



The Guardian

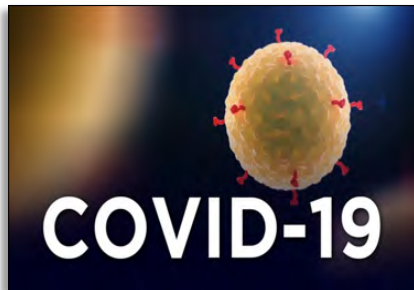
The Newsletter of the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services

www.nmdvs.org

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March, 2020

DVS Postpones Upcoming Scheduled Events in Light of COVID-19/Novel Coronavirus Pandemic



The New Mexico Department of Veterans Services (DVS) has postponed all agency-related public events scheduled for the immediate future—following a New Mexico Department of Health (DOH) public health order temporarily prohibiting mass gatherings in New Mexico in response to the COVID-19/Novel Coronavirus pandemic. The public health order defines “mass gatherings” as events that bring together 100 or more people in a single room or connected space such as auditoriums, stadiums, arenas, conference centers, and theaters. Exempt from the order are airports, other mass transit, shopping malls, shelters, retail and grocery stores, offices and businesses,

courthouses, all educational institutions, child-care centers, health care facilities and other congregate care facilities and places of worship.

The following upcoming DVS-sponsored or DVS-assisted events to postponed until further notice are:

Date	Event	Location
Mar. 18	Military & Veterans Entrepreneurial Summit	Las Cruces/Las Cruces Convention Center
Mar. 26	Ohkay Owingeh Vietnam War 50 th Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony	Ohkay Owingeh Hotel & Casino
Mar. 27	Santa Fe Veterans Benefits Claims Clinic	Dept. of Workforce Solutions Bldg.
Apr. 8	DVS 2 nd Quarterly Briefing	Albuquerque Veterans Memorial
Apr. 9	Bataan Remembrance Day Ceremony	Santa Fe/Eternal Flame Monument
Apr. 13-17	NACVSO Accreditation Training Conference	Santa Fe/Higher Education Department Bldg.
Apr. 25- May 1	Native American Training Institute Conference	Isleta Casino & Resort

The status for events scheduled for May and beyond are currently still listed as a “go”—but may be subjected to change pending further actions by DOH and the Governor’s office.

“I hope our veterans and their families understand the reasoning behind the postponements of these events,” said DVS Secretary Judy Griego. “DVS will follow the lead of the Department of Health and the Governor’s office, and will certainly look to reschedule some of these postponed events if possible.”

(see page 12 more information about COVID-19/the Novel Coronavirus from the New Mexico Dept. of Health, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, and the VA)

State Budget Signed by Governor Lujan Grisham; Sets the DVS FY2021 Budget

The Fiscal Year 2021 operating budget for the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services (DVS) has been finalized with the signing by Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham of the \$7.6 billion state FY2021 budget on March 11.

The DVS FY2021 budget will enable DVS Secretary Judy Griego to address the two most pressing needs she identified after her confirmation last year as DVS Secretary: The need for additional Veterans Service Officers (VSO's), and additional staffing for the agency's state veterans' cemeteries.

Filling these positions, she said, will greatly help the agency fulfill its mandate of serving New Mexico's veterans and their families—and in particular, carrying out its most important duty.

"First and foremost, DVS was created to help veterans file for or update their VA and state veterans benefits—which can be a complicated process. This is our number-one mission," said Secretary Griego. "We also need to increase our reach to rural-area veterans....and increase our overall outreach from our existing field offices. Our new budget will help us do this—and I'm excited to get started."

"I want to thank all 112 state legislators, the Governor, and Lt. Governor Morales for their support of the state budget—and with it, the DVS budget," she said. "I realize there is a give-and-take when, at the end, it comes time to making final decisions. So I'm grateful that all involved saw to it that New Mexico's veterans are getting the budget they deserve."

Legislators also approved \$2.172 million in capital outlay funding to make much-needed repairs and improvements at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Angel Fire (*right photo*) parking lot, walk ways, roof, electrical and HVAC systems, and other improvements at the Memorial.

DVS will also begin preparing a site at the Memorial for a Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall which will be funded by a project led by Vietnam Veterans of Northern New Mexico Chapter 996. (*below photo*)



The non-profit service organization is currently raising money for the design and construction of a half-scale replica of the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. For more information about this replica wall—and to make a tax-deductible donation—please go to <https://www.vietnammemorial.net>.

