

ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION
Director's Conference Room, 3839 N. 3rd St., Suite 209, Phoenix, AZ 85012
Thursday – March 11, 2010

M I N U T E S

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m. by Chairwoman Fulkerson.

Present

Advisory Commissioners

Linda Fulkerson, Chairwoman
Gary Fredricks, Vice Chairman
George Cushing
Larry McKim*
Jeffrey Olson*
Lionel Sanchez
Kenneth Yamanouchi

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Joey Strickland, Director
Mike Klier, Assistant Deputy Director
Gabe Forsberg, Strategic Planner
Homer Rodgers, Assistant Deputy Director
Robert Barnes, Deputy Director

Absent

Terrie Gent

* Participated by telephone

Guests:

Anthony E. Narcia, Sr. - Councilman, Ak-Chin Indian Community

Called to order at 1:00 p.m. The minutes of the February 11 meeting were approved as published.

Communications - Gabe Forsberg outlined 3 letters sent out by Chairwoman Fulkerson regarding Troops to Teachers.

- Two supported legislative changes that would expand the number of former service personnel who would be eligible to participate in the program (to Congressmen Courtney and Senator McCain as primary sponsors of the two bills).
- The third letter was directed to Secretary Shinsecki regarding the transfer of the Troops to Teacher program from the US Department of Education to the US Department of Veterans Affairs.

Terrie Gent provided a list of 30 individuals she thanked in writing; they were participants in the regional town hall meeting in January 2010.

Chairwoman Fulkerson sent a letter to the Raymond Hanna, President of the State Bar of Arizona, thanking him for establishing the Arizona State Bar Military Legal Assistance Committee.

Correspondence received by the Advisory Commission:

- Chairwoman Fulkerson and each Commissioner received a letter regarding a recommendation made during the January town hall style meeting in Safford. The suggestion will be discussed later in today's meeting.

- Steven Gonzales, Associate Professor of Law and Director of Experiential Learning at the Phoenix School of Law, thanked the Commission for its support of the veteran's legal clinic. He indicated there may be a "kick off" or another type of ceremony to launch the program later in the year, and he will keep the Commission informed.
- Congressman Joe Courtney's Legislative Assistant sent an email to John Scheuer, Troops to Teachers, thanking him for the ADVS letter of support for H.R. 3943.

Agency Announcements and Updates

Robert Barnes briefed the Commission on the Southwest Defense Alliance quarterly meeting held in Phoenix. It was a 2-day event that the Governor's Office asked ADVS to staff. There are 7 states represented by the Alliance, with the primary focus of supporting military presence in each of those states.

Homer Rodgers provided a recap of the progress made by Phoenix Home over the past few months (the census is steadily increasing and overtime is now under control). State veteran home in Tucson - the groundbreaking will be on March 19 and the Commissioners will have reserved seating.

Next week (3/17 & 3/18) the agency is hosting VBC refresher training at the Four Points Hotel at Metro Center. Veterans service organizations are welcome to attend so they can increase their service officers' knowledge of claims administration. Col. Strickland indicated that every March and September the agency would offer semi-annual VBC training.

Gabe Forsberg indicated that the Arizona Military Women's Conference will be held May 21 & 22 at the Sheraton Crescent Hotel in Phoenix. Chairwoman Fulkerson told the group that the mobile vets center (a 37 foot recreational vehicle that allows for two simultaneous confidential counseling sessions) will be available for mental health counseling and that VBCs will be available to speak to women wishing to file claims.

The Gila River Indian tribe approached ADVS to support an October Stand Down for homeless American Indian veterans. They will partner with the local services and VA and include the typical services offered during the Phoenix StandDown (such as court services). There will be a separate section for women veterans. Brad Bridwell will be the contact and David Lucier will be working with him. Col. Strickland also indicated that Brad was working with the Navajo to provide stand down on the Navajo reservation as well.

Col. Strickland would like to establish a Yellow Ribbon Coordinator position that will report to Mike Klier, Assistant Deputy Director in charge of the Veterans Service Division. He is also looking for federal funding so that the state doesn't bear those costs. A second position he is hoping to establish is an American Indian Coordinator to be a better job of working with tribal governments statewide.

