DVS Secretary Sonya L. Smith and the group Women Veterans of New Mexico hosted a live online Zoom meeting on March 16 to provide women veterans the chance to meet the secretary and voice their suggestions for improving service to women veterans.

One of the key concerns raised by several women was the need for DVS and all service agencies to aggressively reach out to the state’s 16,000 women veterans—whom many in the discussion say are not aware of their VA or state veterans benefits.

“Many older-generation veterans didn’t think they were veterans, so they weren’t entitled to any veterans benefits,” said Women Veterans of New Mexico President and retires U.S. Army Lt. Col. Patricia “Pat” Gaston of Albuquerque. “They think that, because they didn’t deploy overseas, they weren’t veterans. We need to change that thinking.”

“I’d like to see more outreach in the rural areas of New Mexico,” said Cassandra Morgan of Gallup--a former U.S. Marine Corps heavy equipment mechanic and a member of the Navajo Veterans Advisory Council. “We need to give them more recognition--let them know they are veterans and get the same benefits as male veterans.”

Other suggestions were the need for the various women veterans groups to communicate with each other, a push for women veterans to utilize their G.I. Bill® to pursue a post-high school education to increase their career earnings capability, and the desire for state women veterans conferences or conventions.

All of this was duly noted by DVS Secretary Smith, who said the meeting was critical for her as she prepares for a national meeting with the VA’s Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and other women state veterans service agency cabinet secretaries later this year.

“The VBA approached us about wanting to have a meeting to gauge our needs,” she said. “But I wanted to have a conversation with local women veterans first before I engage with the other national directors, to let them know of our concerns here in New Mexico.”

Secretary Smith assured the participants that DVS will act on their concerns, and called for regular meetings to continue monitoring the needs of women veterans.

“We have but one job…and one job only…here at DVS,” she said. “And that is, to make the lives better for all of our veterans and their families.”