



The Guardian

The monthly newsletter of the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services

June, 2021

The New Mexico Department of Veterans Services (DVS) continues to provide benefits assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All 18 DVS certified Veterans Service Officers are working remotely to help veterans with filing VA claims or applying for state veterans benefits.

For phone assistance:
(505) 383-2400

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

DVS website for more information:
www.nmdvs.org

DVS Commemorates Memorial Day At Its Vietnam Veterans Memorial



ABOVE PHOTO: DVS Vietnam Veterans Memorial Staff Member Ernest Sutliff rings the Memorial's "Honor Bell" 21 times during the Memorial Day ceremony held in front of the Memorial's museum to the right of the bell.

The New Mexico Department of Veterans Services (DVS) commemorated Memorial Day with a brief ceremony at its Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Angel Fire.

Due to public safety concerns regarding the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the ceremony was closed to the public. But a handful of people who stopped by the memorial were not turned away by DVS staff.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial Manager DB Herbst read a proclamation shortly before a memorial wreath was presented outside the memorial museum.

“Whereas, since the founding of the United States of America, the men and women of our Armed Forces have sacrificed to serve and protect our nation from all enemies foreign and domestic—giving their lives, when necessary,” he read from the official governor’s proclamation. “Whereas military service has always been a part of the fabric of New Mexico’s culture and history, as it is sure to be for future generations, now therefore I, Michelle Lujan Grisham, governor of the state of New Mexico, do hereby proclaim May 31st, 2021, as Memorial Day throughout the state of New Mexico.”

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The wreath was presented by Angel Fire State Veterans Cemetery Supervisor Randy Myklebust—and Vietnam War veteran Eugene Stefanko, who came all the way from his home in Latrobe, PA, to do the honors. (*below; lower-left photo*)

Mr. Stefanko was a member of the unit in which U.S. Marine 1st Lt. David Westphall was killed in action when it came under attack on May 22, 1968 near Con Thien, South Vietnam. The memorial was built by 1st Lt. Westphall's parents, Victor and Jeanne, to honor him and all who served in the Vietnam War.

Mr. Stefanko is the last surviving member of the unit that came under attack, and was honored to pay tribute to his former unit member—along with others who have given their lives.

“I am proud to be able to honor my fallen brother today,” said Mr. Stefanko afterwards. “I really didn't know him personally that well. But he was a fellow Marine—and that's why I'm here, honoring him today, too--with everybody else.”

The brief ceremony concluded with a benediction, and the ringing of the memorial's Honor Bell 21 times—in lieu of a rifle volley.

DVS has produced a video of the ceremony, with video messages from DVS Secretary Sonya Smith and members of New Mexico's congressional delegation, along with the thoughts of some who attended the ceremony. Please go to www.nmdvs.org. Click on the “News & Events” tab in the upper right...and then on “Recent Press Releases.”



DVS Secretary Smith Guests on KCHF's *Issues & Answers*

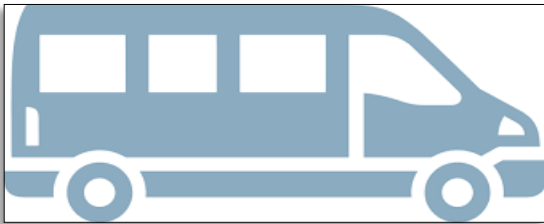
DVS Secretary Sonya L. Smith (*right photo, at left*) was a guest on a taping of Santa Fe TV station KCHF's (Channel 11) *Issues & Answers* with longtime host Diane Kinderwater on June 3.



During the wide-ranging 30-minute show, Secretary Smith talked about her service as a medical technician during Operation Desert Storm—and why she enlisted with the U.S. Air Force. She also discussed her vision and plans for the agency.

This segment of *Issues & Answers* will be in rotation on KCHF through the early part of the summer. You can catch the show on the following dates and times:

June 10	7pm
July 2	10am
July 3	7:30pm
July 4	2pm & 11pm



REMINDER: New Phone Number for the DVS Highly Rural Veterans Transportation Program

DVS is reminding veterans living in Cibola, Socorro, Colfax, Guadalupe, Harding, Mora, Quay, San Miguel, and Union counties about a new phone number for the Highly Rural Transportation Program—which provides free round-trip rides for veterans in these counties to any medical appointments at VA or VA-approved facilities. That number is **(505) 429-5906**.