As a matter of protocol, the Advisory Commission should send a copy of correspondence to the Governor to the following: (1) Victor Daniels, Policy Advisor on Military Affairs and (2) Brian McNeil, Deputy Chief of Staff – Operations.

State Legislation - tabled at this time. Vicechair Fredricks asked the Commissioners if they had any specific legislative issues that should be raised, but there were none.

Agency Presentation on Human Resources Policies and Procedures

Robert Barnes provided a handout and went over the recruiting/hiring process in place. The policies and procedures are in place to ensure that the agency follows statutory requirements and personnel rules. Issues are dealt with through open communication. There is an internal appellate process in place for disciplinary actions and other personnel actions. Over the past six months, Mr. Barnes has overturned 4 decisions brought before him.

The Commission asked about the ability of staff to raise an issue once the agency director has made a final decision. Director Strickland reports to both the Deputy Chief of Staff and the Policy Advisory on Military Affairs. If an employee were dissatisfied with a response from the agency director, there are other avenues available to discuss problems.

Col. Strickland emphasized the need to ensure continuity if there is any change in leadership in the future. The stability for the agency lies with Homer Rodgers and Robert Barnes.

Nepotism was a specific discussion point. There are now adequate safeguards to identify (1) any relationships with other employees within the agency or (2) if there are any personal or family business relationships with the agency. The agency would ask about relationships at the time of hire, but recently instituted a policy to request periodic disclosures of possible conflicts of interest. There is a public folder where complaints can be made available to staff for inspection.

The Home does a background check for all direct-care staff. Mr. Rodgers is working to extend the background checks to all staff. Ken Yamanouchi mentioned that there are issues whereby employees are indicted after joining the agency. He suggested an annual review because there may be sealed records for various reasons (i.e., sealed by the court because of a domestic violence issue or crimes which occurred as juveniles).

Col. Strickland was pleased to announce that Mr. Rodgers has been asked to serve on a committee of the National Association of State Veteran Homes to develop nationwide policies and procedures.

Mr. Barnes briefed the Commission on other hiring procedures and how the agency is no longer able to double- or triple fill positions. There is also an effort underway to combine the Veterans Benefits Counselor I and VBC II into a single position. There are 43 total VBC positions where the employee can be paid in accordance with their years of service, providing a structured means for future salary increases. This is the last area where the agency has multiple employees in appropriated positions and they are actively working to eliminate all double-filled positions.

Vicechair Fredricks indicated that the briefing was thorough and that he would be willing to attest that there are sufficient checks and balances to ensure that the agency's positions are properly filled. The rest of the Commissioners agreed, and asked no further questions about the agency's Human Resource practices.

The emphasis that the VA has placed on homeless veterans caused the Director to create a new position for that purpose. It took two tries to get the Arizona Department of Administration to approve the creation of the newly established position. Col. Strickland also wants to create a Yellow Ribbon position, using a federal grant, and an American Indian Veteran Coordinator.

Good of the Order

Next month, Robert Barnes will go over the agency's budget items.

Larry McKim was thanked for his assistance in pulling together the issues raised during the regional meetings.

In future, the Commissioners participating by telephone would appreciate copies of the handouts before the meeting. Staff will get the two documents to Commissioners McKim and Olson.

Charity Item

At the January town hall meeting, an attendee recommended that the agency post a link to the American Institute of Philanthropy on its website. This is a charity watchdog organization that uses a specific method of grading a veterans service organization. George Cushing feels that the methodology used by the organization to rate charities may be misleading to report readers. Gary Fredricks felt that the Commission owes a letter of explanation to the person making the recommendation. Commissioner Cushing moved to respond to Mr. Hollar's recommendation in writing, which was seconded and unanimously supported. Commissioner Cushing was asked to draft the letter when Mr. Hollar's contact information is supplied.

Adjournment – Chairwoman Fulkerson adjourned the meeting at 2:24 p.m. The next meeting will be a full Commission meeting at 1:00 p.m. on April 8, in the Director's Conference Room - Suite 209, 3839 N. 3rd Street, Phoenix, AZ 85012.