



# The Guardian

*The Newsletter of the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services*

*September, 2016*

## Transportation Agencies Gather for DVS-Sponsored **Veterans' Transportation Summit**



More than three dozen transportation agencies from around the state were represented at a transportation summit called **by the New Mexico Department of Veterans' Services** on August 1 in Albuquerque to find solutions for transportation issues facing veterans.

The summit, held at the New Mexico Veterans Memorial, was the result of what NMDVS Secretary Jack Fox has identified—based on feedback from his frequent travels throughout the state—as the one of the most pressing issues facing veterans in New Mexico.

**“Every place I’ve visited, veterans have told me they really need help getting around their communities—and especially getting to their doctor appointments at the VA hospital here in Albuquerque or their community-based outpatient clinics in their area,” said Secretary Fox during his welcome remarks at the summit. “We’ve brought you all here to see if there’s a way we can develop a plan and pool resources to help with this issue.”**

New Mexico VA Health Care System Director Andrew Welch also attended as a guest speaker, and gave an update about five new transport vans coming on line in the coming months which will be available for transportation throughout the state—including one which is capable of transporting large wheelchairs.

He said once word gets out about the vans, veterans who have not registered with the VA will hopefully do so and receive the health care which they have earned through their service.

**“I believe there are many veterans who do not sign up with the VA because of transportation issues—they know they don’t have a means to get to the VA hospital or to our clinics,” said Director Welch. “These vans will help make these visits much easier.”**

New Mexico Department of Veterans Services Veteran Health Care Coordinator Mitchell Lawrence addressed the need for transportation agencies to make it easier for veterans to transfer between services.

**“The key is to link each other’s services to provide one continuous and seamless trip,” said Mr. Lawrence. “Offering veterans discounts or even free rides can also be a great help. And of course, advertising is key to getting the word out to the veteran community.”**

*(continued)*

He credited some Albuquerque metro area and northern New Mexico area transit systems which allow free inter-system transfers—including to and from the Rail Runner commuter train, which offers free rides for veterans who show a Rail Runner Veterans Card---and the Albuquerque Ride bus system which offers free rides for veterans.

**The summit's afternoon session featured breakout sessions** *(right photo & two photos below)* formed between the various agency representatives, who discussed what each agency offers for veterans, and how they might be able to work together to better serve veterans.

Some of the key points addressed were: The need to have agency websites linked to each other, developing a main veterans transportation website, the need to reach out to older veterans—many of whom are not computer-savvy and therefore not able to access websites, pursuing federal transportation grant funds, and developing a committee or board to help oversee the issue of providing transportation for veterans.



**“This is a tremendous first step,”** said NMDVS Secretary Fox in his closing remarks *(right photo)*.

**“Bringing everyone together is a great start. We will hold more summits on a regular basis, and move forward with developing a program which we can all use to serve the transportation needs of our veterans in the state.”**





## NMDVS Explains *VA Choice Program* at Town Hall Meeting in SW New Mexico



More than sixty veterans attended a VA Choice Program/Legal Aid informational town hall meeting presented by the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services on August 5 in Grant County (southwestern New Mexico/Silver City area).

NMDS Veterans Health Care Coordinator Mitchell Lawrence (*left photo/standing in upper right*), NMDVS Rural Veterans Coordination Program Southwest Region Coordinator Angelina Trujillo (*lower photo/standing behind table*) and New Mexico Legal Aid Staff Attorney Thomas Hare answered questions from veterans about the VA Choice Program and the Legal Aid program.

The program, which Mr. Lawrence told the veterans in attendance, was established by congress and signed into law as the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014, was aimed at improving the access of veterans to medical services by allowing medical care to be rendered by non-Department of Veteran Affairs providers. It allows veterans already enrolled with the VA health care to receive care from providers in their community if they either have been or will be waiting more than 30 days for an appointment at a VA facility, live more than 40 miles away from a VA medical care facility, or face an excessive travel burden to a VA medical facility.

He said that even though Grant County has a VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Silver City, veterans in southwest New Mexico can choose to receive locally-based non-VA facility medical care if they meet the eligibility requirements of the Choice Program. Veterans are urged to call 1-866-606-8198 prior to securing care outside of the VA to ensure they meet eligibility and to avoid being billed for non-authorized services.



**“But these non-VA local providers must establish a contract with Tri-West Healthcare Alliance who administers the Choice Program here in New Mexico” said Lawrence. “If a local non-VA provider has not signed a contract, the veteran runs the risk of the VA not covering the cost of services. Again, the way to ensure you are following the guidelines of the program is to call the Choice Program to confirm you are eligible and the provider in question has signed a contract.”**

Mr. Lawrence also answered questions from veterans about other VA health care questions—and told those who asked questions about medical issues of a more personal nature to contact him at the NMDVS northeast Albuquerque office at [mitchell.lawrence@state.nm.us](mailto:mitchell.lawrence@state.nm.us) or (505) 383-2430. More information can also be found on the VA’s website at [www.va.gov/opa/choiceact](http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact).