Reservations can also be made for confirmed COVID-19 vaccine appointments. Veterans must make a reservation by calling at least three days in advance of a medical appointment Monday through Friday from 9am-5pm. *Please do not call any other DVS phone number.*

Upon pickup at their home, veterans will be required to show proof of veteran status to the driver—who, per COVID-19 safety protocol, will be wearing a mask. Until further notice, veterans will also be required to wear a face mask for the duration of the trip.

The DVS Rural Veterans Transportation Program

The program is made possible through a grant awarded by the VA's Highly Rural Transportation Grants Program. This grant is awarded to qualified organizations that can demonstrate the need and ability to provide transportation for veterans in "highly rural areas" who have trouble getting VA health care due to the lack of available transportation options. VA defines a highly rural area as a county with less than seven people per square mile, and provided DVS with a list of qualifying counties in New Mexico.



State Launches COVID-19 Vaccine Vax 2 the Max Sweepstakes

Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, the New Mexico Department of Health and the New Mexico Lottery have announced New Mexico's [Vax 2 the Max Sweepstakes](#), a statewide vaccination incentive program that will make available \$10 million in total prize money to New Mexicans who receive their COVID-19 vaccinations, among other prizes and awards throughout the summer.

New Mexicans can register and schedule their COVID-19 vaccinations at vaccinenm.org.

To be eligible for the cash sweepstakes, New Mexicans who receive or have already received their COVID-19 vaccinations must opt in to register and verify their personal and vaccination information at vax2themaxnm.org.

“Getting vaccinated is the right thing to do -- for yourself, for your family and for your state,” said Gov. Lujan Grisham. “I’m excited to add a little fun to our nation-leading vaccination push. New Mexicans have sacrificed a lot over the last year. Now anyone who has stepped up to get their shots will have a chance to win some excellent prizes -- please encourage your friends and neighbors to opt in for their chance to win big and to sign up for their shots as soon as possible!”

More than 55 percent of eligible New Mexicans have completed their vaccination series, according to the Department of Health. The state is hoping to reach 60 percent this month, after which point the state will graduate out of the color-coded county-by-county risk framework, and continue to increase toward at least 70 percent as a near-term goal.

VAX 2 THE MAX CASH SWEEPSTAKES

Vaccinated New Mexicans who have opted into the sweepstakes will be part of five weekly drawings beginning in the middle of June.

Each weekly drawing will award one \$250,000 winner from each of the state’s four public health regions, for a total of \$1 million in cash prizes each week. A grand prize of \$5 million will be awarded at the conclusion of the sweepstakes, in early August, to one winner drawn from the statewide pool of vaccinated New Mexicans who have opted in to the sweepstakes.

The New Mexico Lottery will conduct the cash sweepstakes drawings on behalf of the Lujan Grisham administration.

“I’m pleased the New Mexico Lottery can assist the state in making these prizes available to New Mexicans getting their shots,” said Lottery Chief Executive David M. Barden. “Our organization is deeply experienced in operating fun, fair and exciting drawings, and we look forward to a successful sweepstakes.”

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OTHER PRIZES AND AWARDS AT VACCINATION SITES

Beginning next week, New Mexicans receiving their vaccinations through providers who have partnered with the state vaccinenm.org registration system will be eligible to win assorted prizes. Winners will be selected at random. Prizes include:

- 18 in-state “staycation” travel packages, ranging in value from \$600 to \$1,100, including four nights of accommodations and gift cards to local businesses and experiences
- Fishing and hunting licenses
- Annual day-use passes for New Mexico State Parks
- Day-use passes for New Mexico state museums and cultural sites

In addition, the New Mexico Lottery will bring 10 “prize wheels” to providers who have partnered with the state registration system; these sites will be spread across the state. New Mexicans receiving vaccinations at these sites will be eligible for chance to win assorted prizes, including New Mexico Lottery tickets.



