



The Guardian

The monthly newsletter of the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services

January, 2021

The New Mexico Department of Veterans Services (DVS) is continuing to assist veterans and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All 18 DVS certified Veterans Service Officers are working remotely to help veterans with filing VA claims, applying for state veterans benefits, or with any other problems facing a veteran. If we can't solve an issue, we will refer you to one of our partner agencies.

For phone assistance:
(505) 383-2400

For Email assistance:
nmdvs.info@state.nm.us

DVS website for
more information:
www.nmdvs.org

Operation Holiday Cheer Sends Hundreds of Holiday Cards to the State Veterans Home



A DVS-led initiative asking New Mexicans to send holiday cards to residents and staff of the New Mexico Veterans Home in Truth or Consequences was, in the words of home officials, “a resounding success!”

Operation Holiday Cheer was started in conjunction with the Department of Aging and Long Term Care Services to send holiday greetings to the residents, and show our appreciation to the staff for their hard work during the pandemic.



Cards needed only to be addressed with “Dear Veteran” or “Dear Veterans Home Staff Member” and sent directly to the home.

According to recreation staff worker Kathleen Martinez, most cards also included handwritten messages of appreciation for military service or care provided for residents.

She said the number of cards received hasn't been determined, but about 250-300 a day were coming in.

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“Staff initially began to distribute cards the same day they came in. But then the quantity increased, and began to exponentially snowball!” said Ms. Martinez. “When the residents read or had the cards read to them, many became emotional. The heartfelt gesture and outpouring of love in each card was evident...and so very touching ...and sincerely appreciated by each person who received a card.”

Residents received about 25 cards each. The home received about 250 caregiver cards, which were then put on display at nurses' stations and other critical areas so that all shift staff could read and enjoy them. DVS looks forward to making this an annual event.

American Legion Delivers Gifts to Residents of the New Mexico State Veterans Home

American Legion Post 13, Post 49, and other members from the American Legion Department of New Mexico delivered more than \$1,800 of “comfort items” on December 17 to the New Mexico State Veterans Home.

The money was raised through an American Legion fundraising effort—allowing members to purchase games and arts & crafts supplies for the home’s 100 residents.



2020 Wreaths Across America Commemorated in Virtual and Closed Ceremonies



DVS Secretary-Designate Sonya L. Smith took part in a virtual/online Wreaths Across America ceremony on December 19 to honor deceased veterans buried at the Santa Fe National Cemetery.

The annual ceremony, as with ceremonies across the nation, was closed to the public due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Secretary-Designate Smith was among six speakers who videotaped a message honoring veterans laid to rest at the Santa Fe National Cemetery.

“Although we are not able to be together this year to lay wreaths at the Santa Fe National Cemetery, it does not diminish our remembrance of, and gratitude for, our departed veterans this holiday season,” said Secretary-Designate Smith in her videotaped message.

“Today, through this ‘virtual’ gathering, we will still remember that Americans are able to celebrate the holiday season...to spend time with family and loved ones...because of the service and sacrifice of the men and women who have served in the United States Armed Forces.”



“Bandits” 4-H Club



Blue Star Mothers of Northern NM



New Mexico State Police

A limited number of members from local service organizations placed wreaths at selected gravesites.

Everyone wore mandated safety masks and observed social distancing spacing while placing the wreaths.



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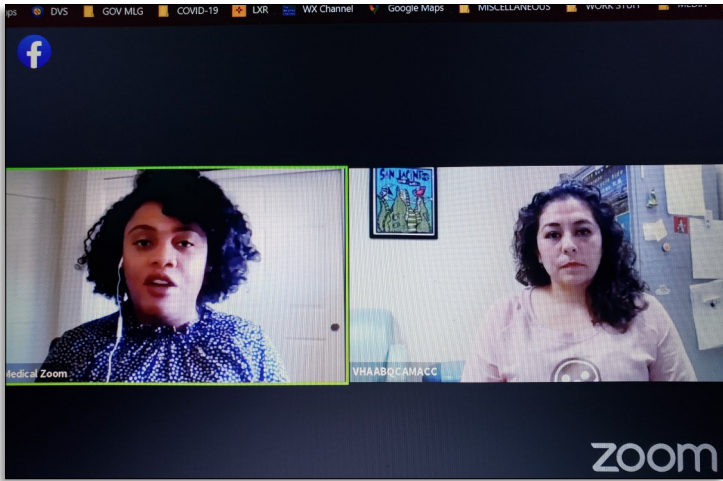


At the DVS-managed Ft. Stanton State Veterans Cemetery (photos on this page), volunteer ushers from the Spencer Theater in Ruidoso laid wreaths at both the main veterans' cemetery and (upper left photo) the "old" Merchant Marine & Military Cemetery.



