



# The Guardian

The monthly newsletter of the New Mexico Dept. of Veterans Services

July, 2023

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## Governor Lujan Grisham Names 11-Member Veterans Advisory Council

Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham has signed an executive order creating the Governor's Veterans Advisory Council.

The 11-member council will be attached to the New Department of Veterans' Services (DVS). It is tasked with working with DVS to support the needs of veterans in New Mexico, review existing policies, and consulting with the state's veteran community to make sure that every veteran and their family receives the resources they are owed from their military service.



"There are 143,000 veterans in New Mexico, and it is our duty to create a system centered around their needs once they return home or retire from service," said Gov. Lujan Grisham. "Making sure that veterans' voices are included and heard means better outcomes for our veterans and their families. Whether that's access to health care, housing, or other benefits, we can do so much more to help the veteran community live more healthy, productive lives. I want to thank these 11 men and women for saying 'yes' to helping me advance our work to make New Mexico the best state for veterans."

"There is infinite power when a group of people with similar interests, experiences and backgrounds work together toward the same goals," said DVS Cabinet Secretary Donnie Quintana. "This advisory board represents a broad spectrum of individuals that should provide invaluable input regarding the many issues and opportunities facing New Mexico's veteran community."

"As a disabled Vietnam War veteran suffering from exposure to the Agent Orange herbicide, I want to make sure the state is providing the best possible care and service to New Mexico's veterans," said Council Chair Sam Trujillo. "We owe them that, and I am looking forward to serving on this council to serve my fellow veterans."

The eleven members of the veterans advisory council are listed on the following pages.



### **Sam Trujillo (Chair)**

Served from 1963-1967 in the U.S. Navy, including from 1965-67 off the coast of Vietnam, before completing his service at the rank of petty officer/3rd class.



### **Tina Archuleta (Vice Chair)**

Served from 1990-2017 in the New Mexico Air National Guard, retiring as a senior master sergeant. She currently works for the city of Albuquerque.



### **Chad Autry**

A self-employed civilian/non-veteran, Chad is the son of a retired U.S. Army Vietnam War veteran who served from 1968-1988. His father was on the last helicopter out of Vietnam in 1975.

### **Reginald Clark**

Served in the United States Air Force from 1980-1988, and in the New Mexico Air National Guard from 1988-2022, retiring from service as a colonel. In retirement he has been actively involved with the Tuskegee Airmen of New Mexico, which is part of the national veterans' service organization named in honor of the famed all-Black WWII airmen.



*(continued on next page)*



### **Jason Gonzales**

Served two tours with the New Mexico Army National Guard, from 1990-1997 and then from 2000-2005, including a tour in Iraq, before completing his service at the rank of sergeant. Jason is currently a member of the Questa City Council.

### **William Griego**

Served in the New Mexico Army National Guard from 1986-2019 before retiring as a command sergeant major. He remains active in several volunteer community and veterans' causes.



### **David LaCour**

Served 11 year in the U.S. Army, including tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, completing his service at the rank of sergeant. He is currently a firefighter with the city of Albuquerque.

### **Fred Lujan**

The former United States Marine Corps lance corporal served in Vietnam from 1961-1965. He is currently the commander of the Pueblo of Isleta Veterans' Association.





**Gilbert Platero**

Served in the U.S. Army from 1982-1989, including being stationed in South Korea. He finished his service at the rank of corporal. Mr. Platero is an active member of the Eastern Navajo Nation Veterans' Advisory Council.

**Chris Sedillo**

Served in the United States Navy from 1981-2007, deploying to the Persian Gulf and Iraq, before retiring as a senior chief petty officer. While in retirement he has been an active member of American Legion Post 13, where he is a member of the post's honor guard that renders military honors at the funerals of veterans.

**Shirley Tetreault**

Member of the Gold Star Mothers of New Mexico—the mother of the late New Mexico Air National Guard Sr. Master Sgt. Allen Tetreault. She is active with the Gold Star Mothers that assists parents of fallen active service members.