# NMVB OC Hosts Summer Business Development Workshops for Entrepreneurial-Minded Veterans



It's been a busy late spring and summer period for the New Mexico Veterans Business Outreach Center (VBOC)—the business development division of the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services.

The VBOC presented *VBOC On the Road* business development workshops in Portales on May 11, Gallup (June 29), Silver City (August 10) (*left photo*), and a *VBOC On the Rez* workshop on August 13 at the Isleta Resort & Casino. These free events—presented along with other partner agencies and organizations—provide valuable information and resources for veterans who would like to start or expand their own small business. Spouses are also invited to attend, and free hot meals are provided for all.

(RIGHT PHOTO): On August 1, Governor Susana Martinez personally congratulated the VBOC team for being named by the U.S. Small Business Administration earlier this year as the nation's top veterans business outreach center. (FROM L to R: NMDVS Secretary Jack Fox, VBOC Veterans Business Advisor Rich Coffel, Governor Martinez, VBOC Director Joseph Long, and VBOC Administrative Assistant Danelle Lucero.)

## VBOC to Present Next Workshop in El Paso, TX



The New Mexico Veterans Business Outreach Center (VBOC), as part of its ongoing outreach throughout the southwest, is presenting its next free business development lunch workshop in El Paso, TX, on September 22 from 11:30am to 1:15pm at the Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce, located at 10 Civic Center Plaza.

Spouses are also invited, and a free hot lunch will be provided for all. Private consultations are also available afterwards.

The workshop is part of the ongoing On the Road series of business development workshops for veterans presented by the New Mexico VBOC. The Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce, the South-West Texas Border Small Business Development Center Network/El Paso Community College, and the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley are joining the effort to present this unique business learning opportunity. To pre-register or more information, contact Andrea Kerr of the Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce at (915) 629-6700 or [www.elpaso.org](http://www.elpaso.org).



# NMVS Busy with Summer Benefits/Resources Outreach; More Scheduled for Fall



**ABOVE & BELOW PHOTOS:** *Operation Veterans Wellness Benefits & Resources Fair on July 30 in Albuquerque. The event was presented by the Gallup Military Support Group Planning Committee—a joint collaboration between the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services/Rural Veterans Coordination Program (RVCP), the Navajo Nation Department of Behavioral Health/Gallup branch, the Navajo Nation Judicial Branch, Diné Hoghaan Bii Development, Inc., the Rio West Mall and the New Mexico Human Services Department/ Office of Peer Recovery and Engagement .*

New Mexico Department of Veterans Services service officers have also been busy—along with the NMDVS Health Care Coordination Division, and the Rural Veterans Coordination Program Division--to present or take part in summer outreach events.

These outreach efforts are part of an ongoing department effort to find and educate veterans about **their earned VA and state veterans' benefits.**

**“According to the latest VA data, there are a little over 170,000 veterans here in New Mexico,”** said NMDVS Secretary Jack Fox. **“These are veterans who have enrolled in the VA. However, we believe there are thousands more who are not enrolled or are aware of their benefits. We want to find these unenrolled veterans—and at the same time make sure enrolled veterans are taking advantage of all of their benefits.”**

The summer outreach events were presented in Senior Centers, benefits fairs, and other events listed below.

Elephant Butte  
Roswell  
Albuquerque  
Gallup  
Dulce  
Albuquerque

*Operation Help Rural Veterans* (Jul. 14)  
NMDVS Benefits Fair (Jul. 23)  
Outreach at Barelvas Senior Center (Jul. 26)  
***Operation Veterans' Wellness*** (Jul. 30)  
Benefits & Resources Fair (Aug. 11)  
Outreach at Bear Canyon Senior Center (Aug. 18)





*The New Mexico Department of Veterans Services-Rural Veterans Coordination Program and American Legion Post 44 presented “Operation Help Rural Veterans”—a benefits and resources fair for veterans on July 14 at American Legion Post 44 in Elephant Butte.*

*NMDVS Las Cruces-based Veterans Service Officer J.R. Turner (in dark clothing lower right) and NMDVS Rural Veterans Coordination Program Southwest Region Coordinator Angelina Trujillo were among the two-dozen representatives from service provider agencies on hand to answer questions about or help veterans with their VA or state benefits*



*The New Mexico Department of Veterans Services presented the Roswell Benefits & Resources Fair on July 30 at the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell.*

*NMDVS Veterans Service Officers Richard Moncrief and Dagmar Youngberg (in red shirt, assisting a veteran) were among the thirty representatives from veterans service organizations on hand to help veterans and answer questions about available veterans benefits and services in Chaves County.*