The Wreaths Across America Project allows anyone in the country to purchase a wreath to honor those who have served our country but are no longer with us to celebrate the holiday season. For more information about the program, go to <https://www.wreathscrossamerica.org>.

Recap of DVS-Hosted Suicide Awareness & Prevention “Live” Online Discussion on Dec. 17



DVS hosted a live Facebook Veteran Suicide Awareness & Prevention discussion on December 17 featuring DVS Healthcare Division Director Jemia Warner (*left photo, left square*) and New Mexico VA Health Care System (NMVAHCS) Suicide Case Prevention Manager Christina Camacho. (*right square*)

Among the main topics discussed were some possible causes of suicidal thoughts, and signs that someone may be on the verge of thinking about taking their own life. This portion of the discussion can be found at the 3:20 mark.

The discussion also covered possible stress triggers—and innovative suggestions someone can do if they are having stressful thoughts or are experiencing stressful situations. This can be found at the 23:00 mark.

“We are in the middle of a global pandemic,” said DVS Healthcare Division Director Warner, in reference to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which has increased the stress levels of Americans nationwide. “Even though the holidays doesn’t necessarily mean that there will be an increase in suicide cases, there can be an increase in loneliness and hopelessness—especially during this pandemic right now.”

Director Warner said suicide awareness and prevention is something that actually should be talked about always, not just during the holidays. NMVAHCS Case Manager Camacho mentioned the importance of family, friends and others recognizing possible signs of trouble.

“Continuing reaching out, and if you are there for a veteran, continue being there for them,” she said. “Everybody needs that ‘reach-out’ person—and just to know that someone is there for them can really go a long way.”

The discussion was videotaped and can be viewed on the DVS website at www.nmdvs.org.

For immediate help, veterans or family or friends of a suicidal veteran should contact the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:
1-(855) 662-7474.

For guidance on how to deal with a troubled veteran, there the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Coaching Into Care hotline: 1-(888) 823-7458.

For more information about local long-term care, please contact DVS at www.nmdvs.healthcare@state.nm.us

Update on COVID-19 Vaccine Program in New Mexico

The New Mexico Department of Health (DOH) has launched a website that enables New Mexicans to be notified when they qualify for a COVID-19 vaccine. That website is: cvvaccine.nmhealth.org.



After logging on to the website, you'll be asked to submit basic contact information, including your employment category and about any medical conditions. DOH will then send you a notification when a vaccine will be available for you. You'll be able to schedule your vaccination at a provider near you. On the day of your appointment, you'll fill out a medical questionnaire about your current health.

Though the vaccinations are free, you'll be asked for insurance information to help support the cost of the vaccination program—though if you don't have insurance, you'll still be able to receive a free vaccination once you've been notified of your appointment.

The state started Phase IA of offering vaccines with frontline health care workers, and staff and residents of long-term care facilities. Phase IB was launched this month to expand eligibility to include: Anyone over the age of 75, anyone over the age of 16 who is at greater risk of COVID-19 complications. Also included are front-line essential workers unable to work remotely, such as those who work in early & K-12 education, caregiving, grocery stores/food service/agriculture, public transit, critical manufacturing, public health, public safety, mortuaries, indigent care, and non-hospital laboratories.

This phase is scheduled to last into the spring. After that, everyone over the age of 60, and other essential workers — including members of the media, veterinarians and those working in public utility functions — will be included. The last phase, scheduled for sometime in the summer, will cover all members of the general public.

The state also launched a hotline for questions or help with the registration process - including New Mexicans who do not have internet access: 1-(855) 600-3453, press option 0 for vaccine questions, or option 4 for tech support. For more information about COVID-19 here in New Mexico, go to the DOH website: <https://cv.nmhealth.org/covid-vaccine/>

Update From the New Mexico VA Health Care System

(the following information is provided courtesy of the NMVAHCS)

New Mexico VA Health Care System (NMVAHCS) is working with the VA in Washington on the VA's vaccine program for veterans here in New Mexico.

Veterans will be contacted directly when they can receive the vaccine. To sign up for info: <https://bit.ly/3bnccr9>

When vaccines become available, the NMVAHCS will offer free vaccines to all Veterans receiving VA health care who want one. This link offers additional information: <https://www.va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine/#who-will-get-a-covid-19-vaccine>

Dept. of Game & Fish Offers Special Disabled Veteran Hunting/Fishing Licenses

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (DGF) is reminding service-connected disabled veterans about their eligibility to apply for reduced-fee hunting and fishing licenses—including a free lifetime small-game and fishing license for New Mexico resident veterans rated 100% service-connected disabled.