## VETERANS BENEFITS

## DVS July Benefits Outreach Schedule

DVS veterans' service officers are scheduled to make veterans benefits outreach stops in July at the locations listed below. Veterans or their eligible dependents can drop by to get information about or help with filing VA claims, applying for state veterans benefits, or assistance with any other issues a veteran needs help with. Please bring a copy of your DD-214, which is necessary for filing all veterans'

<u>Date</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>address</u>	<u>time</u>
Jul. 18	Grants-American Legion Post 80	121 Third St.	6pm-9pm
Jul. 19	Grants/VFW Post 3221	1408 Johnson St.	6pm-9pm
Jul. 19	Ft. Bayard Medical Center Lobby	41 Fort Bayard Road	11:30am
Jul. 19	Santa Rosa/Guadalupe Co. Vet Ctr.	720 Lake Drive	10am-3pm
Jul. 19	Las Cruces-VFW Post 10124	709 South Valley Dr.	9am-10:30am
Jul. 20	Artesia-United Veterans Hall	402 West Hermosa St.	9am-3:30om
Jul. 24	Albuquerque-VA Hospital Lobby	1501 San Pedro Drive SE	8am-4pm
Jul. 25	Las Cruces City Hall	700 North Main St.	11am-noon
Jul. 26	Deming Senior Center	800 South Granite St.	10am-12:30pm
Aug. 3	Capitan Public Library	101 East 2nd Street	10am-3pm

As a reminder, veterans or their eligible dependents can always make an appointment with any VSO at any of the 16 DVS field offices for in-office or virtual assistance. Please go to the last two pages of this newsletter for office locations and VSO contact information.

## Upcoming PACT Act Informational Town Hall Meetings

The New Mexico VA Health Care System, the Albuquerque VA Regional Office, and DVS will be presenting the following PACT Act information town hall meetings in July. Veterans, family members, and service provide agency representatives are encouraged to attend and learn about the new law which opens up VA health care for veterans who think they have developed health issues due to exposure to toxic materials during their service.

Taos Pueblo	July 19	10a	Taos Pueblo Heritage Center
Santa Clara Pueblo	July 19	2pm	Santa Clara Pueblo Senior Center
Trinidad (CO)	July 26	10am	Mt. Carmel Wellness Center
Pueblo (CO)	July 28	10am	La Plata County Fairgrounds

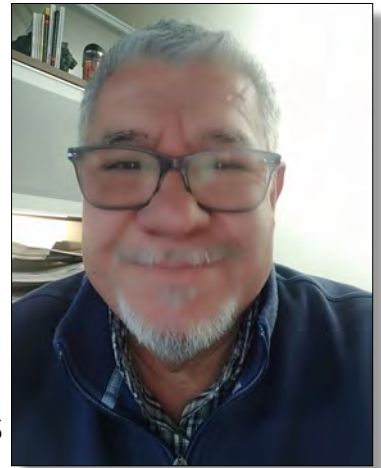
## DVS VSO Finds Stuffed Bank Deposit Bag; Returns it to Owner

June 22 is a day DVS Veterans' Service Officer (VSO) Ronn Saavedra and his wife Kathy will never forget....yet always be proud of.

As the longtime-married couple were leaving their favorite Albuquerque restaurant after a leisurely lunch, they spotted a large bag just as they were about to drive away from the parking area.

Saavedra, who had worked for many years in retail prior to coming to DVS earlier this year, immediately recognized it was a bank deposit bag.

"No way—it can't be," he remembered thinking as his wife picked up the bag off the pavement. Once inside their vehicle, the couple was stunned after opening up the bag and finding "nicely packeted \$100s...50s....20s... all the way down to 1s," he said. "I figured it was easily over fifty-thousand dollars—probably way more than fifty, based on my previous retail experience."



**Ronn Saavedra**  
DVS Albuquerque VSO

They returned to the restaurant—only to find that it had closed for the weekend, and that everyone had gone home. He promised his wife he would go back first thing Monday (June 24) and check with the owner-whom he'd gotten to know a little bit due to his frequent stops for lunch.

That Monday morning Saavedra swung by the restaurant before reporting for work at the DVS Albuquerque office. He found the owner, and asked: "Hi (the owner's name). Are you missing something? I may have found something of yours."

Saavedra said the owner's eyes lit up—and the owner started shaking as Saavedra handed over the bag—assuring the owner "Don't worry—nothing's missing. it's all there."

The owner told Saavedra a restaurant employee—a close family friend--had advertently placed the bag on top of his/her car that Saturday...intending to make a bank deposit of the restaurant's weeks worth of sales. That employee—who had recently suffered a personal tragedy—then drove off to the bank, forgetting about the bag atop the car...which obviously fell onto the parking lot. The employee became frantic upon arriving at the bank and not finding the bank bag....and became even more despondent over the weekend.

Saavedra refused multiple offers of a cash reward, free lunches, and even a free catered event.

"I just did what I thought....really, what I KNEW...was the right thing to do," said Saavedra, an Air Force veteran. "I'm just glad everything worked out for that employee and the restaurant owner. Besides—Kathy and I really like that place a lot!"