Veteran & Military-Related Legislation Passed in the 2020 Legislature

In addition to passing the state budget, New Mexico's state Senators and Representatives introduced nineteen veteran and military-related bills pieces of legislation. Of the nineteen, one senate memorial (SM) was passed in the Senate and signed by senate officers; Two senate bills (SB) and two house bills (HB) were passed by both chambers and sent to the Governor's desk.

SM 20 Conservation of Two Bells From the Historic Battleship USS New Mexico (BB-40)

(Sponsor: Sen. William Payne/R-Bernalillo County)

Requests the New Mexico Cultural Affairs Department to convene a task force to make recommendations for the appropriate display and conservation of two bells from the historic battleship USS New Mexico (BB-40). *Passed 43-0 on the Senate floor; signed by officers of the Senate (no signature needed by the Governor)*

SB-99 Diplomas for Vietnam Veterans (Sen. George Munoz/D-Cibola, McKinley, & San Juan)

Authorized New Mexico public school districts to grant diplomas to Vietnam War veterans who left high school to serve in the Vietnam War. *Passed in the Senate 39-0; Passed in the House 67-0. Signed into law by Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham on March 6.*

SB-175 Changes to the Dept. of Military Affairs (Sen. William Burt/R-Chaves, Lincoln, & Otero)

Makes the Department of Military Affairs a cabinet-level department; creates a Civil Air Patrol Division; expands the Governor's and Adjutant General's powers to activate the National Guard and State Defense Force; and provides authority for a court martial to be convened by the "land component commander," and provides for court-martial and penalties for prohibited sexual activity with a specially protected junior member of the armed forces (includes a cadet, officer candidate or a student). *Passed in the Senate 38-0; Passed in the House 69-0. Signed into law by Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham on March 11.*

HB-30 Expedited Licensure for Qualified Military (Rep. Eliseo Alcon/D-Cibola & McKinley; Rep. Candace Gould/R-Bernalillo & Sandoval; Rep. Debra Sariñana/D-Bernalillo; Rep. Harry Garcia/D-Bernalillo, Cibola, McKinley, Socorro, San Juan, & Valencia; Rep. Patricia Roybal Caballero/D-Bernalillo)

Provides a waiver of fees and an expedited issuance of teaching, professional, and occupational license for qualified military service members, veterans, their spouses, and dependent children. *Passed in the House 56-0; Passed in the Senate 40-0. Signed into law by Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham on February 26.*

HB-22 Clarifies Military Leave for the Civil Air Patrol (Rep. Dayan Hochman-Vigil/D-Bernalillo; Rep. Candy Spence Ezzell/R-Chaves; Rep. Greg Nibert/R-Chaves & Lincoln)

Specifying what constitutes military leave, and who may authorize military leave, for members of the Civil Air Patrol. *Passed in the House 65-0; Passed in the Senate 38-0. Signed into law by Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham on March 6.*

DVS Receives VA's *Pillars of Excellence Award*



(photos from the 2019 Forgotten Heroes Funeral)

DVS has been awarded the prestigious Abraham Lincoln Pillars of Excellence Award from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVDA).

The award is presented annually to veterans services departments or organizations in recognition of outstanding state programs that support veterans.

Specifically, DVS was honored in the "Innovative State Programs" category—one of four categories for service to veterans—for its *Forgotten Heroes Program*. First presented in 2009 in cooperation with Bernalillo County, the program provides a military funeral for any honorably discharged veteran who, upon death, is unclaimed by family members—and therefore, not provided with a military funeral typically available for deceased veterans fortunate to have family to provide one for them.

NASDVA was impressed with the Forgotten Heroes Program for not only being the first state-managed effort in the nation to bury unclaimed veterans, but also for its continued occurrences. Similar funerals take place in other states, but are not state-organized—or if they are presented by the state, do not take place on a regular basis. DVS has presented a Forgotten Heroes Funeral every year since that 2009 initial funeral.

DVS Secretary Judy Griego is elated that the program is being recognized at such a high level in a category featuring many other well-deserving programs from veterans agencies throughout the nation.



"I want to thank NASDVA for honoring DVS with the Pillars of Excellence Award, and recognizing just what a truly special benefit this is for veterans who previously had no one with them at the end," she said.

