ability to establish other committees as needed.

Page 10, Item 9c – The old guidelines said a letter would be sent to the governor during the legislative session that says what's going on or how things are going. The reality is that a lot of good legislation and budget issues are discussed before the legislative session starts. This is our effort to let the governor know as the budget and legislative issues are developed, what is going well and what we think could be improved upon. This guideline continues the ability to send letters to the governor, and does require one letter, prior to the legislative session.

Page 11 – No change

Page 12 – No one is assigned to Region 2 because of vacancies on the commission. Commissioner Caldwell was added to Region 4 due to Commissioner Krula's resignation. Chairman Olson discussed

with Vice Chair Perkins that, as new commissioners come in, assignments will be moved around to place a current commissioner with a new commissioner in the regions, as part of the mentoring program.

Page 13 – Absentee Policy. The old policy stated that if a commissioner missed four AVSAC meetings in a given year, we would have a discussion with the commissioner to determine improving attendance or resigning. This is now changed to two missed meetings since we are now holding six meetings a year.

Commissioner Cushing moved to approve the proposed changes to the Strategic Plan and Guidelines. Commissioner Caldwell seconded the motion.

The motion carried unanimously.

Commissioner Olson spoke with the Governor's Boards and Commissions and was told they are optimistic they will have the required commissioners appointed by July 1 or shortly afterward.

Open Discussion for the Good of the Order

Chairman Olson asked for open discussion from members.

Director Vogt extended his best wishes to George Cushing as he leaves the commission.

Commissioner Cushing said that with the commission going to a different meeting format, he suggests that in order to be sure the outlying areas are aware of the commission's presence and what it does, the commission should be sure to reach out to veterans who don't have the resources the veterans in Maricopa County have.

It will be important when commissioners visit outlying areas to interact with VBC's and VSO's. If there is an event going on, commissioners in that area need to be there talking with veterans. Sometimes veterans will talk about their concerns one on one, but they may not bring up questions in an open conference style setting. It is imperative that the commission serves the outlying areas. They have unique situations that are different from the metropolitan areas.

Commissioner Cushing said he has enjoyed his time on the Advisory Commission and looks forward to doing something else in the future. He thanked the commission for the opportunity to serve six years and feels the commission has accomplished great things.

Commissioner Toliver said he is proud to have had the opportunity to serve with George.

He pointed out that he and Commissioner Caldwell will send a formal letter to VBC's and VSO's to identify themselves as Advisory Commission members and provide contact information. They want to start a relationship with the VBC's and organizations so that when they make appearances at meetings, people will know who they are and we want to know who they are.

Commissioner Hanson said Commissioner Cushing talked him into becoming the commander of the Northwest Valley Veterans' Association and from that time they formed a great friendship. Commissioner Hanson said it was his pleasure to serve with Commissioner Cushing on the commission. He looks forward to continuing to work with Commissioner Cushing in another capacity.

While in Springerville for the summer, Commissioner Hanson will attend American Legion and VFW meetings in Round Valley, Springerville and Eager. People in the area have no idea what the Advisory Commission does.

Chairman Olson said Commissioner Krula regrets that he will not be able to continue another term on the Advisory Commission. Chairman Olson spoke with Wayne recently and expressed his appreciation for Wayne's having served on the Advisory Commission.

Chairman Olson said he and George Cushing are on the American Legion National Veterans Affairs Rehabilitation Commission discussing veterans' issues. They have a good time and he appreciates George's friendship.

Commissioner Cushing motioned to adjourn the meeting. The meeting adjourned at 11:21 a.m. The next Advisory Commission meeting will be held July 10, 2014, in Room A-107 at the Phoenix Veteran Home.