



Arizona House of Representatives

1700 West Washington • Phoenix, AZ 85007-2844

Phone: (602) 926-5545 • FAX: (602) 417-3001

Rep. Sonny Borrelli, R-Lake Havasu (Dist. 05)

By Sonny Borrelli
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Paying attention to Arizona's veterans helps everyone

Op Ed by Rep. Sonny Borrelli, R – Lake Havasu

As a veteran and member of the Arizona House of Representatives, naturally, I have been involved in veteran-related legislation since I was elected in November 2012. I like to think, however that the legislation we worked on not only benefited Arizona's veterans, but it benefited all Arizonans by making our state more attractive to new veterans, thereby boosting economic growth.

Secondly, I want to condemn the disgraceful way that the Federal Veteran Affairs (VA) health care system has treated our veterans. Many veterans have had to wait too long for treatment. And the long wait times at the Phoenix Veterans Affairs facility may have led to nearly 40 deaths.

Moreover, the [Interim Report](#) by the VA's Office of Inspector General dated May 28, 2014, confirms that people at the Phoenix VA were manipulating wait times, and points to what conservatives in the Arizona House of Representatives have been highlighting for nearly a decade: there are serious, negative consequences to allowing government to provide services that the private sector can provide. Those consequences are in addition to the basic economic consequences of reduced market efficiencies and choice, as well as higher taxes when government steps out of its proper role.

I do believe, however, it is right for government to provide a basic safety net to citizens during times of personal and public crises, but one that does not intrude on the private sector and targets those most vulnerable and deserving. That kind of safety net is especially appropriate when it concerns Arizona's veterans—men and women who have risked their lives to keep our society free.

Last session we expanded Arizona's safety net for veterans. The Legislature appropriated more than \$9 million to build a state veteran home in Yuma, complementing the veteran homes the Legislature help fund in Phoenix (\$5 million) and Tucson (\$10 million). Most of the veterans in these homes are 75 years of age or older, and are not expected to be discharged, according to Arizona's Auditor General.

Veteran Facts

92% of veterans 25 and older have at least a high school diploma

26% of veterans 25 and older have at least a bachelor's degree

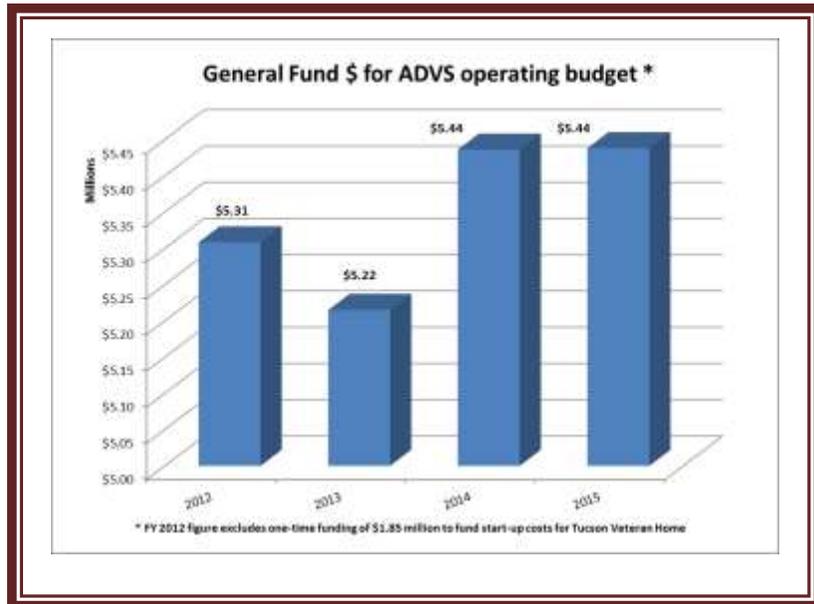
Veterans own 9% of all U.S. businesses

Median income for veterans is about \$10,000 higher than that of average American

Median income of veterans is \$35,367

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

In addition to nearly \$25 million in capital improvements for the construction of these homes, the Legislature has consistently funded the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS) operating budget at more than \$5 million every year for the last four fiscal years. This money goes directly to helping veterans coordinate their benefits, get educated, and receive a proper burial among other services.



Broadening the safety net

and funding services for veterans is important, but we also improved opportunities for veterans and active-duty military members to buy their own home.

The Home Plus Mortgage Loan Origination Program, operated by the Arizona Housing Finance Authority, was expanded so retired and active military members would get an extra 1 percent grant, on top of the existing 4 percent grant, toward the down payment and closing costs associated with purchasing a home. For younger vets getting into their first home this is a big plus.

Home Plus Mortgage Loan Program

- Offered by Arizona Housing Finance Authority
- Provides down payment and closing cost assistance up to 5% of mortgage amount for qualified veterans
- Assistance is a grant and is not repayable
- For more info: 602.771.1091

Source: Arizona Housing Finance Authority

The Home Plus program already existed for low and moderate income homebuyers, so we asked the Housing Finance Authority to expand eligibility to our veterans from 4 percent to 5 percent, and so did not need to go through the process of writing and approving new legislation.

Last session also included legislation to improve educational options for military families and strengthened each veteran's Second Amendment rights.

House Bill 2150 waived the 100 day waiting period for children of military families who qualify for an Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA). Before the legislation, if parents wanted to enroll their child in a charter school using their ESA, they first had to enroll their child in a district school and keep them there for 100 days. Military children more than other children bounce around from school to school simply because of the nature of the parent(s) job, and so anything we can do to minimize the culture shock of transferring from one school to another helps children and families.

House Bill 2103 makes it possible for active military members and honorably discharged veterans who are at least 19 years of age to obtain concealed weapons permits. Prior to HB 2103, a veteran needed to be at least 21 before obtaining a concealed weapon permit. Allowing active-duty and veteran members of the military to continue to carry their weapons is common sense and respects our military members and their extensive weapons training.

Finally, House Bill 2514 removes a veteran's combat-related special compensation from consideration during any court proceeding involving the disposition of property or the awarding of spousal maintenance. Sadly, the Pentagon has reported that divorce rates among military members has been rising dramatically, more than 40 percent, since the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. And as recently as July 2013 the US Department of Defense said that rising divorce rates were one of several issues that veterans have had to confront. We sincerely hope that families stay together, but understand that it may not be possible. And if divorce occurs then this legislation will help protect our veterans.

I know you all join me in thanking our military members, veterans, and their families for their service. I am committed to ensuring that current and veteran members of the military feel welcomed and appreciated, in order to maintain Arizona's status as a premier location for military operations and a friendly place for them to live.