

N.M. VETERANS NEWSLETTER

U.S. SENATOR MARTIN HEINRICH



SUMMER 2018

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

FOR NEW MEXICO'S VETERANS



COVER PHOTO: Rio Rancho Memorial Day Ceremony, May 28, 2018

August 2018

DEAR FRIEND,

Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of participating in the Rio Rancho Memorial Day Ceremony, where a fallen New Mexican from each branch of the armed forces was recognized and honored. I had the privilege of presenting U.S. Capitol Flags to the mother of Lance Corporal Christopher Adlesperger, who was killed in Iraq, and to the sister of Hospitalman Third Class Phil Isadore Valdez, who was killed in action in Vietnam.

I am always moved by how many ordinary New Mexicans made and continue to make extraordinary contributions to our national security--from the Navajo Code Talkers and Bataan Death Marchers in World War II to the men and women serving today in missions at New Mexico's military bases and all around the globe.

We must never forget those lost to protect our nation. I strongly believe we must also honor the families they left behind, and our service members and veterans who fought alongside them. They deserve much more than just words of gratitude for answering the call of duty. We must also keep our promises to our veterans and their families so they receive the recognition and benefits they earned.

On Memorial Day, we paused to reflect on countless stories of personal sacrifice, perseverance, and patriotism that should never be forgotten. We owe an immeasurable debt to our men and women in uniform who gave their lives to protect and defend our nation. Let's all pledge to honor those great Americans each and every day.

Sincerely,



MARTIN HEINRICH
United States Senator



MISSION ACT: REFORMING VA

PHOTOS: Rio Rancho Memorial Day Ceremony, May 28, 2018

I was pleased to support the 2018 VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act, which was signed into law in June.

This legislation has the strong support of veterans and military service organizations and represents more than a year of negotiations on the future of the VA's community care programs. The new law will help New Mexico's veterans by giving them more choice and flexibility to access better health care.



COMMUNITY CARE PROGRAMS

The MISSION Act consolidates seven VA community care programs, including the Choice Program, and includes funding to keep Choice operating until the new community care program is operational.

The law also lifts restrictions on the Family Caregiver Program that provides benefits to those caring for severely wounded veterans. Before this reform, comprehensive caregiver assistance and benefits were provided only to veterans injured on or after September 11, 2001, leaving family caregivers and veterans injured during World War II, the Korean, Vietnam and 1990-1991 Gulf War ineligible for this critical support. The new law extends the Family Caregiver Program to veterans of all eras.

THE MISSION ACT ALSO:

- Establishes education and training programs to inform veterans about their VA health care options.
- Establishes mobile medical deployment teams to provide additional care at understaffed or overwhelmed VA facilities.
- Creates greater recruitment, retention and relocation incentives so that VA can attract and maintain high-quality providers and better address workforce vacancies.
- Authorizes VA to hire more medical scribes to assist physicians so that doctors can focus on serving veterans, and not filling out paperwork.
- Creates incentives for medical residents and providers to work at rural, tribal, and underserved VA facilities.
- Increases accountability over opioid prescribing practices for veterans.
- Removes barriers for veterans to access mental telehealth care closer to home.

SUPPORTING VETERANS

HELPING NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS FIND A HOME IN INDIAN COUNTRY

On May 30, I led a group of 11 Senators seeking to improve a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) program that assists Native American veterans find a home in Indian Country and allow them to live near their families with access to culturally appropriate and traditional healing practices.

In a letter to the Senate Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, we requested an improvement to the Tribal HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program.

The Tribal HUD-VASH program is a demonstration program to help Native veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness receive rental assistance and supportive services. However, in implementing the program, HUD determined that vouchers could not be used to house veterans in housing units built using Indian Housing Block Grant funds. This restriction severely limits opportunities to house veterans on Tribal lands. We are calling for a no-cost fix that would allow Tribal housing authorities participating in the program to use Tribal HUD-VASH funds to provide available housing to Native veterans.

VA ANNOUNCEMENTS

VA OFFERS EARLY PARTICIPATION IN THE RAPID APPEALS MODERNIZATION PROGRAM

Because of the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017, the VA has been piloting the new Rapid Appeals Modernization Program (RAMP) on an invitation-only basis. The VA recently announced they are expanding access to RAMP by removing the requirement that veterans first receive an invitation from VA to opt into the program. RAMP provides an opportunity for veterans with a pending disability compensation appeal to have early access to the more efficient review process that will become fully operational in 2019.

VA PROVIDES MEDICAL APPOINTMENT REMINDERS THROUGH TEXT MESSAGE

Did you know that over 9 million VA health care appointments are missed each year? In an attempt to increase health care access for all veterans, VA has created VEText, an appointment reminder service that allows veterans to confirm or cancel a medical appointment on their mobile phones via text message. Every veteran with a mobile phone number listed in his or her VA health record will automatically be enrolled to receive reminders from the VEText service. Please make sure your current mobile number is up to date with the VA. If you are unable to attend your appointment, you can cancel it with a simple response, creating an open slot for another veteran and preventing a no-show.

CONSTITUENT SERVICES

COMBAT-INJURED VETERANS TAX FAIRNESS ACT

In 2016, I cosponsored the Combat-Injured Veterans Tax Fairness Act after the Department of Defense revealed it had incorrectly taxed non-taxable lump-sum disability severance payments on more than 300,000 U.S. veterans between 1991 and 2016. The law went into effect in 2017 and waives the statute of limitations for filing an amended tax return, eliminating the need to sue. This allows 130,000 remaining veterans to receive a refund for their portion of the estimated \$80 million in overpaid taxes.

Between July 9 and July 20, 2018 the Defense Department mailed notification letters to veterans who received lump-sum disability severance payments during that 25-year period who have not already filed a refund claim. That letter contains instructions for filing an amended tax return to claim a refund. Veterans who are eligible for the tax refund must have received a disability discharge between January 1991 and December 2016, received a lump-sum disability severance payment from the Department of Defense, and not previously filed for a refund. Regular monthly disability compensation benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs do not apply.

The refund claim process is complex. So if you are a veteran, or the spouse of a now deceased veteran, who meets these eligibility criteria and you need assistance navigating the refund claim process, please contact my office at (505) 346-6601.



NATIONAL NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS

EVENT ANNOUNCEMENTS

Artist rendering of The National Native American Veterans Memorial, Warriors' Circle of Honor, Harvey Pratt

GROUNDBREAKING FOR THE NATIONAL NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS MEMORIAL

New Mexico's Tribal communities have a storied history of military service. In 2013, I enthusiastically supported the passing of the Native American Veterans' Memorial Amendments Act, which commissioned the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian to build a National Native American Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

The Smithsonian recently announced the selection of Cheyenne/Arapaho artist Harvey Pratt's design concept for the memorial titled "Warriors' Circle of Honor." Groundbreaking for the memorial is set for September 21, 2019 and it is set to open late 2020.

HOW CAN I HELP YOU?



PHOTO: U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich presents Capitol flags to families of fallen service members during the Memorial Day ceremony in Rio Rancho, May 28, 2018

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



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