Nonresident disabled active-duty service members, veteran licenses for rehabilitation enrollees, nonresident active-duty personnel, or veterans who are undergoing a rehabilitation program involving hunting are eligible for a resident fee for deer, elk, javelina, oryx, pronghorn, and turkey licenses. The rehabilitation program must be sponsored by the federal government, or a nonprofit organization authorized by the federal government, and must be under the direction of a military or VA federal rehabilitation center. This benefit is not available through the draw. Proof of eligibility must be provided. This benefit is available only through the DGF Santa Fe office.



DGF is also reminding hunters about upcoming hunting and military “draw” deadlines:

- The turkey and bear application deadline is February 10
- Big game draw deadline on March 17

For upcoming military draws, it is important that veterans register and turn in the required paperwork as soon as possible—preferably by March 12--to allow DGF time to get files updated.

DGF has released its 2021 Rules & Information Booklet, which can be found online at: <http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us/home/publications/>

For additional information:

<http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us/download/nmdgf-events/2021-big-game-draw-applications-all-you-want-to-know.pdf>

<http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us/hunting/licenses-and-permits/exceptions-license-information/>

Five Questions For...



Dr. Tracie Collins
Cabinet Secretary-Designate
 New Mexico Department of Health



By: Sonya L. Smith
 Cabinet Secretary-Designate
 New Mexico Department of Veterans Services

Prior to her appointment in December 2020, Tracie Collins, MD, MPH, MHCDS, served as Dean, College of Population Health, at the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center since July 2019. Dr. Collins completed an internal medicine residency at the University of Oklahoma, Tulsa, followed by a fellowship in general internal medicine at Harvard Medical School and a Master of Public Health at Harvard School of Public Health. Dr. Collins joined the Baylor College of Medicine faculty in Houston, where she conducted studies of patients in the Veterans Affairs health system suffering from peripheral artery disease (PAD). The circulatory disorder has become a longstanding research interest for Dr. Collins, which has led to her completing several trials focused on the efficacy of texting and smartphone applications to promote physical activity among diverse populations including African Americans and Latinos with PAD, obesity, and other health risk factors.

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- 1. You have taken the reins of the New Mexico Department of Health at a very challenging time. We know that battling the COVID-19 pandemic is an obvious priority. When the time is right, what other areas will you be placing your focus?** *I will focus on health inequities and drivers of poor health for communities across the state. Everything we know about population health – and the social determinants of health – tells us that improving health outcomes is about much more than access to health care. It's about systems and structures – and that means that state agencies have important opportunities to collaborate.*
 - 2. Naturally, we were pleased to learn of your background working with veterans. How do you see our agencies collaborating?** *We have an opportunity to partner to address the needs of veterans across New Mexico – including high-quality health care and behavioral health.*
 - 3. There are still a lot of concerns about the COVID-19 vaccine...what advice would you like to share?** *We are moving to a new phase in this pandemic. The goal now is to roll out the vaccine to as many New Mexicans as possible. I would encourage people to seek information from reliable sources. There is a great deal of rumor and misinformation out there – but there are also solid, trustworthy scientific institutions that can help clarify and inform our understanding.*
 - 4. What did you most enjoy about working with the veteran community?** *The commitment of veterans to our country and the opportunity to provide solid health care and listen to their voices.*
 - 5. Is there anything else you would like to share?** *I am honored to serve as secretary, and I want to work to ensure that we address the needs of New Mexico during this pandemic. Those needs are many and diverse – just like our people – which means that our responses and policy solutions must also be thoughtfully tailored and responsive to communities and individuals.*

Veterans Community Bulletin Board

NOTICE: The following page(s) feature event and informational flyers provided to DVS by veterans and community service agencies. These flyers are published for the convenience of New Mexico's veteran community. Inclusion in The Guardian does not constitute an endorsement by DVS of the organization, content, products, or services contained therein.

DVS invites service agencies and non-profit service organizations to send flyers or news releases announcing an upcoming or ongoing veteran-related event. DVS will post these flyers as a public service courtesy to the veteran community. However:

- Flyers must have the name of a point-of-contact from the organization...along with the contact's phone number or email address. Flyers without this information will not be published.
- DVS is not responsible for the accuracy of the content, products, or services in these flyers.
- Views expressed in these flyers are the independent views of the authors/owners of the third-party entity that created the flyer—and does not necessarily reflect the views of DVS.
- To the maximum extent permitted by law, DVS expressly denies liability for any and all losses suffered by any persons or organizations who, in their independent discretion and reliance, either directly or indirectly rely on content, products, services or information offered by these independent third-party organizations.
- DVS reserves the right to edit or decline publishing of any flyer.