RULES AND REGULATIONS

Winners will be required to produce their CDC COVID-19 Vaccination Record Card upon claiming their prize.

Non-winning entries in the Vax 2 the Max Sweepstakes will carry over from one weekly drawing to the next. An individual may not win more than one \$250,000 regional drawing. All eligible participants will be eligible for the final \$5 million drawing.

To be eligible to win a prize, individuals must be at least 18 years of age and a resident of the state of New Mexico. Employees of the New Mexico Lottery and the Office of the Governor, as well as any state employees appointed by the governor, and any members of these employees' households, are not eligible to participate.

In order to be entered into a drawing, eligible individuals must opt in to the sweepstakes on the Vax 2 the Max website by 6:00 p.m. MST the evening before the drawing -- the full schedule for the drawings will be disseminated ahead of time.

To read the full rules and regulations, visit www.vax2themaxnm.org and click on "Rules".

Funding for the Vax 2 the Max Sweepstakes comes from the state's portion of American Rescue Plan stimulus. The U.S. Treasury Department last week confirmed in updated guidance that states may use stimulus funding for lotteries, cash payments and other incentive programs to boost vaccination rates.



June 12 is Women Veterans Day!

The New Mexico Department of Veterans Services (DVS) proudly commemorates the day honoring women who have served and defended our country as members of the United States military.

Friday (June 11)

Women Veterans Benefits, Claims, & Assistance Clinic (9am-noon)

DVS Veterans Service Officers will be available to help women veterans via the “Zoom” links below...with filing VA claims, for state veterans benefits, and with anything else a woman veteran or her family needs.

Central & Northeast NM (DVS VSO: Victoria Bader)

<https://nmdvs-org.zoom.us/j/93929928787?pwd=VWpEK3NBSkdPdjRKOEhhMzR2Rlh4dz09>

Northwest NM (Beverly Charley)

<https://nmdvs-org.zoom.us/j/91352264881?pwd=YVE3TlJQcIgwY0tJenBmdHQyVkgydz09>

Southwest NM (Rosa Bycenski)

<https://nmdvs-org.zoom.us/j/2905184974>

Southeast NM (Dagmar Youngberg)

<https://nmdvs-org.zoom.us/j/91352264881?pwd=YVE3TlJQcIgwY0tJenBmdHQyVkgydz09>

Additional/Overflow Assistance (Dustin Newsom)

<https://nmdvs-org.zoom.us/j/8327658957?pwd=a1JBY3AxaUs2OEIFTlQ3ZUdnOEY3UT09>

Saturday (June 12)

Women Veterans “Listening Session” (11am)

DVS Women Veterans Program Manager Robin Wilson will moderate a free-form discussion session for women veterans to log on and talk about issues important to them

<https://zoom.us/j/96273173345>

Eye On New Mexico (5:30pm/KOB-TV Ch. 4)

DVS Secretary Sonya Smith and DVS Field Services Director Larry Campos sit down with KOB’s Brittany Costello to talk about DVS, women veterans, and other key veterans issues.

On the DVS website:

“I Am Not Invisible”

Many Americans—and women veterans—don’t see women who served as “veterans.” This brief video showcases New Mexican women veterans who emphatically say why “I Am Not Invisible.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3vhWVljaok>

VA

U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

New Opportunity to Participate

Virtual Listening Session on the Future of VA Health Care

When: June 17, 2021 at 5:00 p.m. (MDT)

Who: Veterans, Veterans Service Organization representatives, and other community stakeholders – if you have not already attended a local listening session

Where: The listening session will be conducted virtually – you can join via phone or computer.

Please [register here](#) or dial 404-397-1596 (Access Code: 199 946 6676) to join.

We are looking forward to hearing from Veterans on the following topics:

- How Veterans want care to be delivered in the future
- Perception of the quality of health care at VA and VA's community network
- Experience with the ability to get care at VA and within VA's community network
- Satisfaction with the condition and location of VA's facilities
- VA's role in research, education, and emergency preparedness

VA is hosting public virtual listening sessions to hear from Veterans on how to design a health care system of the future and grow services for Veterans in a way that reinforces VA's role as a leader in the U.S. health care system. This listening session represents an exciting opportunity for Veterans to help VA reimagine how VA delivers care in an equitable, high quality, Veteran-centered manner and develop a plan for investing in VA's aging infrastructure.