The following are outreach events scheduled this fall:

Albuquerque	VA Vet Information Fair (Isleta Resort & Casino) 11000 Broadway SE (Sep. 15)(10am-3pm)
Albuquerque	Outreach at Highland Senior Center 131 Monroe St. NE (Sep. 19)(10am-2pm)
Albuquerque	<i>University of New Mexico Vet Sound Off Day</i> SUB Ballroom (Sep. 21)(10am-4pm)
T or C	Outreach at State Veterans Home 992 South Broadway (Sep. 21) (10a-3p)
Gallup	2 <sup>nd</sup> Annual Gallup Veterans Summit Red Rock Park (Oct. 12 & 13)(8am-5pm)
Albuquerque	Outreach at Los Volcanes Senior Center 6500 Los Volcanes Rd. NW (Oct. 19)(10am-2pm)
Las Cruces	Veterans Information Fair/Sunland Park Racetrack & Casino 1200 Futurity Drive/Sunland (Nov. 10)(9am-1pm)
Albuquerque	West Side Benefits & Resources Fair/Paradise Hills Community Center 5901 Paradise Hills Blvd. NW Nov. 17)(10am-2pm)

# NMDVS Invited to Provide Benefits Assistance at Free Legal Advice Consultation Clinics



*NMDVS Director of Field Operations Ken Adair (gray shirt, behind table) helped veterans with their VA or state veterans issues at the August 24 “Law-la-Palooza” event in Albuquerque.*

NMDVS Albuquerque-based Veterans Service Officer Gordon Schei offered assistance for veterans who attended free Civil Legal Advice Clinic for Veterans on August 9 and September 13 in Albuquerque which were presented by the New Mexico VA Health Care System and the State Bar of New Mexico/Young Lawyers Division.

Volunteer attorneys provided free legal advice on a first-come, first-served basis for non-criminal issues involving family law, divorce/child support cases, consumer rights complaints, bankruptcies, disputes between landlords and tenants, foreclosures, employment disputes, and other civil matters.

Mr. Schei staffed a table to help veterans seeking help or needing information about state veterans or VA benefits—and enrolled those who were not previously enrolled in the VA health care program.

NMDVS Director of Field Services Ken Adair provided the same assistance at *Law-la-Palooza 2016*, a free general-public legal advice clinic on August 25 in Albuquerque which was presented by

the Second Judicial District Court Pro Bono Committee and the New Mexico Legal Aid Volunteer Attorney Program.

**“We really appreciate the opportunity to be a part of these important events,” said Mr. Adair. “These were fantastic opportunities for veterans to receive free legal advice—which we all know can be expensive. And they were great opportunities for our agency to reach out to veterans who may not have been aware of their veterans’ benefits—or were aware that we are here to help file for those benefits.”**

## Veterans Day Events Inquiry

**The New Mexico Department of Veterans is in the process of compiling our department’s annual Veterans Day Activities List. Please e-mail NMDVS Public Information Officer Ray Seva information about Veterans’ Day ceremonies and activities in your area. This information will be forwarded to the statewide media for inclusion in their Veterans Day calendars of events. Ray’s e-mail address is [ray.seva@state.nm.us](mailto:ray.seva@state.nm.us)**

Please include the following in your response:

- City
- Venue
- time of event
- address of venue-nature of event (i.e. parade/ceremony/concert/BBQ, etc.)
- sponsor of event (i.e. VFW/American Legion Chapter, city of, Elks Lodge, etc.)
- point of contact (POC)
- POC’s phone number and Email**

Thank you very much for your assistance.



## Bataan Defender Ernest Montoya Passes Away in Albuquerque



*Ernest Montoya*

Former World War II Prisoner of War and Bataan Defender Ernest Montoya passed away on July 29 in Albuquerque. He was 97 years old.

**The Albuquerque native was a member of the New Mexico National Guard's famed 200<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery Unit** which was in the Philippines when Japan launched a surprise attack the Philippines on December 8, 1941—just hours after it attacked the U.S. Navy base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. He and 1,800 other New Mexico Guardsmen were in the middle of what was supposed to be a year-long training exercise.

The New Mexicans, along with 75,000 other American and Philippine forces, were ordered by Allied Command to surrender to the much larger Japanese occupation forces on April 9, 1942 after a spirited four-month defense. Mr. Montoya then spent 3-1/2 years in brutal prison and slave-labor camps in the Philippines and Manchuria before being freed when Japan surrendered on September 2, 1945—and thus ending the war. After his return home to New Mexico, he married, started a family, and had a long career in the private sector.