## DVS Welcomes Author of Book About Family's Search for Homeless Iraq Veteran Son With PTSD

DVS Cabinet Secretary Donnie Quintana welcomed author Patrick Smithwick to the Collected Works Bookstore and Coffeehouse Tuesday evening (July 11). Smithwick read several passages from his book "War's Over, Come Home: A Father's Search for His Son, Two-Tour Marine Veteran of the Iraq War."

The book is a powerfully emotional account of an ongoing search for Smithwick's son Andrew, a Marine from 2004-2009, who is now homeless and wandering the country. He developed a severe case of PTSD from the effects of what Patrick calls "his two tours of hellish duty in Iraq."

"It's been said that the military does a great job turning a civilian into a warrior," said Secretary Quintana during his introduction of Smithwick. "But the military fails to turn many of these warriors back into a civilian once his or her service is finished. This is something that Andrew and his family have come to find out all too well."

The Smithwick family desperately wants to find Andrew and get him the treatment he needs—either through VA or non-traditional therapies.



Secretary Quintana presented Patrick Smithwick with a DVS Challenge Coin (*bottom photos*)—telling him to "give this to Andrew, when you find him and bring him home."





**Excerpts read aloud from "War's Over, Come Home: A Father's Search for His Son, Two-Tour Marine Veteran of the Iraq War."**

**One time Patrick did find Andrew somewhere in Texas:**

Andrew was not afraid of fights. He would fight anyone—including me.

*"I oughtta hit you. I oughtta knock the sh\*t out of you, but I'm not going to," he told me.*

We stared into each other's eyes. He was just inches away. I hold my ground.

*"ANDREW! You're not a Marine at war anymore! You're a CIVILIAN. It's time to realize that violence is not the answer."*

He turned, and just walked away. It would be awhile before we heard about or from him again.

**Another time they found him...this time shirtless, and working on a construction site.**

*"Andrew. I've got to get back to your mother." "There it is...your tattoo! D. E., your grandmother...and her death date!"*

What would've happened? Would he have broken down? In a movie, there would have been flashbacks showing his close relationship with his grandmother. That would be the one thing...the catalyst...that would break him. He would give up...and throw his arms around me, and come home.

(VOICE BREAKS) But here, on this sidewalk...in this desolate area...I see his pronounced ribs...he sets his hardhat on his head.

*"This is it, Andrew!" I plead with him. "Stop playing these games!"*

*"I don't know you," he said. He then walks away from me, towards the construction site far in the distance.*

---

**Patrick Smithwick, during a post-reading Q&A session:**

*"I hope that he can come back into society...and to contribute. He was an excellent horseman. I'm from a very "horsey" family. (VOICE BREAKS) My father and uncle are both in the racing Hall of Fame. Andrew really loved his uncle Mikey. He worked for him after he finished with the Marines for about a year—it was really great for him."*

*"I'll be perfectly honest. Sometimes you meet people, and they just say to give up. That...disturbs me. We're not going to give up. I remain optimistic."*



## Reserved Parking Spots For Veterans Visiting the DVS Santa Fe and Albuquerque Offices

There are now reserved parking spaces for veterans or their eligible dependents visiting the DVS offices in Santa Fe and Albuquerque.



In Santa Fe (*above photo*), there is a clearly marked reserved space on the south side of the Bataan Memorial Building, which houses the office of the cabinet secretary, the DVS administrative services division—and the state benefits division, which processes veterans' license plates, disabled veteran hunting/fishing discounted licenses and state parks/museum passes, the state veterans property tax exemption, and 100% service-connected disabled property tax waivers.

At the DVS Albuquerque office at 4801 Indian School Road NE/Building 2, there are four clearly marked reserved parking spaces for veterans who stop by to visit the four Albuquerque-based veterans' service officers (VSOs), the DVS Women Veterans' Program manager, the Health Care Coordination Division, the state approving agency, or the Veterans Business Outreach Center (VBOC).



## Two Women Veteran Art Exhibits Now On Display in Santa Fe



DVS is proud to announce two new art exhibits now on display at the Bataan Memorial Building in downtown Santa Fe that honor women veterans.

*(Top two photos)* The “Proudly She Served” national art exhibit is now on display in the east-west hallway of the venerable building. Artist Steve Alpert has painted twelve 36”x30” oil portraits showcasing women veterans who have demonstrated courage, strength, and selfless service for our country.

*(Bottom two photos)* A second separate exhibit in the same hallway, courtesy of the Santa Fe Community College Veterans Legacy Grant Program, features six unique women veterans interred at the Santa Fe National Cemetery.







