



**Michelle Lujan Grisham**  
*Governor*

**Sonya L. Smith**  
*DVS Secretary*

**OR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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March 4, 2021

**DVS Secretary Smith Discusses Veterans Issues With Staffs  
of U.S. Senators Heinrich and Lujan**

SANTA FE-New Mexico Department of Veterans Services (DVS) Secretary Sonya L. Smith met with representatives from offices of U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich and U.S. Senator Ben Ray Lujan yesterday to discuss ways DVS can work with the two senators to improve the lives of New Mexico's veterans.

In a morning videoconference with Senator Heinrich's staff, Secretary Smith provided an update on the DVS Highly Rural Veterans Transportation Grant launched last month to provide free transportation for rural-area veterans to and from their home to any VA medical appointment.

In noting the first phase of the program's launch to serve veterans living in Cibola, Colfax, Guadalupe, and Socorro counties, the staff asked if the program would expand.

Secretary Smith responded that it will expand to six more counties in the near future, and that DVS will re-apply for another VA grant to allow even further expansion.

Secretary Smith congratulated Senator Heinrich for his appointment as chairman of the Senate Appropriation Committee's Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies subcommittee—which oversees funding for new military construction, and all aspects of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs funding.

“This is great news for our agency and the veterans of New Mexico,” said Secretary Smith.

In an afternoon videoconference with Senator Lujan's staff, among the topics discussed was the willingness for DVS and the senator's staff to look into the expansion and improvement of telehealth care for veterans—especially in rural areas of the state.

Secretary Smith agreed, the need to improve broadband internet infrastructure and access is even more critical.

“Telehealth care is the future, and the future is now—it's already here,” she said. “But what good is it if veterans have computers, phones, and tablets—but you can't get an internet connection? So yes, we do need to work together on this.”

She also explained how the COVID-19 public health restrictions has opened up possibilities to increase outreach to veterans. DVS staff have been working remotely and not offering face to face assistance for serving veterans.

“While we know that there are those who prefer in-person assistance, this virtual element has really expanded how we can now operate as an agency”, she said. “Just because a veteran lives in Albuquerque doesn't mean he or she has to work with an Albuquerque VSO. Veterans can now work with any of our veterans service officers anywhere in the state.”

Both meetings ended on high notes, with each staff and DVS eager to meet regularly to discuss veterans issues. DVS hopes to hold similar videoconference meetings with staffs of Congresswomen Yvette Herrell, Teresa Leger Fernandez, and the presumptive replacement for Congresswoman Debra Haaland, is awaiting confirmation to serve as President Joe Biden's Interior Secretary.

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