Mr. Montoya remained active in veterans organizations and causes throughout his post-service life. He **was a fixture at the city of Albuquerque's annual Bataan Memorial Day Ceremony to commemorate the April 2 surrender date—taking part in this year's ceremonial raising of a white flag.**

New Mexico Department of Veterans Services Secretary Jack Fox presented a state flag and condolence letter on behalf of Governor Susana Martinez to Mr. Montoya's family members when he was buried with full military honors on August 5 at the Santa Fe National Cemetery. His passing leaves fourteen remaining members of the **1,800 New Mexico National Guard's 200<sup>th</sup> and 515<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery Unit** members who were imprisoned or enslaved after the 1942 surrender to Japan.



**LEFT PHOTO:** *Former World War II Prisoner of War and Bataan Defender Ernest Montoya (front row, in middle wearing green hat) attended this year's Bataan Memorial Day Ceremony observed on April 2 in Albuquerque as a VIP guest. Also attending were fellow Bataan Defenders Atilano David (lower left, in brown jacket) and William Overmeir (back row, in middle wearing blue hat).*

**RIGHT PHOTO:** *Mr. Montoya (middle, behind white flag) and Mr. Overmeir took part in the ceremonial raising of the White Flag of Surrender at the April 2 Bataan Memorial Day ceremony in Albuquerque.*



## *Women Veterans of New Mexico Celebrates Ten Years of Service for Women Veterans*



**The veterans' service organization** *Women Veterans of New Mexico* celebrated its tenth anniversary of its founding at a ceremony on August 27 in Albuquerque. New Mexico Department of Veterans Services (NMDVS) Deputy Secretary Alan Martinez and NMDVS Women Veterans Program Coordinator Melanie Suazo were among the dignitaries on hand to celebrate the milestone. The non-profit organization serves as an advocate for women in New Mexico who have served or are currently serving in the United States Armed Forces—often partnering with the NMDVS at many of its outreach events.

**LEFT PHOTO:** *Women Veterans of New Mexico presented certificates of Appreciation to several groups and individuals for their help in assisting the organization's mission in helping women veterans throughout the state. From L to R: Women Veterans of New Mexico Board Member Sharon Lester, Horses for Heroes-Cowboy Up Chief Administrator/Certified Riding Instructor Nancy DeSantis, NMDVS Deputy Secretary Alan Martinez, New Mexico VA Health Care System Director Andrew Welch, Women Veterans of New Mexico President Pat Gaston, City of Albuquerque Veterans' Liaison Roger Newall, New Mexico Veterans Advisory Board Member Kristin Barden, and Major Supporter/Contributor of Women Veterans of New Mexico Kyle Thompson.*

**RIGHT PHOTO:** *New Mexico Department of Veterans' Services Women Veterans Program Coordinator Melanie Suazo (right) and Women Veterans of New Mexico Board Member Isabelle Archibeque.*

### NMDVS Women Veterans Program Coordinator

The New Mexico Department of Veterans Services created its Women Veterans Program Division to **improve the awareness of women veterans about their eligibility for veterans' benefits.**

**Program Coordinator Melanie Suazo works with veterans' groups throughout the state to accomplish this goal—and to also assist women veterans with any help they need in filing for or utilizing VA, state, or local benefits and services available to them.**

**For more information and assistance with women veteran's issues, please contact Women Veterans Program Coordinator Melanie Suazo at [MelanieA.suazo@state.nm.us](mailto:MelanieA.suazo@state.nm.us)**

# Ground Broken For Women Veterans Monument in Las Cruces



Ground was broken for a Women Veterans Monument on September 10 in Las Cruces at Veterans Memorial Park.

New Mexico Department of Veterans Services Secretary Jack Fox, Women Veterans Program Coordinator Melanie Suazo, and Las Cruces-based Veterans Service Officer J.R. Turner were among the dignitaries joining Mayor Ken Miyagishima and other local leaders for the **ceremonial groundbreaking of the states' first** monument honoring women veterans.

**“This is a long overdue memorial that will honor the service and sacrifice of women who have served our nation,”** said Secretary Fox in his remarks at the ceremony. **“Women are and will continue to serve a major role in the United States Armed Forces—the finest force the world has ever seen.”**

Several members of the United Military Women of the South West—a service organization bases in Las Cruces—were also in attendance. The group was one of the driving forces in calling for a monument to honor women veterans.

The monument is being built just south of the Garrison flag pole (*above photo*). The \$406,500 construction cost was made possible through capital appropriation funding from the New Mexico Legislature. It will feature life-size bronze sculptures of servicewomen representing all military branches and eras during which they served in the military. Two prefabricated shade structures will frame the monument and cultured stone will clad the walls. The expected finish date is sometime late next spring.