## Twenty-Five Northern New Mexico Veterans Return From “2023 Honor Flight” to Washington, D.C.

Twenty-five veterans from New Mexico, along with their chaperones, returned to the Albuquerque International Sunport on June 22 from a special two-day trip to Washington, D.C.

This all-expenses-paid trip was courtesy of the Honor Flight of Northern New Mexico Foundation, which is part of the national non-profit Honor Flight Network.

These annual free honor flights bring veterans to visit the national war monuments in our nation’s capital that are dedicated to their war era of service. The trip also includes a visit to the Arlington National Cemetery. Priority is given to veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and any veteran suffering from a terminal medical condition.

DVS Pueblos & Tribal Liaison Beverly Charley was among the chaperones who paid out-of-pocket to chaperone the veterans.

“It was an honor, and an extremely emotional one, for me to finally be a part of this special yearly event, said Charley, who chaperoned U.S. Air Force and Vietnam War veteran Bill Strabo (*both in right photo*). “It could’ve been tiring, but we all felt energized by seeing those beautiful monuments and the national cemetery. It’s a trip I’ll never forget.”



DVS videotaped the hero’s welcome the group—two WWII veterans, seven Korean War, one Cold War, and 15 Korean War veterans--received upon 2023 Northern New Mexico Honor Flight on June 22. DVS was there at the Albuquerque International to capture the hero's welcome received by the returning group...and [produced this short video showing the highlights](#).





# New Mexico Department of Veterans Services

## Military Honors Fall Training Conference and Competition 2023



**DATE:** Friday, August 25, 2023

**TIME:** 0800-1600

**LOCATION:**

New Mexico Veterans Memorial Park

1100 Louisiana Blvd. SE

Albuquerque, NM 87108

**POC:** Diana Myklebust, NMDVS 505-231-8911





**#SWVetsBizConf**



**SAVE THE DATE**

**October 19 & 20, 2023**

**SOUTHWEST VETERANS BUSINESS CONFERENCE**

**LAS CRUCES**



"Funded in part by a Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. Small Business Administration"

A **FREE** conference for veteran-owned business owners...  
...and veterans and transitioning active-duty service members  
who are thinking of starting their own business.

More information to follow in the coming months...

# Veterans Community Bulletin Board

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 government agencies and non-profit service organizations to send flyers for publication in *The Guardian* announcing an upcoming or ongoing veteran-related event. DVS will run these flyers as a public service courtesy to the veteran community.

Please note:

- 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 to publish any flyer.



Division of Behavioral and Mental Health Services presents:

# 2023 Operation Veterans Wellness

"Moving Forward, Healing Together"



Registration @ 11:30  
Start @ 12 noon  
Contact Cheryl Toledo  
505.722-9470  
\*\* FREE EVENT \*\*



**Friday, July 21, 2023**  
**10am - 4pm**  
**Gallup Sports Complex**  
**925 Park Ave**  
**Gallup, NM 87301**

**10:00am Presentation of Colors**

**10:15am Welcome Address**

**10:30am "What is Mental Health" Presentation**

**12:00pm Fun Run/Walk & Youth Activities**

**12:00pm-3:30pm Gourd Dance**  
**(Please bring your own chairs)**

Head Gourd Dancer: Travis King, US Army Veteran

Head Gourd Singer: Michael Coan, Turquoise Mountain Singers

MC: Michael Salabiye



**CITY OF  
GALLUP**



**10:00am - 3:30pm Resource Fair (Non-Profit Organizations)**

For more information call TJ Anderson @ (928) 551-1053

**\*\* THIS IS A DRUG AND ALCOHOL FREE EVENT \*\***

**\*\* NO SOLICITING \*\***

**\*\* Sponsors not responsible for theft, accidents, injuries, etc \*\***



## FREE Post-Traumatic Stress Retreats for Veterans & Partners



Veterans & their  
partners will  
experience 7.5  
days of relief &  
healing from  
PTS in Red River,  
New Mexico



April 23-30, 2023  
May 14-21, 2023  
August 6-13, 2023  
October 15-22, 2023

Offering education, counseling, massage, acupuncture, reiki, yoga, art therapy,  
nutrition, chiropractic care, horseback riding and more!

[VeteransWellnessAndHealing.org](http://VeteransWellnessAndHealing.org)

575-377-5236

[Info@veteranswellnessandhealing.org](mailto:Info@veteranswellnessandhealing.org)

Contact us for an application TODAY!