We encourage Veterans, Veterans Service Organizations, Community Veterans Engagement Boards, and other interested stakeholders to attend. The feedback will be used to develop the recommendations VA submits to the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission in January 2022.

If you are not able to attend but would still like to provide feedback, please submit your feedback to VHAMAQs@va.gov.



Please do not include personal health information and be aware that VA will not be providing responses to individual emails.

Click Here

**See the Full Schedule
and Register**

You may have heard about Radon, but what is it, and how do you know if you have unsafe levels of Radon in YOUR home?

Come learn about Radon!

Learn the facts and stay safe



Radon is a cancer-causing gas

It comes from the radioactive decay of uranium and radium and exists naturally in rocks like granite. Colorado's large amount of granite translates to much higher levels of Radon than national averages.



Like carbon monoxide it is tasteless, colorless and odorless.



Radon breaks down into radioactive particles

Which are inhaled and become trapped inside the lungs. As these particles break down further they can damage the lung tissue and alter the DNA of the cells.



Radon is a leading cause of lung cancer

Only smoking causes more lung cancer deaths than exposure to Radon.

Free Test Kits

June 14, 21, & 28th

NM VA Lobby

8:00am-2pm



ABOUT

20,000

DEATHS FROM LUNG CANCER WERE CAUSED BY EXPOSURE TO INCREASED RADON LEVELS

Radon is natural **radioactive gas** in the ground from decay of uranium and radium

Radon causes **20,000** cases of lung cancer each year

Rn
RADON

Have your home tested regularly

Radon attaches to surfaces and air particles like dust and if then inhaled can cause severe health risks

7/10 Homes in Iowa have elevated levels
Radon is colorless, odorless, and tasteless



HONOR

CONNECT

RESPECT

**CLICK HERE
TO REGISTER
FOR EVENTS!**

OKLAHOMA TRIBAL WOMEN VETERANS

VIRTUAL SUMMER SESSIONS

Tuesday June 1, 10am-12pm

Marrying Tribal & Veteran Culture

Tuesday, June 22, 10am-12pm

Missing Murdered Indigenous Women

Tuesday July 13, 10am-12pm

Intimate Partner & Domestic Violence

Tribal Women Veterans Roundtable with

VA Center for Women Veterans

Wednesday, June 23, 10am-12pm

To Register for the above sessions:

<https://tinyurl.com/oktribalwv>



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs



OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS



News from the VA

VA to Expand Benefits For Disability Claims For Conditions Related to Certain Toxic Exposures

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced two major decisions related to presumptive conditions associated with Agent Orange and particulate matter exposures during military service in Southwest Asia.

Agent Orange

VA will begin implementing provisions of the William M. Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (Public Law 116-283), adding three conditions to the list of those presumptively associated with exposure to herbicide agents, more commonly known as Agent Orange. Those conditions are bladder cancer, hypothyroidism and Parkinsonism.

“Many of our Nation’s Veterans have waited a long time for these benefits,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “VA will not make them wait any longer. This is absolutely the right thing to do for Veterans and their families.”

VA will apply the provisions of court orders related to *Nehmer vs. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*, which may result in an earlier date for entitlement to benefits for Veterans who served in the Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Vietnam War era Veterans and their survivors, who previously filed and were denied benefits for one of these three new presumptive conditions, will have their cases automatically reviewed without the need to refile a claim. VA will send letters to impacted Veterans and survivors.

Particulate Matter Exposures

The secretary recently concluded the first iteration of a newly formed internal VA process to review scientific evidence to support rulemaking, resulting in the recommendation to consider creation of new presumptions of service connection for respiratory conditions based on VA’s evaluation of a National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine report and other evidence.

VA’s review supports initiation of rulemaking to address the role that particulate matter pollution plays in generating chronic respiratory conditions, which may include asthma, rhinitis, and sinusitis, for Veterans who served in the Southwest Asia theater of operations during the Persian Gulf War and/or after September 19, 2001, or in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan during the Persian Gulf War.