**LEFT TO RIGHT:** *New Mexico Department of Veterans Services Veterans Service Officer J.R. Turner, Cabinet Secretary Jack Fox, Women Veterans Program Coordinator Melanie Suazo, and Las Cruces Mayor Ken Miyagishima attended the groundbreaking ceremony of the Women Veterans Monument in Las Cruces on September 10.*



*Among the dignitaries turning the first shovelfuls of dirt were NMDVS Secretary Jack Fox (red shirt), White Sands Missile Range Commanding General BG Eric Sanchez (white shirt/black beret), United Military Women of the South West Past President Carol Gaines (lower left corner), UMWSW President Karen Woods (lower right corner, w/shovel), and 101-year old WWII Army Veteran Betty Somppi (in blue).*



# Navy Week, Naturalization Citizenship Ceremony Highlight *Military & Veterans Day at the State Fair*

Military veterans, retirees, Guard/Reserve, and active-duty personnel enjoyed a “free admission” day at the New Mexico State Fair on September 13 for Military and Veterans’ Appreciation Day at the New Mexico State Fair. The annual day at the fair is presented by the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services, the New Mexico National Guard, and the New Mexico State Fair to honor and thank the men and women of the United States Armed Forces.

All current and former military personnel showing their DD-214, VA Health Card, veterans-designation driver’s license, retiree card or active-duty DoD card received free admission to the fair. Nearly three dozen veterans’ service agencies and organizations set up informational and interactive exhibits along “Main Street” for the veterans, their families and all fair-goers to stop by to gather information or get a “hands-on” military experience.

At the traditional 11am ceremony on the Main Stage, New Mexico Department of Veterans’ Services Secretary Jack Fox (*right photo*) thanked veterans, service men and women for serving our country, saying “without your sacrifice, we would not be able to enjoy this day at the fair—or any of our freedoms we enjoy as Americans.”



The ceremony also celebrated Navy Week in Albuquerque—one of fifteen designated *Navy Week* cities for 2016. It is coordinated by the Navy Office of Community Outreach (NAVCO) to provide Americans an opportunity to learn about the Navy, its service members, and their importance to national security and prosperity. It is the Navy’s flagship outreach effort into areas without a significant Navy presence.

The ceremony also featured an emotional reading by members of the American Gold Star Mothers, Inc./ New Mexico Chapter of the names of the 87 New Mexican service members killed in action since the Global War on Terror commenced shortly after the 2001 9/11 Terrorist Attacks (*bottom left photo*). It concluded with a Naturalization Ceremony for New Mexico Army National Guard veteran SGT Francisco Avina Lopez (*bottom right photo, at left*). The native of Mexico realized a longtime dream of becoming a naturalized American citizen by taking the Oath of American Citizenship administered by an official from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Department.



# NMDVS Staffers Honored at Agency Conference

New Mexico Department of Veterans Services Benefits Administrative Assistant Rebecca Tapia (bottom left photo) and Administrative Accounts Manager Terrie Romero (center photo) were honored by NMDVS Secretary Jack Fox and Deputy Secretary Alan Martinez for their hard work in helping the agency deal with budgetary and benefits issues over the summer. Also, NMDVS Event Coordinator Josetta Rodriguez (right photo) was honored for her ten years of hard work at the agency. The employees were feted during a break at an agency training conference in Albuquerque on September 9 which provided updates on veterans' issues, agency policies and procedures, and other administrative matters.

"I wish everyone in the state knew just how hard-working the entire staff is here at the department," said NMDVS Secretary Jack Fox. "We cannot function as an agency without their dedication to helping veterans and their families. "I will be going around to our other offices, to make sure the staff knows just how much I really appreciate the work they do."



## Former American Legion State Commander Elected to National Leadership Post



*Former American Legion State Commander Paul Espinoza (left) is congratulated by New Mexico Department of Veterans Services Deputy Secretary Alan Martinez for his election as a an American Legion National Vice Commander.*

Former American Legion State Commander Paul L. Espinoza has been elected as a National Vice Commander of the 2.2 million-member American Legion. He was one of 12 national officers elected during the organization's national convention on September 1<sup>st</sup>.

**The Albuquerque Native served four years in the Army's 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division and another 18-years with the New Mexico National Guard, and is an Iraq War veteran. He is also a retired U.S. Postal Service Letter Carrier, and a longtime member of American Legion Post 13 in Albuquerque.**

New Mexico Department of Veterans Services Secretary Jack Fox praised the news, saying the department has benefitted from **Commander Espinoza's leadership when working with the Legion.**

**"This is a well-deserved honor for someone who has tirelessly worked to serve New Mexico's veterans and their families," said Secretary Jack Fox. "We look forward to continue working with Paul now on the national level. I know he will excel in his new position."**



## Vietnam War Veterans to be Honored at 50th Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony in Las Vegas, NM



The 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War will be commemorated at a special 10 a.m. ceremony on September 30 in Las Vegas, New Mexico, at Veterans Park, located at the intersection of Mills Ave. and Fourth Street across from the Gene Torres Golf Course.

