



Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Committees Bill Highlights

The fiscal year 2024 appropriations bill for Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies provides the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and related agencies \$135.25 billion in non-defense discretionary funding, as well as \$172.5 billion in mandatory funding, to fulfill our nation's obligations to our veterans. The bill also provides advance appropriations for our veterans in fiscal year 2025, including \$112.6 billion for veterans' medical care and \$195.8 billion for veterans benefits. In addition, the bill includes \$18.7 billion in defense spending for military construction and family housing for fiscal year 2024—an increase of \$2 billion over the President's budget request—to upgrade and modernize critical infrastructure and support military families.

Access to Care for Rural and Tribal Veterans: The bill includes report language Heinrich authored to prevent the VA from closing Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs). This will ensure that veterans have access to care at VA facilities and effectively protect key facilities in rural and Tribal areas from being closed through the quadrennial market assessments process conducted by the VA's Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission.

Transportation for Rural Veterans: The bill increases funding for the Highly Rural Transportation Grants (HRTG) program to \$15 million, an increase of \$5 million. This program helps veterans in rural areas travel to VA or VA-authorized health care facilities. The increase in funding will directly benefit New Mexico veterans who utilize HRTGs in Colfax, Union, Mora, Harding, San Miguel, Quay, Guadalupe, Cibola, Socorro, Torrance, Lincoln, De Baca, Catron, Sierra, and Hidalgo Counties through the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services.

Rural Health for Veterans: The bill increases funding for an existing home-based primary care program serving veterans located in rural and highly rural areas by increasing relevant research, innovation, and dissemination capabilities. Many veterans in New Mexico live in rural and tribal areas, and these veterans often must travel to major medical centers in urban areas for medical care, sometimes requiring multiple-day trips. Native American veterans often live in rural areas and are disproportionately affected by the distance they must travel for medical care. The bill delivers \$347.5 million in funding veteran rural home-based care, \$10 million more than the FY 2023 enacted level and the President's budget request.

Homeless Veterans Assistance: The bill increases funding to expand Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program, the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program, and the Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program. This funding will build on the success of FY23 by providing an 8% increase of funding for a total of \$3.1 billion. These programs support communities across the nation providing critical services and housing for veterans and their families. The number of veterans experiencing homelessness has decreased substantially nationwide since 2009, a 50% reduction by some estimates. As of January 2020, New Mexico had an estimated 3,333 veterans experiencing homelessness on any given day, as reported by Continuums of Care to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Of that total 252 were Veterans experiencing chronic homelessness.

State Extended Care Facilities: The bill provides \$154 million for grants to construct state extended care facilities and includes Heinrich's request for a review of the VA Secretary's project prioritization process for these grants. The current prioritization criteria can have an adverse impact to veterans in rural states, as some of the criteria are influenced by population.

Suicide Prevention Coordinators: Heinrich successfully advocated for report language that improves veteran access to Suicide Prevention Coordinators. In 2018, the veteran suicide rate in New Mexico was significantly higher than the national veteran suicide rate and the general population suicide rate. The VA Suicide Prevention Coordinator utilizes real-time technologies to remain engaged in a veteran's daily life and proactively support veterans to ensure they are well. The bill includes \$559 million for veteran suicide prevention outreach.

VA Medical and Prosthetics Research: The bill delivers \$938 million in funding for research on Prosthetics and Limb Loss. The VA's Prosthetics and Sensory Aids Service is the largest and most comprehensive provider of prosthetic devices and sensory aids in the world. This funding would continue to support the VA's research to restore veterans' highest possible level of functioning within their families, communities, and workplaces by providing the most up to date prosthetics.

Neurology Centers of Excellence: Nine million veterans are enrolled in VA care around the nation, including many who suffer from neurologic diseases. Many of these veterans benefit from the unique care of neurology-related Centers of Excellence, which are fully integrated into a VA medical center to better coordinate multidisciplinary care. There are centers around the country that focus on Multiple Sclerosis, Epilepsy, Parkinson's, and Headache Disorders. The bill provides \$70 million of funding to build on this work, provides clear funding for all the Centers, and aligns the Epilepsy and Headache centers.

Heinrich successfully advocated for major increases in funding to programs that support veterans and secured key language to protect access to health care for veterans in New Mexico.

Heinrich successfully secured funding for the following New Mexico projects in the bill:

- **\$8,200,000 to construct a headquarters fire station at White Sands Missile Range**
- **\$5,600,000 to renovate and expand the Guided Missile Building at White Sands Missile Range**
- **\$4,450,000 to construct a High Energy Laser Systems Test Facility fire station at White Sands Missile Range**

Heinrich and U.S. Senator Ben Ray Luján (D-N.M.) also successfully included funding for the following projects:

- **\$11,000,000 for the Rio Rancho National Guard Vehicle Maintenance Shop, in addition to the planning and design funding that Heinrich and Luján secured for this project in the FY23 Appropriations Funding Agreement.**
- **\$4,300,000 to refurbish a health facility in Roswell, N.M., for statewide collective training, soldier combat-readiness, and combat-fitness test requirements for the New Mexico National Guard**
- **\$3,600,000 for the planning and development of a new Access Control Point to replace the current El Paso Gate Access Control Point for White Sands Missile Range**
- **\$3,060,000 to plan and design a new laboratory, operations, and administration facility at the Joint Directed Energy Test Center on White Sands Missile Range**
- **\$2,000,000 to plan and design a new fire station and emergency communications center on Cannon Air Force Base**