

N.M. VETERANS NEWSLETTER



LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

FOR NEW MEXICO'S VETERANS

SUMMER 2021



DEAR FRIEND,

I am proud to have several veterans in my family and to serve a state with one of the highest rates of military volunteerism in the nation. Veterans deserve more than just words of gratitude for their sacrifice when they return home. They deserve the quality care and benefits they earned. In my new role this Congress as the Chairman of the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee, I oversee funding for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). I am committed to fighting for all the resources and funding VA needs to keep America's promise to our service members and their families.

Veterans have faced unique challenges during the pandemic and economic crisis. The American Rescue Plan that President Biden signed into law earlier this year provides billions of dollars in emergency funding for the Veterans Health Administration to deliver health care to veterans who may have delayed care or more complex health care needs as a result of the pandemic. I fought to include strong funding levels for COVID-19 related care, improving telehealth services for rural veterans, and supercharging our vaccine distribution campaign for veterans. I also fought to include \$1 billion in funds so VA can waive co-payment debt of veterans, and stop collecting co-pays for the rest of this fiscal year.

The rescue package also provides support for veterans experiencing unemployment and homelessness. That includes \$386 million to create a Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program for veterans who are unemployed due to COVID-19. It will provide up to 12 months of training and employment assistance for veterans to enter high-demand jobs. There is \$272 million directed toward substantially reducing the backlog of disability compensation and pension claims and appeals in the Veterans Benefits Administration. Finally, we included expanded support for programs that assist veterans experiencing homelessness, and additional funding for state veterans homes to improve the living conditions of our most vulnerable veterans.

My office has helped hundreds of veterans across New Mexico access their care and benefits. If you or a family member is having trouble filing a claim with VA, receiving benefits, accessing health benefits or military records, replacing medals, or other veterans issues, you can contact my office by calling (505) 346-6601 or by visiting the Veterans Resources Center on my website, [Heinrich.Senate.Gov](https://heinrich.senate.gov).

Thank you for your service and sacrifice.

Sincerely,



MARTIN HEINRICH
United States Senator

VISITING THE RAYMOND G. MURPHY VA MEDICAL CENTER

In February, I visited the Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center in Albuquerque to discuss the needs of New Mexico's military veterans and their families. During my visit, I toured the new Fisher House and the VA's Field Hospital and took time to thank VA officials and medical staff for their roles in providing COVID-19 testing and vaccine services to area-veterans, and for opening the medical center's ICU beds to non-veterans from the Navajo Nation during the pandemic.

I also spoke with Medical Center Director Andrew Welch about the expansion of the Spinal Cord Injury Center. The Albuquerque Expand Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) project was approved and included in the VA's FY21 budget request. The construction project has a total estimated cost of \$13.75 million, and will expand the existing SCI unit by approximately 13,250 square feet, including the addition of 10 private rooms to increase patient privacy.



PHOTO: U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich and Andrew Welch, Director of the New Mexico VA Health Care System at the Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center, New Mexico, February 18, 2021

THANK YOU NM NATIONAL GUARD MEMBERS

In April 2021, I visited with the New Mexico National Guard and health care workers in Albuquerque who were assisting New Mexicans to receive the COVID-19 vaccine at the Army National Guard Recruiting Center in Albuquerque. I helped secure provisions in the American Rescue Plan to ramp up vaccine distribution and help communities and businesses recover. I encourage every New Mexican who hasn't been vaccinated yet to make a plan to get vaccinated.

The willingness of the men and women of the New Mexico National Guard to serve at a moment's notice upholds the proud tradition of New Mexico military volunteerism. I was honored to meet with the Guard members who were deployed to the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. following the January 6th attack, and I will forever be grateful for their service to our country.