A nationwide initiative was issued by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2008 **to honor America's Vietnam War veterans, and to also commemorate the 50th anniversary of our country's involvement in the war which lasted from November, 1955, to May 15, 1975.** A 2012 Presidential Proclamation extended the commemoration through Veterans Day, 2025.

**New Mexico Department of Veterans' Services State Cemetery Program Director and Vietnam War veteran Thomas Wagner is serving as the State Chairman of New Mexico's Vietnam War 50th Commemoration ceremony—which is being presented by the New Mexico Department of Veterans' Services, the American Legion Riders Chapter 26, the Santa Fe National Cemetery, the Santa Fe Vet Center, the New Mexico State Council of the Vietnam Veterans of America, and Vietnam Veterans of America Northern New Mexico Chapter 996.**

The 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War Commemoration recognizes and honors those who served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces while the U.S. was involved in Vietnam. VA data indicates more than nine million Americans served in the military during this war era.

The commemorative effort makes no distinction between veterans who served in-country, in-theater, or were stationed elsewhere during the Vietnam War era. All answered the call of duty. Veterans from this era attending the ceremony will be presented with a certificate of appreciation for their service during the war, and also a special 50th Anniversary Commemorative Pin. The first commemoration ceremony in the state was presented on June 18 in Santa Fe. In an effort to reach as many Vietnam War-era veterans as possible, ceremonies in other states are being planned by the NMDVS over the next couple of years.

For more information, contact NMDVS Event Coordinator Josetta Rodriguez at [josetta.rodriguez@state.nm.us](mailto:josetta.rodriguez@state.nm.us).

*(photos below are from the June 18 Vietnam War 50th Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony in Santa Fe)*



## Results Released from VA Health Care System Survey



*VA Secretary  
Robert A. McDonald*

*For more news from the  
VA and for benefits  
information, visit  
[www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)*

*The VA has a regional  
office in Albuquerque.  
For more information:  
[www.benefits.va.gov/  
albuquerque](http://www.benefits.va.gov/albuquerque)*

*For information about  
VA health care, visit the  
website of the New  
Mexico VA Health Care  
System at:  
[www.albuquerque.va.gov](http://www.albuquerque.va.gov)*

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has released results of The Joint Commission Special Focused Surveys on VA health care facilities. The VA invited The Joint Commission to conduct unannounced, focused surveys at 139 medical facilities and 47 community-based outpatient clinics across the country to measure progress on VA access to care, quality improvements and diffusion of best practices across the system. The surveys also assessed barriers that may stand in the way of providing timely care to veterans. Results indicate the VA has made significant progress since The Joint Commission began its surveys two years ago.

**“The Joint Commission is one of the most widely-respected health care organizations in the industry,” said VA Under Secretary for Health Dr. David J. Shulkin. “Their analysis shows that the VA as national healthcare leader is making progress in improving the care we provide to our veterans. This affirms our commitment to providing both excellent health care and an exceptional experience of care to all veterans served.”**

The Joint Commission assessed processes related to timely access to care; processes that may potentially indicate delays in care and diagnosis; processes related to patient flow and coordination of care; infection prevention and control; the environment of care; and organizational leadership and culture. For the survey, the VA’s Veterans Health Administration provided organization-specific data addressing performance in the key areas targeted for review. This data allowed surveyors to focus on areas of greatest risk for each organization and to validate whether the VA-provided data reflected observed practice. The survey provided an opportunity to recognize patterns across the organization, to make an assessment about the system as a whole and identify solutions to system-wide issues that are best addressed through internal processes.

**“We commend the VA for being proactive by requesting The Joint Commission to conduct unannounced site visits at all their medical centers to review and evaluate their efforts to improve access and quality of care,” said Dr. Mark Chassin, President and CEO of The Joint Commission. “The VA was the first system ever to request an assessment with an important focus on access so that deficiencies could be identified and rapidly addressed. The Joint Commission will track and report on the extent to which improvements were sustained, when the same facilities undergo their triennial accreditation surveys. To date, results from 57 hospitals that have undergone full accreditation are promising. We are pleased with the VA’s ongoing commitment to quality improvement and patient safety.”**

**Among the survey’s top findings:**

*(continued)*



Improvement efforts that were undertaken include leadership teams utilizing data to better understand where particular bottlenecks were and taking corrective actions. As the Joint Commission continues the regularly scheduled triennial surveys of VHA facilities after the special surveys were completed, the findings are encouraging. For example, as of April 1, 2016, 57 facilities have undergone follow-up surveys. Of these 57 sites, only one facility was found to have a repeat requirement for improvement (issue) related to patient access. Staffing continued to be a challenge in this area, but as new staff was hired, the wait times for appointments were more effectively addressed.

Choice Act: Early discussions with veterans indicated a strong preference, and even a loyalty, for **their “own” VHA organization, even if it would mean waiting longer to be seen. VHA facilities and** veterans also report that many times appointments in the community could not be made any earlier than would have been possible inside the VA.

