



# Annual Tribal Consultation Report – FY2020

## **Agency Overview**

The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS) is the single state administered veteran services agency for Arizona with the overarching goal of championing the provision of veteran services. The department is an advocate for service members, veterans and their families and provides them the following services: skilled nursing care, preparation and submission of claims for compensation and pension benefits to the Veterans Administration, burial benefits, approval of GI Bill funding for institutions of higher learning, as well as the administration of state and federal grant funding and initiatives that address veteran homelessness, employment, mental health and suicide prevention.

## **Tribal Liaison**

The Department created a Tribal Liaison position in 2014 in accordance with the Executive Order 2006-14. The Tribal Liaison is responsible for facilitating state-tribal consultation for the 22 Arizona tribes, and is tasked with developing a robust network of service provision, consultation, and education of state and federal benefits amongst the service members, veterans and their families residing on tribal lands. Since February 2015, our Tribal Liaison Representative is R. Scott Fincher, Assistant Deputy Director - Veterans Services Division.

## **Tribal Government Consultation Policy**

The Department is committed to working with the American Indian Tribes to enhance military veteran services for service members, veterans and their families. The establishment of Tribal Government Consultation Policy ensures that ADVS engages in open, continuous and meaningful collaboration, consultation and services provision with Arizona Tribal Nations. ADVS continues to promote open dialogue, garnering feedback for creating a consultation policy. The ADVS website link for the Tribal Government Consultation Policy can be found here: <https://dvs.az.gov/about>.

The Liaison contacted 20 Arizona tribes regarding N-95 mask needs due to the COVID 19 pandemic and referred the tribes to the DEMA Tribal Liaison to receive the masks. From July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020, the Department conducted a total of seven reservation specific outreach trips to tribal communities to enhance the provision of service delivery by reaching American Indian veterans living in remote locations throughout the state. The Department also participated in American Indian veteran resource fairs, veteran summits, a symposium, stand downs, and an Arizona Indian Council on Aging conference. In all, the Department provided direct services and/or information about veteran benefits to 1,354 American Indian veterans and their families. The Liaison also spoke during the Code Talker highway sign dedication in Tuba City and attended the White House Conference on Supporting Contemporary Native American Veterans. Prior to the pandemic, the ADVS Public and Intergovernmental Division worked with the Hopi tribe on coordinating a women veterans event. Also during the pandemic, ADVS approved Veteran Donation Fund small grants to assist the Hopi and Navajo veterans.

In addition to the provision of services to American Indian Veterans and their families, the Liaison met with several members of the leadership offices and Chapter Representatives of the Navajo Nation to address veteran needs.

The Liaison attended all Project Atlas meetings that will have a profound effect on tribal veterans by virtually receiving VA healthcare, Board of Veterans Appeals hearings and possibly Veteran Benefits Counselor (VBC) meetings to obtain federal and state benefits.

The Liaison also met with the Gila River Indian Community Veterans and Family Services Office staff to discuss state accreditation. When the Veteran Service Officers (VSO) complete training they will become accredited with the state until the tribe completes the process to become a VA accrediting body for their own VSO's.

Challenges include the immense distance between the different rural communities and local available services, and now the COVID 19 pandemic. Many American Indians faced a lack of transportation to service providers. ADVS has alleviated much of this burden by offering virtual VBC appointments state wide. Veterans in rural communities have met with VBCs via phone, email and computer to file for federal and state benefits from their home or an office close to their home without having to travel too far or worry about transportation over long distances.



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The Department has contracted with the University of Arizona on a project that started August 1, 2020 to conduct a year long in depth statewide transportation study for veterans. The study includes 99 cities/towns, 15 counties, and 22 Arizona tribes. Our goal is to better understand the current transportation systems, what is lacking and how to bridge the gaps in providing needed transportation services.

Goal	Objective	Activity and Performance Measure
Visit specific reservations for outreach opportunities both in-person and virtually	Educate on federal, state and ADVS resources and benefits	ADVS staff have visited seven specific Arizona tribal reservations for this fiscal year
Increase the number of outreach work assignments to tribes in Arizona	Provide more direct services with regards to claim submissions to VA for service related disabilities	ADVS staff have been in contact with 1,354 American Indian veterans and their families.
Connect with American Indian veterans and their families in the rural communities of Arizona	Create a tool that will more efficiently connect ADVS with rural tribal communities	ADVS has successfully implemented the virtual Veteran Benefit Counselor (VBC) sessions statewide and have been able to assist rural American Indian veterans and their families with claim submissions.

## **Major Accomplishments**

The Department worked closely with the tribes and specifically their Veterans Affairs departments. This fiscal year has seen direct services provided to American Indian veterans and their families, and the Department has been able to target seven specific reservations, averaging roughly one every other per month. The Department has met with and assisted three tribes who are interested in receiving VA accreditation so a tribal VSO can file VA claims for their tribal veterans and their families. These discussions continued beyond FY 2020. By expanding the virtual VBC appointment program statewide, the Department has connected with Arizona's rural tribal communities, bringing them new services and education.

## **Major Challenge**

A major challenge this fiscal year has been the COVID 19 pandemic. Under state orders, ADVS has been restricted to no in-person contact since March 2020. ADVS has worked to overcome this barrier by using virtual and telephone appointments to ensure all tribal veterans and family members who contacted ADVS were served.

For questions and more information, please contact:

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