PHOTO: New Mexico National Guard members involved in efforts to administer COVID-19 vaccines, New Mexico, April 6, 2021

PHOTOS

PHOTO: U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich and New Mexico National Guard Unit in front of the U.S. Capitol Building, January 21, 2021



PHOTO: Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center, NM, February 18, 2021



PHOTO: Not Forgotten Outreach Farm, NM, May 5, 2021



AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT VETERAN HIGHLIGHTS

[MORE INFO](#) 

Additional funding for the Veterans Health Administration

Provides \$14.5 billion for health care services and additional resources to care for our nation's veterans.

Prohibit copayments for medical

Allows VA to waive copays that would otherwise be charged to veterans for VA health care services during this unprecedented health emergency.

Secure assistance for unemployed veterans

Provides nearly \$400 million to help get veterans back to work by funding the Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program.

Increase claims and appeals processing

Provides VA \$272 million to mitigate the backlog in claims processing caused by the pandemic.

Bolster VA's supply chain modernization

Provides \$100 million in funding to accelerate VA's supply chain modernization, which is crucial for improving the Administration's public health emergency response.

Support State Veterans Homes

Provides \$500 million to help states upgrade State Veterans Homes and \$250 million in one-time emergency payments to support these facilities.

Fund stronger oversight

Provides \$10 million to help VA's Office of Inspector General continue their stringent oversight of VA's response to the pandemic.

Emergency Employee Leave Fund

Includes \$80 million to provide certain VHA personnel with paid emergency leave.

For more information on the American Rescue Plan and how it can directly affect you, I urge you to contact my office.

DEFENDERS OF BATAAN AND CORREGIDOR CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL ACT

[MORE INFO](#)



Tens of thousands of Americans and Filipinos—including many New Mexicans— demonstrated incredible and courageous fortitude during World War II’s Bataan Death March. Bataan veterans deserve the recognition of our nation’s highest and most distinguished honor for their perseverance and patriotism. That’s why I introduced the Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor Congressional Gold Medal Act to bestow a collective Congressional Gold Medal to the troops from the United States and the Philippines who bravely defended Bataan and Corregidor and endured one of the most harrowing prisoners of war experiences in history. America owes its Bataan veterans a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid. These brave soldiers demonstrated courage in the face of captivity and inhumanity. We must never forget their undaunted heroism in the face of unthinkable conditions and horrific abuses.

Despite the unprecedented challenges brought about during 2020, I'm happy to report Congress passed some remarkable Veterans Legislation during the 116th Congress. In case you missed it, here are some of the bills I was happy to support in becoming law:

BLUE WATER NAVY VIETNAM VETERANS ACT OF 2019

[MORE INFO](#) 

- Extends the presumption of herbicide exposure, such as Agent Orange, to nearly 90,000 veterans who served in the offshore waters of the Republic of Vietnam between Jan. 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975.
- Expands VA benefits to children with spina bifida whose parent was exposed to a herbicide agent while serving in Thailand between January 9, 1962, and May 7, 1975.
- Revises the VA home loan guaranty program to adjust loan fee rates and eliminate the limit on the amount of a loan for which the VA may provide a guaranty of 25%.
- Removes the cap on a direct housing loan amount that may be made to a Native American veterans purchasing a home located on tribal land held in federal trust.
- Waives loan fees for active-duty Purple Heart recipients.

VETERANS' COMPENSATION COST-OF-LIVING ADJUSTMENT ACT OF 2020

[MORE INFO](#) 

- Increased rate of compensation for veterans with disabilities.
- Increased clothing allowance.
- Increased compensation for dependents.
- Increased compensation to surviving spouse.
- Increased compensation to children.

COMMANDER JOHN SCOTT HANNON VETERANS MENTAL HEALTH CARE IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2019

[MORE INFO](#) 

Helps increase outreach and services to veterans at risk of suicide and improves VA mental health services by:

- Improving transition from active-duty service to veteran status.
- Encouraging and incentivizing mental health professionals to work in the VA.
- Improving access, especially rural access, to mental health services.
- Increasing funding for certain suicide prevention efforts.
- Funding to integrate mental health efforts with supportive communities outside of the VA.
- Expanding veteran access to health programs.
- Supporting expanded research on mental health conditions among veterans.