## Veterans need your help!

### MYTH:

- The VA takes care of all Veterans

### FACTS:

- 60% of Veterans are not in the VA system
- Approximately 40% of those do not qualify
- There are an estimated 564,000 Veterans in Colorado, New Mexico & Wyoming
- About 338,400 are on their own, not belonging to any Veteran organization
- The majority have families who are also underserved



Since 2017, Qualified Listeners, a Colorado-based 501(C)3 nonprofit organization, has been filling the gaps in services. We are a Veteran and Family Resource Hub. We change lives, we impact lives, and we save lives. Our services are FREE to Veterans and their families, but it takes money to provide these services.

“

I'm an 84-year-old paraplegic Korean War Veteran. Qualified Listeners helped me get enrolled into the VA system. I now have mobility improvements in my home, including a new wheelchair, hearing aids, and a significant reduction in my prescription medications. This would not have happened without Qualified Listeners.

”

“

As a woman Veteran, I've not felt safe in talking about these things until I met Qualified Listeners.

”

“

I don't know what we would do without Qualified Listeners, we were stuck with no help until we met you.

”



Contact us to learn more

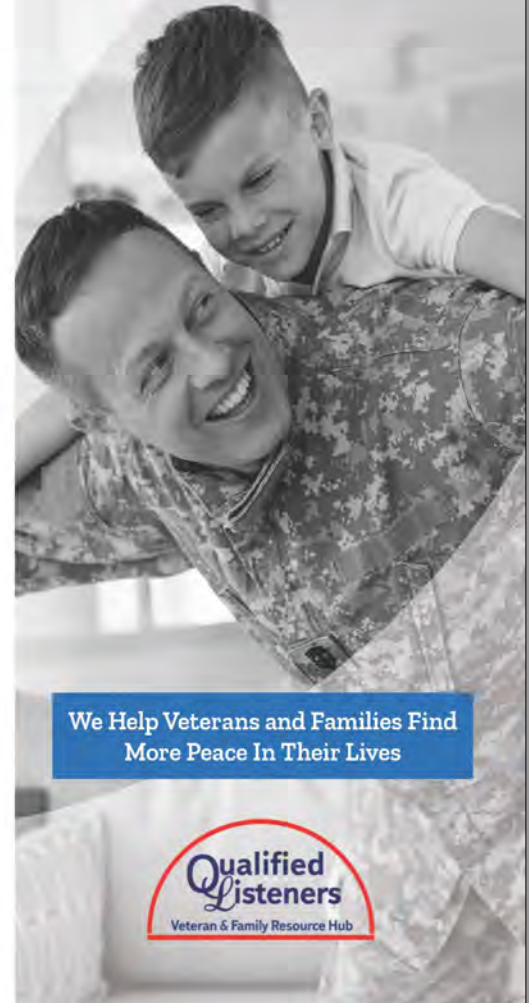
720-600-0860

[QualifiedListeners.org](http://QualifiedListeners.org)

P.O. Box 563  
Dacono, CO 80514

PO Box 2382  
Tijeras, NM 87059

## VETERAN & FAMILY RESOURCE HUB



We Help Veterans and Families Find  
More Peace In Their Lives



(more on next page)



# What does Qualified Listeners do?



**WE HELP VETERANS AND FAMILIES FIND MORE PEACE IN THEIR LIVES!**

## ☑ LISTENING

To everyone who calls and can be followed by phone or in-person sessions, including, assisted living facilities or Hospice visitations.

## ☑ VET TRANSPORTS

Medical appointments or other necessary trips.

## ☑ FREE VETERAN & FAMILY RESOURCE DIRECTORY

Printed and Online with quarterly updates. Over 11,000 in circulation in print and online.

## ☑ MOBILITY DEVICES & HOUSEHOLD ITEMS

Pickup and distribute donated goods.

## ☑ COORDINATE HOME, YARD, & AUTO REPAIRS & MAINTENANCE

## ☑ PROVIDE ASSISTANCE IN ARRANGING BURIALS

## ☑ DIRECTING PEOPLE TO SERVICES

Assistance with connecting to Veteran Service Offices, household budgeting help, home insurance, health insurance, & drug & alcohol abuse assistance.

## ☑ COORDINATION OF SERVICES

Including errands, gift cards, home modifications for mobility challenges, & housing.

## ☑ CONNECTING VETERANS TO MENTAL HEALTH EXPERTS

## ☑ CONNECTING VETERANS TO JOBS & VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES

## ☑ ADVOCATE ON BEHALF OF THE VETERAN

Teach service providers to understand the actual needs of Veterans and their families, outside or inside the VA.

## ☑ CONNECTING VETERANS TO GROUPS

Including Marine Corps League, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), PAMVET breakfast club, Monday morning Ken's coffee group, & Honor Flight programs.