### Efforts to Improve Veterans Access to Care

- **In 2014, the VA introduced MyVA.** MyVA is the largest transformation in the history of VA, which **focuses on the needs of veterans. As part of that transformation, in 2016, the VA’s Veterans Health Administration** established and launched *MyVA Access*. *MyVA Access* also puts veterans more in control of how they receive their health care.
- **The VA is moving to incorporate same-day access** to primary care and mental health services for Veterans when it is medically necessary. At present, 39 VA facilities offer same-day appointments.
- **A new smart phone app called the Veteran Appointment Request App has been developed and is** currently being piloted. This app allows veterans to view, schedule and cancel primary care and mental health appointments as well as track the status of the appointment request and review upcoming appointments. The VA expects to make the app available to all veterans by early 2017.
- **Website enhancements are underway that will allow veterans to check wait times in real time** wherever they live – this includes a new, easy-to-use scheduling software program. The new **program is being piloted and is expected to reduce scheduling errors and enhance the VA’s ability** to measure and track supply, demand and usage.
- **Nationally, the VA completed more than 57.85 million appointments from July 1, 2015 through** June 30, 2016. This represents an increase of 1.1 million more appointments than were completed during the same time period in 2014/2015.
- **From Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 to FY 2015, Community Care appointments increased approximately 20** percent from 17.7 million in FY 2014 to 21.3 million in FY 2015.
- **In FY 2015, the VA activated 2.2 million square feet of space for clinical, mental health, long-term** care, and associated support facilities to care for veterans.
- **The VA held two Access Stand Downs, focusing on patients with the most urgent health care needs** first. During a nationwide Access Stand Down that took place on February 27, 2016, the one-day event resulted in the VA reviewing the records of more than 80,000 veterans to get those waiting for urgent care off wait lists; 93 percent of veterans waiting for urgent care were contacted, with many receiving earlier appointments.
- **The VA increased its total clinical work (direct patient care) by 11 percent over the last two years as** measured by private sector standards (relative value units). This increase translates to roughly 7.4 million additional provider hours of care for our veterans.

(continued)

- **The VA is also working to increase clinical staff, add space and locations in areas where demand is increasing and extending clinic hours into nights and weekends, all of which have helped increase access to care even as demand for services increases.**
- **In FY 2015, 677,000 Veterans completed more than 2 million telehealth visits, providing enhanced access to care.**

The Joint Commission, an independent, not-for-profit organization, accredits and certifies nearly 21,000 **health care facilities and programs in the United States. The VA's Veterans Health Administration is the largest integrated health care system in the nation, caring for 9 million veterans.**

## Veterans Needing Audiology and Optometry Appointments Will Soon Be Able to Directly Schedule

**Veterans receiving care at Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Medical Centers will now be able to schedule routine ear and eye appointments at local VA Audiology and Optometry clinics without a primary care referral – a move that eliminates multiple steps and gets veterans into appointments quicker.**

Before now, veterans seeking appointments with audiologists or optometrists had to first make an appointment with a primary care physician for a referral for a routine clinic consult visit. A clinic representative would contact the patient to set up the consult appointment, which could result in a **several weeks'**-long lag between the appointment and when the veteran was actually seen. The new process, the Audiology and Optometry Direct Scheduling Initiative, which began as a successful pilot at three sites in 2015, is being expanded to all VA Medical Centers.

**"The Audiology and Optometry Direct Scheduling Initiative allows veterans who need eye and ear care to be seen sooner," said VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald. "It also has the benefit of freeing up primary care physicians so access to primary care improves for other veterans as well. This kind of process improvement is exactly the type of innovation we expected when we launched MyVA in 2014. In the end, we changed a VA process by considering the needs of our veterans, a change that allows for more timely care and an improved veteran experience."**

The Audiology and Optometry Direct Scheduling Initiative is one of a number of efforts underway at the **VA to improve Veterans' access to care and wait times.**

**"We want our veterans and those who care for them to know that we are doing everything that we can to improve their experience with the VA and to provide the care our veterans deserve in a thoughtful and timely way," said VA Under Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin. "We have made progress, but know there is more work to be done. This Audiology and Optometry Direct Scheduling Initiative is one of many initiatives underway to improve Veterans access to care."**

The Audiology and Optometry Direct Scheduling Initiative is expected to be fully operational within all VA Medical Centers by the end of 2016.





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# Work & Wellbeing



## September: Suicide Prevention Month

When it comes to our personal wellbeing, we cannot be healthy if we are mentally unhealthy. Today, one in five people struggles with a mental illness. As the third leading cause of death among young people, suicide is often the result of mental health conditions that affect people when they are most vulnerable. However, with the right treatment, people who suffer from mental illness can learn to manage the stresses of life, work productively, and make meaningful contributions to society.