Mental Health Resources for Veterans

[AVAILABLE
HERE](#) 

JOHNNY ISAKSON AND DAVID P. ROE, M.D. VETERANS HEALTH CARE AND BENEFITS IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2020

[MORE INFO](#) 

- Helps to prevent veteran homelessness by expanding program eligibility.
- Ensures female veterans receive proper VA care.
- Ensures creation of new VA sexual assault and harassment policy.
- Secures educational opportunities for veterans.
- Protects veterans from predatory schools.
- Extends in-state tuition to all veterans seeking to attend public schools.
- Mandates studying toxic chemicals veterans have been exposed to.



CHAIRMAN OF MILITARY CONSTRUCTION AND VA APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE

PHOTO: U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich in a Subcommittee on Military Construction and VA Appropriations Hearing on military infrastructure and climate resilience, May 19, 2021

I am honored to take on a new leadership role overseeing U.S. Department of Defense military construction funding and the entire budget of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). I will take all that I learned over 12 years of service on the House and Senate Armed Services Committee and fight to ensure our military installations have all of the modern facilities they need to execute their national security missions. I will also focus on securing all the resources and funding the VA needs to keep America's promise to our service members and their families when they return home as veterans. In my first months as chairman, I held hearings to examine the VA's Telehealth Program and to make sure our military installations are resilient to natural disasters and climate change.



HONORING THE SERVICE OF ALFRED AUSTEN

PHOTO: U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich and Alfred Austen, December 22, 2019

On December 22, 2019, before the start of the pandemic, I hosted a medal ceremony for Korean War veteran, Alfred Austen. I was privileged to honor the military service of U.S. Army Private First Class (PFC) Austen by presenting the Albuquerque resident with the Korean Service Medal and Triple Bronze Star Attachment, the Presidential Unit Citation, the Meritorious Unit Commendation, the National Defense Service Medal, and the United Nations Service Medal. Austen, age 91, was initially awarded these medals and commendations after serving in three campaigns in Korea, but had never received them. More than 65 years later, Mr. Austen finally received recognition for his service to our country.

AIRBORNE HAZARDS AND OPEN BURN PIT REGISTRY

I welcome President Biden's recent announcement that all American servicemembers will withdraw from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. The war in Afghanistan is now by far the longest in American history, and I am grateful for the contributions of all who have served over these past two decades. We know the challenges of war are not all left behind on the battlefield when the time comes for our service men and women to pack up and come home.

It's estimated that over the course of the first Gulf War and 20 years of warfare in Southwest Asia since 9/11, about 3 million veterans have been exposed to burn pits and other airborne hazards that can have long-term impacts on their health. Fewer than 300,000 of these 3 million veterans with possible exposure have signed up for the [VA's Airborne Hazard and Open Burn Pit Registry](#). If you know a veteran who may have been exposed to these toxic environments, please tell them about the registry and encourage them to share any possible exposure with their healthcare provider. The more veterans who sign up, the better the VA will understand the long-term effects of these exposures and more veterans will be connected to the health care they've earned.

[SIGN UP HERE](#)



HOW CAN I HELP YOU?



PHOTO: U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich and New Mexico National Guard Unit in front of the U.S. Capitol Building, January 21, 2021

MY OFFICE CAN HELP WITH:

- VA Claims
- Military Records
- Replacement Medals
- GI Bill Benefits
- VA Home Loans
- VA Health Benefits
- Survivor's Benefits

TO START A CASE WITH MY OFFICE:

Call My Office At (505) 346-6601 or fill out the Privacy Release Form on my Website: Heinrich.Senate.Gov

**PRIVACY RELEASE
FORM**





U.S. SENATOR MARTIN HEINRICH

HEINRICH.SENATE.GOV

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