## ☑ CONNECTING VETERANS TO OTHER VETERANS

By branch, by military job, & by era.

## ☑ HEALING THROUGH HELPING

Help our volunteers to learn the power of Healing through Helping

**WE CHANGE LIVES, WE IMPACT LIVES, WE SAVE LIVES.**

If you would like to volunteer, donate, or are seeking help, please contact Qualified Listeners today!

720-600-0860 | [QualifiedListeners.org](http://QualifiedListeners.org)  
P.O. Box 563 | Dacono, CO 80514  
PO Box 2382 | Tijeras, NM 87059



**SERVING COLORADO, NEW MEXICO & WYOMING**





## STARS & STRIPES 2023 SUMMER CAMPS

RAFTING ★ HIKING ★ BIKING ★ CAMPING ★ FISHING

### VETERANS FLY FISHING CAMP

During this 5-day/4-night camp, participants will learn the fundamentals of fly fishing, enjoy an overnight camping experience, and have the opportunity to explore other outdoor activities.

**Ages:** 19+ | **Check In:** July 9 / **Check Out:** July 13

### VETERANS RAFTING CAMP

During this mild to wild 5-day/4-night camp, participants will spend 3 days on the river – starting out with a day trip, followed by an overnight adventure.

**Ages:** 19+ | **Check In:** July 16 / **Check Out:** July 20

### VETERANS WOMEN'S RETREAT

Geared towards survivors and centered around the peace and serenity of nature, participants will spend at least one night being connected to nature on a camping trip along with additional outdoor activities, health and well opportunities, and yoga during this 5-day, 4-night itinerary.

**Dates:** **Check In:** August 13 / **Check Out:** August 17

**Learn more at [steamboatstars.com](https://steamboatstars.com) or email [kyle@steamboatstars.com](mailto:kyle@steamboatstars.com)**

### CAMP INFORMATION

**Cost:** A \$100 deposit is required from all Veterans which will be returned upon completion of the camp and a completion of a survey.

**Lodging:** Participants will be staying at the STARS Ranch or camping for a night or two in the wilderness depending on which camp participants register for.

**Family Members:** The cost to bring a family member will cover accommodations, breakfast and dinner daily, and daily transportation to and from activities. It will not include activities, unless otherwise specified.

**Meals:** Breakfast and dinner included.

**NOT Included:** Airfare/transportation to and from Steamboat Springs, CO.



## News from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)



### VA Creates Equity Team to Ensure Fair Distribution of Benefits

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has created an agency equity team to ensure that VA delivers on its promise to provide world-class care and benefits to all veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors — regardless of their age, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, or sexual identity.

The Agency Equity Team, known as the I\*DEA (inclusion, diversity, equity, and access) Council, will be responsible for helping VA improve outcomes for historically underserved veterans, identifying and eliminating any disparities in VA health care and benefits, creating and implementing a VA Equity Action Plan, listening to and learning from historically underserved veteran communities, and more.

The council will also work to eliminate disparities and barriers to recruit, hire, develop, promote, and retain employees, including those from historically underserved communities. The council will report directly to VA's deputy secretary.

VA also announced that it has created a new Equity Assurance Office within the Veterans Benefits Administration. This office will work in coordination with the I\*DEA Council to eliminate any disparities in the delivery of earned benefits to veterans, including disability benefits, housing benefits, GI Bill® benefits, and much more.

VA is standing up the I\*DEA Council and the VBA Equity Assurance Office as a part of its mission to provide world-class care and benefits to all veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. These efforts are also a part of executing President Biden's executive orders on advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities.

"At VA, it's our mission to serve all veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors as well as they've served our country," said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. "This new Agency Equity Team will help us deliver on that promise, making sure that we provide every veteran with the world-class care and benefits they deserve — no matter their age, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, or sexual identity. The team's first order of business will be identifying any disparities in VA health care and benefits and eliminating them." *(continued on next page)*



The new I\*DEA Council is an evolution of VA's I\*DEA Sub-Council, which Secretary McDonough [established in 2021](#) to embed inclusion, diversity, equity and access into all VA activities.

The new action-oriented council will be comprised of senior leaders from across VA, including leaders from the Veterans Health Administration, the Veterans Benefits Administration, the National Cemetery Administration, the Center for Women Veterans, the Center for Minority Veterans, and other parts of VA.

The Council will be empowered to make decisions across VA to ensure equitable outcomes for veterans, and it will work directly with historically underserved veteran communities, as well as veterans' service organizations, congressional partners, union partners, and others.