Free Civil Legal Advice *for Veterans*

Feb. 2, 2021

**Via confidential phone call on your
phone between 8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m.**

- Family Law (divorce, custody/
visitation, child support)
- Consumer Rights
- Bankruptcy
- Landlord-Tenant
- Foreclosure
- Employment
- Service providers including:
Goodwill, NM Department
of Veterans Services, United
South Broadway Corporation,
Roadrunner Food Bank, and More!

Phone calls are on a sign-up only basis. Help is contingent on volunteer attorneys.
If you have any further questions, please contact the
Veterans Justice Outreach Program at 505-206-9086.





News from the VA

VA Expands Telehealth Access Services for Older, Rural, and Homeless Veterans

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced its Digital Divide Consult (<https://connectedcare.va.gov/sites/default/files/telehealth-digital-divide-fact-sheet.pdf>) has helped more than 12,000 veterans obtain internet access or a video-capable device for their health care needs.

As part of the program, the VA providers refer veterans to a VA social worker, who determines eligibility for various programs to assist with getting the internet service or technology needed for VA telehealth — ensuring older veterans, those living in rural areas and veterans who are homeless or in temporary housing have the opportunity to participate.

According to the Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association, veterans with lower incomes, more severe disabilities and more chronic conditions are more likely to use virtual care during the pandemic. But veterans older than 45, and veterans who are homeless or who live in rural areas, are less likely to use video care. The Digital Divide Consult provides a solution for these veterans to access video care when needed.

“The pandemic has tested the VA’s workforce like never before, and innovations like the Digital Divide Consult highlight the ingenuity and resilience that have been hallmarks of the department’s successful response to this national emergency,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “As our virtual care infrastructure continually improves, so does the quality and accessibility of veterans’ care.”

The VA’s Digital Divide Consult and other initiatives are prime reasons the use of telehealth services by veterans continues to rise. Last November, a total of 196,116 telehealth video visits to veterans in their homes or other off-site locations were completed over a seven-day period, representing a 1,653% increase in weekly VA Video Connect visits since the end of last February. The number of video appointments held per day peaked at more than 41,000.

To further enable veterans to participate in telehealth, VA facilities are establishing test-call services to support veterans ahead of their first video visit. Additionally, the VA is partnering with Microsoft to educate veterans on essential digital skills. The VA intends to update the Digital Divide Consult as opportunities for future broadband and device discounts become available.

To learn more about VA telehealth: <https://connectedcare.va.gov/>

VA Publishes Final Regulation to Improve Delivery of Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Services

The VA recently published a final rule to establish and clarify eligibility for prosthetic and rehabilitative items and services available to veterans.

This establishes for the first time, the nationwide categories of prosthetic and orthotic services, sensory aids and medical devices the VA is authorized to provide to veterans as part of their active treatment and ongoing rehabilitation.

Previously, these categories varied across VA medical centers.

“The rule establishes a uniform approach for the VA to deliver prosthetic items and services to veterans,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “It ensures veterans receive the same standard of service for the rehabilitative devices they need to live independently, no matter which medical center they walk into.”

Categories of prosthetic and rehabilitation items and services defined in the rule include: adaptive household items, adaptive recreation equipment, cognitive devices, communication devices, home exercise equipment, home medical equipment, home respiratory equipment, implants, mobility aids, orthotic devices, prosthetic limbs and replacement items.

The rule reflects the VA’s Veteran-centered approach to health care, by empowering the veteran and clinician to jointly decide which prosthetic equipment will best meet the veteran’s treatment or rehabilitation needs, based on clinical need and veteran input. While the items the VA currently provides to veterans will not significantly change, the rule enables the VA to identify current best practices to serve as the standard for all Veterans who receive their care through the VA.

As the largest and most comprehensive provider of prosthetic devices and sensory aids in the country, the VA provides a full range of equipment and services to veterans, including artificial limbs and bracing, wheeled mobility and seating systems, implants and devices surgically placed in the veteran (e.g., hips and pacemakers), and home respiratory care. In fiscal year 2020, the VA provided approximately 21 million prosthetic devices/items to veterans, serving more than 52% of all veterans treated by VA health care.

For more information, visit <https://www.prosthetics.va.gov/psas/index.asp>





January is National Glaucoma Awareness Month

The VA believes quality of care for veterans includes raising awareness around important health topics. By highlighting some of the national health awareness campaigns each month, veterans can get ideas, information, and resources on a variety of health matters.