VA is initiating rulemaking to consider adding respiratory conditions, which may include asthma, sinusitis, and rhinitis, to the list of chronic disabilities, based on an association with military service in Southwest Asia, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan during the covered periods of conflict. VA will conduct broad outreach efforts to reach impacted Veterans and encourages them to participate in the rulemaking process.

For more information, visit the VA’s Airborne Hazards and Burn Pit Exposures - Public Health website: <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/index.asp>

VA Secretary McDonough Comments on VA's Portion of President Biden's Proposed FY22 Budget

The Biden-Harris administration has submitted to Congress the president's budget for fiscal year 2022.

As the administration continues to make progress defeating the pandemic and getting our economy back on track, the budget makes historic investments that will help the country build back better and lay the foundation for shared growth and prosperity for decades to come.

This bold budget request by President Biden to Congress will ensure VA is moving swiftly and smartly into the future, with much-needed monetary investments in our most successful and vital programs. To fulfill VA's sacred promise to care for our nation's veterans, families, caregivers and survivors, we must return the investment veterans have made in America through their service.



Denis McDonough
VA Secretary

The budget includes the two historic plans the president has already put forward — the American Jobs Plan and the American Families Plan — and reinvests in education, research, public health and other foundations of our country's strength.

The total 2022 request for VA is \$269.9 billion (with medical care collections), a 10% increase above 2021. This includes a discretionary budget request of \$117.2 billion (with medical care collections), a 9% increase above 2021. The 2022 mandatory funding request totals \$152.7 billion, an increase of \$14.9 billion or 10.8% above 2021. VA's 2022 request is in addition to the substantial resources provided in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021.

Additionally, the President's FY 2022 Budget includes \$18 billion as part of the American Jobs Plan to address VA health care infrastructure needs in the short- and long-term, together with \$260 million for the American Families Plan to support the administration's commitment to provide supplementary support to veterans who are parents, in order to offer a holistic, family-friendly approach to care.

At the Department of Veterans Affairs, the \$117.2 billion discretionary request would:

Work to eliminate veteran homelessness and prevent veteran suicide. The budget includes \$2.2 billion in discretionary appropriations for veteran homelessness programs, to include \$486 million in American Rescue Plan funding. This will support expanded case management services to help more veterans gain permanent housing through housing vouchers and prevent homelessness among low-income veteran families. Additionally, the budget includes \$598 million for veteran suicide prevention outreach programs that address the risks for suicide, with the goal of intervening before a veteran reaches a point of crisis. VA will also support the new Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program.

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Help our veterans build civilian lives of opportunity with the education and jobs worthy of their skills and talents. The budget supports the president's commitment to help veterans with education and job training by making key investments in the veterans Benefits Administration. This includes an increase of \$81.5 million for the Digital GI Bill Modernization Effort to better serve veterans who are using their GI Bill benefits. Funding also increases by \$5 million for veterans' Clean Energy Job Training in conjunction with the Department of Labor, and by \$3.6 million for the VA Disability Employment Pilot Project to assist eligible veterans with service-connected disabilities seeking employment opportunities.

Ensure VA welcomes all veterans, and diversity, equity and inclusion are woven into the fabric of the department. The department is making a strong commitment to ensuring VA welcomes all our veterans, to include women, those of color and whom are LGBTQ+. To support that commitment VA has created a new Office of Resolution Management, Diversity and Inclusion which will benefit from an increase of \$12.9 million to strengthen VA's diversity program.

Keep faith with our families and caregivers. The budget provides approximately \$1.4 billion, an increase of \$350 million for the Caregiver Support Program. Through this program the Veterans Health Administration provides support to individuals who act as caregivers for veterans. The 2022 budget supports the phased expansion of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers to include all eligible veterans, no matter when they served.

Enacting the budget policies into law this year would strengthen our nation's economy and lay the foundation for shared prosperity, while also improving our nation's long-term fiscal health.

For more information on the President's FY 2022 Budget visit: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/>.