## The Veterans Benefits Banking Program: What Is It???

Remember those days when you had to wait for your check to be handed out at your job, or for it to be delivered via the mail? If so, you know it was a long, cumbersome process that many of us are glad we no longer must deal with.

Well, thanks to the establishment of [VA's Veterans Benefits Banking Program \(VBBP\)](#), more than 250,000 veterans and their beneficiaries have joined VBBP and no longer have to wait. The program was established in 2019 to create bank accounts, convert paper checks to direct deposit, and allow recipients to receive their benefits payments through electronic funds transfers (EFT) quickly and safely.

VBBP benefits also now apply to VA-approved caregivers in addition to veterans and their beneficiaries. In fact, VA recently updated its mission statement to include caregivers: "To fulfill President Lincoln's promise to care for those who have served in our nation's military and for their families, caregivers, and survivors."

There are 71 financial institutions participating in VBBP—this includes 17 banks and 54 credit unions. VA started VBBP with the [nonprofit Association of Military Banks of America \(AMBA\)](#), helping connect veterans with participating banks or credit unions that understand your financial needs. AMBA continues to recruit new financial institutions at a record pace, and their collaboration with VA keeps VBBP growing.

[Free credit counseling](#) from the National Foundation for Credit Counseling (NFCC) and [free financial counseling](#) through the Association for Financial Counseling & Planning Education® (AFCPE®) are also available through VBBP. These counselors work with veterans, beneficiaries, caregivers and family members to develop customized plans to meet their unique goals and needs.

*(continued on next page)*



VA mailed letters about the free counseling to nearly 2.5 million veterans and beneficiaries between August 2022 and May 2023 to spread the word.

The program also sponsors [VetCenters](#), a financial education program that covers topics like budgeting, and is specifically designed for veterans and their families. The [Veterans Saves program](#) was also created to help veterans build financial resilience, save, plan and budget for the future.

### **For more information**

VBBP helps veterans take an important step toward protecting their VA benefits. If you, or someone you know, are eligible for VA benefits and would like to learn more about VBBP, please [visit the Veterans Banking website](#) or [VA's banking information website](#).

## **VA Partners With Arthritis Foundation to Increase Arthritis Awareness**

In collaboration with VA, the Arthritis Foundation created a new [webpage](#) filled with information and resources to help Veterans take control of arthritis symptoms and challenges.

Arthritis affects approximately 1-in-4 adults and is the primary cause of disability in the U.S. A 2013 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) [study](#) found that veterans are more likely to develop arthritis than non-veterans.



Physical injuries and exposure to occupational hazards during service puts veterans at a heightened risk for developing arthritis. Arthritis causes pain, stiffness, swelling, tenderness and reduced range of motion in joints which can make routine tasks challenging. For veterans already coping with obstacles such as post-traumatic stress, dealing with the effects of arthritis is challenging.

### **VA resources to help Veterans with arthritis**

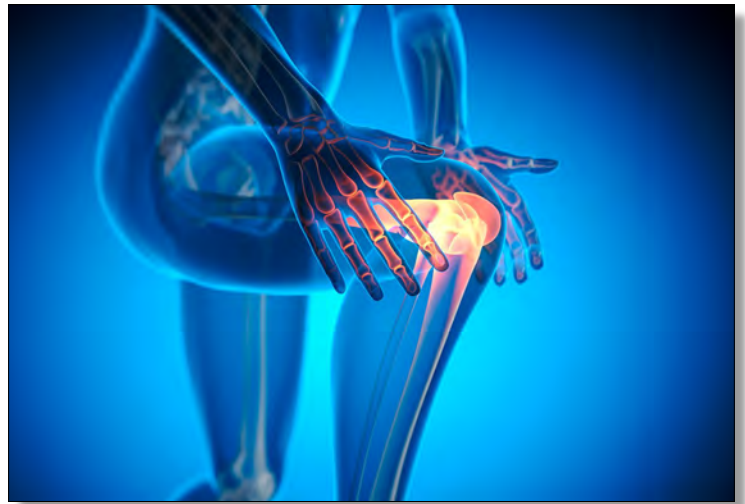
VA is committed to supporting veterans with arthritis and helping them maintain a high quality of life. VA offers [various resources](#), including ongoing research and information on drug-free strategies to relieve pain.

VA's online patient portal [My HealtheVet](#) provides articles, self-assessment tools and helpful tips on how to manage arthritis. The Veterans Health Library provides veterans and their families with up-to-date health information and tools on arthritis, including [videos about the different types of arthritis](#) and pain management resources. Veterans can also [contact local](#) VA health care facilities to learn more about new therapies that may be available.