January is Glaucoma Awareness Month, and the VA wants to educate veterans about this serious eye disease--and what you can do to protect your eyes.

Glaucoma is a group of eye conditions that damages the optic nerve. The health of this nerve is vital for good vision. This damage is often caused by increased pressure in your eye. Glaucoma usually starts without any symptoms. Later, there is some loss of peripheral vision or side vision. Objects straight ahead are seen clearly, but objects to the sides are not seen. As the disease progresses, the ability to see objects on the side is increasingly lost, and eventually the center of vision is affected.

African-American Veterans should especially get their eyes checked regularly, as glaucoma is six to eight times more common in African-Americans than Caucasians. Also, among Hispanic populations, glaucoma is the leading cause of blindness.

Approximately 120,000 Americans are blind from glaucoma, according to the Glaucoma Research Foundation. The disease is not curable, but it can be managed to prevent the eventual loss of vision. Among the treatments currently used are eye drops and laser or traditional surgery.



The VA's Center of Excellence for the Prevention and Treatment of Visual Loss is helping to solve this problem through new methods of detection and developing new treatment strategies. For example, VA now has portable digital eye cameras paired with cutting-edge software that automatically analyzes images of the eye to diagnose glaucoma and determine if it's changing with time. New research is also looking at new molecules that protect the optic nerve from damage and help preserve vision in addition to lowering eye pressure all together.

What can you do? **Get tested for glaucoma right away.** It is a painless procedure, and early diagnosis of glaucoma may reduce the damage of your eye and even save your eyesight. For more information or to make an appointment, contact the Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center in Albuquerque at (505) 265-1711. Or contact a VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinic closest to you. The contact information for New Mexico's 15 CBOC's can be found at:

<https://www.va.gov/directory/guide/state.asp?dnum=ALL&STATE=NM>

DVS Partner Agencies That Can Help Veterans and Their Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic

DVS empathizes with veterans and their families who have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The agencies below are valuable partners with DVS and can help veterans who are experiencing hardships not only during the pandemic, but all year round:



The New Mexico Business Outreach Center (VBOC)

The New Mexico Business Outreach Center (VBOC) is the business development division of DVS provides assistance for entrepreneurial-minded veterans--from starting to growing a small business. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the VBOC can help veterans file for CARES Act funding to help businesses that have suffered economic losses. For more information:

www.nmvboc.org

The New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions (DWS)

The New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions (DWS) is the state agency that helps New Mexicans with all facets of seeking employment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, DWS can help affected workers file for unemployment insurance. www.dws.state.nm.us/en-us/Unemployment



The New Mexico Veterans Integration Centers (VIC)

The New Mexico Veterans Integration Centers (VIC) is a private 501(C)3 non-profit organization dedicated to helping veterans in need with the following free services:

Multiple Housing Options

The VIC has choices for veterans and their families who are literally and on the verge of homelessness to end the cycle immediately...offering emergency housing, transitional housing, rapid re-housing & homeless prevention

Mental Health Counseling

Focuses on clinical mental health, substance abuse and addictions.

Clothing and Donations Program

Thanks to the generosity of the community, the VIC has clothing options for men, women and children, as well as essential hygiene items every client receives upon enrollment as needed.

Food Pantry and Nutrition Education

Veterans, their families, and residents of the 87123 zip code have access to food boxes for the food insecure through the VIC food pantry.

Transportation

The VIC offers veterans and their families access to transportation resources that stop at several locations around the city each day. For more information about the VIC: www.nmvic.org



Goodwill Industries of New Mexico

Goodwill Industries of New Mexico is a nonprofit organization that helps all New Mexicans in need. Veterans and their families experiencing hardships during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic can get through the following Goodwill programs:

Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program

Focuses on placing veterans that are experiencing homelessness, or who are at risk of becoming homeless, into long-term employment. Other social services are also available.

Supportive Services for Veterans and Families

Helps stabilize housing for very low-income veterans and their families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Veteran Family Services Program

Provides job development services, job training, and comprehensive case management for veterans and their family members.

Unemployed New Mexicans

Goodwill career specialists are standing by to help with local job leads, improving job skills, creating a resume, learning interview skills, or getting help now with finding a job.

For more information about Goodwill Industries of New Mexico: www.goodwillnm.org

For Help With Any Other Needs

For any other hardship or emergency...during the COVID-19 pandemic, or at any time during the year...please contact DVS at (505) 383-2400 or nmdvs.info@state.nm.us.

DVS has formed strong partnerships with federal, state, local, and private organizations who have pledged to work with us to help veterans and their families. We will quickly put you in touch with the appropriate agency...to get you and your family the help you need.

