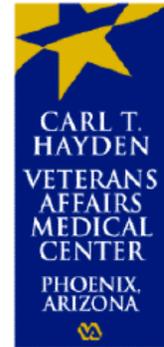


Servicing a VA Target Audience

By Terra Wellington and Paula L. Pedene APR

Combining public relations and community health at its heart, the Carl T. Hayden Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Phoenix, Arizona has created a new, unique program to meet the healthcare needs of the area's 290,000 veterans and get needed public and political exposure.

It's called The Veterans Medical Leadership Council (VMLC) and is an initiative to mobilize a group of external community opinion leaders to assist the Veterans Affairs (VA) department of the medical center in its mission of providing high-quality healthcare to veterans.



The group includes leaders of business and government such as the Maricopa County Attorney, Assistant Secretary of State, and senior executives from large corporations such as Viad Corp. and the Phoenix Suns.



Completing newly announced incorporation in June 2002 as a 501c19 organization, the Council's goals include state-level lobbying for adequate healthcare funding, employee recognition programs, and bringing outside perspective to solving veterans' issues.

“Forming an outside foundation or non-profit organization such as The Veterans Medical Leadership Council, which complements your everyday business initiatives, helps you to more easily tap into your customer, gain public and media interest, and motivate change in a non-threatening way.”
-- Terra Wellington

“We're trying to grow the organization and become more permanent,” says President Len Kirschner, M.D., a retired Air Force Colonel and former state director of the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS).

Fundraising capability is one of the major advantages. Funds can be raised to help cover areas that are often blurred by the lines of regulations regarding appropriate funding and care for patient transportation, homeless veterans, and public relations initiatives.

Commenting on the lobbying efforts that the group puts into action on behalf of the veterans, Kirschner says that healthcare is a “powerful, political weapon.” And, the Council has a committee dedicated to representing veterans’ issues at the state and federal government level.

“Thirty percent of the homeless are veterans,” says Kirschner. “We have to have a sense that if we send people into harm’s way we have to be able to take care of them.”



From left to right: Len Kirschner M.D. President; Neil Thex CPA, Treasurer; Tom Ambrose, Chairman Employee Recognition

Kirschner notes, “It’s an evolutionary process. We’re an organization in transition, committed to assisting the vets in Arizona in a unique way.”

The Veterans Medical Leadership Council was formed in April 1999, at the request of Public Affairs Officer Paula L. Pedene with support from Medical Center Director John Fears. Pedene contacted Vietnam Veteran and CEO of GO Media, Gregg Ostro, to see if he would be willing to assist in this special public relations initiative. Pedene explained the concept of an external opinion leaders group to Ostro to see if he could help create a group that would then help the VA obtain some external community support. They discussed some VA medical center initiatives like special events, community awareness, and media relations. He agreed to help and created the inaugural group. During his tenure as President, the council met and decided to adopt three missions:

- Help ensure appropriate funding for the Veterans Affairs Medical Center
- Improve the public perception of the Veterans Affairs Medical Center.
- Incorporate tactics to help improve employee morale

The council started with approximately ten members and today has 22 members and five supporters. The members and supporters are mostly veterans who are high profile community leaders or who have held high profile community positions.

In 2001, the VMLC voted to become an incorporated organization and they voted to adopt the State Veterans Home as part of its charter to help support veterans. Then in 2002, the VMLC created a mission statement: The mission of the Veterans Medical Leadership Council is to provide a forum for community leaders to advocate initiatives that recognize the contributions of veterans to our nation and enhance the quality of veterans’ health care services in Maricopa County. They also created a strategic plan that called for the implementation of subcommittees, including Development, Health Care Issues, Legislative Education, Employee Recognition, and Public Relations.

To assist in the incorporation, the VMLC secured the services of Brown and Bain for the incorporation. Attorneys at Law, Stephen Newmark and Michelle Morris assisted with the incorporation, and are currently working on the process of establishing bylaws and other necessary documents, for the group to fulfill its goal to become a 501c19. The 501c19 is a special designation that requires the VMLC to have a majority of veterans and a certain number of war veterans in its membership. The purpose of the organization must consist of veterans helping other veterans.

At present the council hopes to meet their objectives of the Strategic Plan accepted in April 2002, and pursue their passion which is helping our VA and the State Veterans home in helping our nation’s veterans.