## Partnering to improve the lives of Veterans with arthritis

In 2021, VA's [National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships \(HAP\)](#) partnered with the [Arthritis Foundation \(AF\)](#) to help veterans living with arthritis. The partnership is dedicated to expanding access to care, education and support services with a focus on helping veterans effectively manage pain, symptoms and other challenges.



The [Live Yes! Connect Groups](#) provide support, education, robust programming, expert speakers and camaraderie so veterans and service members with arthritis can connect and meet others who understand their challenges.

The [Find Your Workout page](#) offers podcasts, webinars and programs with safe and effective workouts for veterans with arthritis.

The pain management trackers help Veterans proactively [track their symptoms](#) and record details for their next doctor's appointment.

The partnership has produced or collaborated on the creation of two webinars specifically for veterans: “[Arthritis in the Military: Getting the Best Possible Care](#)” and “[Navigating Arthritis for Veterans in Agriculture](#).”



## DVS Field Offices in New Mexico

DVS has field offices throughout the state that are staffed with nationally accredited veterans service officers who are dedicated to helping veterans with filing VA claims, applying for state veterans benefits, or with helping with anything else a veteran or their family needs with.

Office hours are Monday-Friday from 8am-5pm, (excluding holidays).

Though this service is free, appointments are required and can be

made by contacting the VSOs below. **Please note: in addition to in-office assistance, VSOs can offer phone or email assistance to any veteran in New Mexico.**

### Alamogordo/Southeast NM

**David Henley**

411 10th Street #107  
(575) 937-5620

[david.henley@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:david.henley@dvs.nm.gov)

### Albuquerque Metro Area

**May Chavez** (*ABQ metro supervisor*)

Pinetree Business Park/Bldg. 2  
4801 Indian School Rd. NE/2nd floor  
(505) 383-2400

[helen.chavez@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:helen.chavez@dvs.nm.gov)

### Albuquerque Metro Area

**Austin Walker**

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### Albuquerque Metro Area

**Hope Fryer**

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### Albuquerque Metro Area

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### Belen/Albuquerque Metro Area

**Rob Miller**

Belen Business Center  
719 South Main. St.  
(505) 537-9339

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### Carlsbad/Southeast NM

**Dagmar Youngberg**

101 N. Halagueno  
(575) 988-5900

[dagmar.youngberg@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:dagmar.youngberg@dvs.nm.gov)

### Clovis/Southeast NM

**Matt Barela** (*SE region supervisor*)

904 W. Sixth St.  
(575) 825-9602

[matthew.barela@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:matthew.barela@dvs.nm.gov)

### Clovis/Southeast NM

**Ben Padilla**

904 W. Sixth St.  
(505) 537-1445

[ben.padilla@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:ben.padilla@dvs.nm.gov)

### Farmington/Northwest NM

**Robert Guinn** (*region supervisor*)

San Juan College Vet Center/  
Room 1715-B  
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### Farmington/Northwest NM

**Candice Pioche-Zunie**

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### Gallup/Northwest NM

**John Livingston**

908 E. Buena Vista Ave/Room 1A  
(505) 389-8731

[john.livingston@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:john.livingston@dvs.nm.gov)

(more offices are on the next page)



**Grants/Northwest NM****April Ball**

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(505) 521-8132

[april.ball@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:april.ball@dvs.nm.gov)**Hobbs/Southeast NM****Fred Solis-Littlejohn**

2120 North Alto St.

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[fred.solis-little@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:fred.solis-little@dvs.nm.gov)**Las Cruces/Southwest NM****Miguel Martinez** (*supervisor*)

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(505) TBD

[jimmy.saiz@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:jimmy.saiz@dvs.nm.gov)**Rio Rancho/Northwest NM****Dustin Newsom**

Sandoval County Admin. Bldg.

1500 Idalia Rd./Bldg. D, Room 2041

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1600 SE Main Street /Suite 2A

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[danielle.thompson@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:danielle.thompson@dvs.nm.gov)**Santa Fe/Northwest NM****Nick McKenzie**Bataan Memorial Bldg. 1st Floor/  
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Juan Chacon Bldg./Rm. 138A

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[clarissa.sierra@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:clarissa.sierra@dvs.nm.gov)**Taos/Northwest NM****Leticia “Lety” Cano**Health & Human Service Bldg.  
145 Roy Rd.

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[leticia.cano@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:leticia.cano@dvs.nm.gov)**Women Veterans Program****Theresa Figueroa**

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[theresa.figueroa@dvs.nm.gov](mailto:theresa.figueroa@dvs.nm.gov)**Pueblos/Tribal Liaison****Beverly Charley**

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