This month, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) aims to raise awareness and promotes resources about suicide prevention. These issues are important all year round, but NAMI highlights them this month to encourage people to come together for honest discussions about mental health conditions and suicide in our communities.

For more information, visit [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org).

## Work & Wellbeing

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## How Much Should You Exercise?

We hear it all the time: Exercise and a healthy diet are critical elements for optimum health and longevity. But how much exercise do you really need? The recommendations can be confusing. As part of its challenge to help individuals commit to regular physical activity and healthy eating, *Let's Move!*, a comprehensive initiative launched by First Lady Michelle Obama, is geared toward people of all ages who want to set themselves on the road to a healthier life through positive changes to physical activity and eating behaviors. Let's Move recommends:

Age	Activity Minutes	Frequency
Kids and Teens <i>Anyone between 6-17 years</i>	60 minutes a day OR 11,000 – 13,000 steps per day	5 days a week
Adults <i>Anyone 18 and older</i>	30 minutes a day OR 8,500 steps per day	5 days a week

A new report from researchers at the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation also touts the long-term benefits of getting plenty of exercise. According to an article in HealthDay News, people with high levels of weekly physical activity had a lower risk of breast cancer, colon cancer, diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

To stay physically active as you age, consider activities like yoga, climbing stairs, vacuuming, gardening, running, walking or cycling. In addition, ballroom dancing has not only shown to enhance quality of life, but may lower the risk of cognitive decline.

## September Health Observances

[National Alcohol & Drug Addiction](#)

[Recovery Month](#)

[National Cholesterol Education Month](#)

[National Ballroom Dance Week](#)

[Sept. 16-25](#)

[Suicide Prevention Month](#)

[Healthy Aging Month](#)

[National Childhood Obesity Awareness](#)

[National Yoga Month](#)





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## Work & Wellbeing

### Tips for Reducing Your Cholesterol



For many of us, the onset of fall means health fairs and biometric screenings. These events typically include cholesterol screenings as an indicator of heart health. Why? Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance your body needs, but when you have too much in your blood, it can form blockages in your arteries. Over time, high LDL “bad” cholesterol can lead to heart disease, heart attack and stroke. High cholesterol does not have symptoms, so many people don’t know if they are at risk for heart disease without screening. That’s why the National Cholesterol Education Program recommends that adults aged 20 years or older have their cholesterol checked every five years.



While heredity can play a part in how much cholesterol your body makes, you do have some control. Following these guidelines can help you keep your cholesterol at a healthy level.

**Eat a Healthy Diet** – Eating polyunsaturated fats and fiber can help lower cholesterol. Avoid saturated fats and trans fats, which can raise cholesterol levels.

**Maintain a Healthy Weight**— Losing weight may help lower your triglyceride levels and raise your HDL.

**Exercise Regularly**— Regular exercise can lower LDL cholesterol somewhat and raise HDL cholesterol. You should try to be physically active for 30 minutes on most days.

**Don’t Smoke** – If you smoke, quit as soon as possible.

*Sources: Cleveland Clinic, Centers for Disease Control*

### How to Get a Day’s Worth of Fruits AND Veggies



*Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture*



It’s easy for most of us to get enough fruit in our diets. Add bananas, berries, or dried fruit to breakfast cereal, slice a juicy melon for dessert, and crunch on an apple for a quick snack and you’ll probably meet the daily nutritional guidelines of two cups. Getting enough vegetables can be more challenging, however. Here are some easy ways to work the recommended 2½ cups into your daily menu:

- Start the day with ½ cup of vegetable juice.
- Enjoy a spinach salad or other main dish salad for lunch.
- Add vegetables instead of meat to pasta dishes, pizzas, soups and stews.
- Spoon salsa onto a baked potato.
- Keep bags of pre-cut, pre-washed carrots, snap peas and cherry tomatoes on hand for quick snacking.
- Make a vegetable stir-fry with small amounts of chicken, lean beef or fish.
- Whip up some refreshing fruit and vegetable smoothies.



“The part can never be well unless the whole is well.”

~Plato



# NMDVS FIELD OFFICES

There New Mexico Department of Veterans' Services field offices throughout the state to assist veterans and their eligible dependents with filing for VA and state veterans' benefits. Each office is managed by a nationally-certified Veterans' Service Officer who is committed to helping fellow veterans with filing for their VA and state veterans' benefits.

Below are the NMDVS field offices (LISTED IN ALL CAPITAL LETTER HEADINGS) and outreach locations (shown in lower-case italicized headings with an asterisk\*). Please contact your nearest office to set up an appointment. For additional information, you can also contact NMDVS Field Services Director Ken Adair at (505) 383-2415 or [kenneth.adair@state.nm.us](mailto:kenneth.adair@state.nm.us).

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