"Throughout the years, DVS has presented these funerals out of gratitude and respect for these forgotten veterans. But we're all very humbled that we're being recognized on a national level for our effort. I especially want to thank DVS State Benefits Director Ed Mendez, Cemetery & Memorial Operations Bureau Chief David Walker, and Cemetery & Memorial Operations Administrative Assistant Deanna Anaya for their work in overseeing this great program."

DVS SAA Bureau Chief is the Featured Speaker at the 2020 Women in Military Tribute Luncheon



DVS State Approving Agency Bureau Chief Marilyn "Mandy" Dykman was the luncheon speaker at the *Tribute to Women in the Military Luncheon* on March 6 held this year at American Legion Post 49 in Albuquerque .

The annual event, first started in 1985, is held in Albuquerque on the first Friday of March to honor military women of the past...the present...and future. The featured luncheon speaker is chosen on a rotational basis from each of the five service branches.

Mrs. Dykman, a retired U.S. Coast Guard Lt. Commander, was the Coast Guard's first Hispanic female helicopter

pilot. In her luncheon address, she talked about that experience—how she learned from what she called " ...the best of the best: Former Vietnam War Huey helicopter pilots."

"The old UH-1H...the one with single engine. That's the one I started flying. A long-time Vietnam veteran pilot told me, 'Mandy—I'm gonna show you what this helicopter can do!,'" she said to a chuckling crowd. "And I'm praying that my lunch wasn't going to end up all throughout the cockpit! But they're the ones that taught me how to fly. I cannot thank them enough. My Vietnam brothers helped mold me into a better pilot...and helped me persevere in the Coast Guard--I want to give a 'Shout Out' to them."

She said that gave her the confidence to serve on dozens of search and rescue missions when she was based in southern California—and how it gave her the confidence to be not only a helicopter pilot...but as a woman, a valued and respected Coast Guard member.



"Women began serving in the Coast Guard in the 1970's. Today, there are more than 5,800 women. Women have persevered--serving today in positions all the way up to the officer's ranks," she said. "Women have helped shape the Coast Guard into a better institution. And they will play an even greater role in shaping this service branch well into the 21st century."



Mrs. Dykman (*left photo/in center*) was then presented with a special hand-knitted quilt from the *Quilt of Valor Foundation* in appreciation for her military service for our country.

At DVS, she is responsible for the review, evaluation, and approval of education and training programs to ensure they meet strict state and federal criteria. She conducts compliance surveys and inspection visits, provides technical assistance, and conducts outreach visits throughout the state to educate veterans about and promote the use of the GI Bill® for college/university study and vocational training.

DVS Fills Health Care Coordination Director Vacancy



Jemia Warner
DVS Health Care
Coordination Director

DVS has named Jemia Warner as the agency's Health Care Coordination Director, ending a six-month search to fill the vacant position.

Mrs. Warner will serve as the veterans' health care coordination liaison between DVS and the New Mexico VA Health Care System, the New Mexico Department of Health, and all public and private agencies providing health care for veterans.

She will also oversee the agency's veterans' health care benefits education and outreach efforts throughout the state—with an emphasis on suicide prevention, homeless and near-homelessness solutions, veterans' transportation, and veterans' court programs.

The Chicago native comes to DVS from the Salvation Army-Harbor Light Center in Washington, D.C., where she served as the agency's Senior Substance Abuse Counselor. Among her many duties, Mrs. Warner's work included coordinating the agency's evidence-based individual and group counseling efforts, particularly for the woman's population. She earned her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Social Work from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her husband, USAF Capt. Ryan Warner, PhD, is a Staff Psychologist with the 377th Medical Group at Kirtland AFB.

"It was a lengthy process, involving interviewing several outstanding candidates, but in the end I'm excited to be able to hire and welcome Jemia," said DVS Secretary Judy Griego. "She has a reputation of being an extremely hard worker—one who is dedicated to serving people needing assistance. She will be a tremendous asset as we work to educate and enroll more veterans into the VA health care system."

DVS Participates in Carlsbad Veteran Suicide & Depression Roundtable Forum



DVS Carlsbad-based Veterans Service Officer Dagmar Youngberg (*left photo/at far left*) and DVS Women Veterans Program Manager Tracie Brasier (*left photo/center*) were among several panelists participating in a roundtable forum on February 15 in Carlsbad focusing on veteran suicide and depression.

The forum at the Pecos River Village Conference Center was presented by DVS and the city of Carlsbad to engage SE New Mexico-area veterans in discussion about finding ways to deal with depression, suicide, and other mental health issues in the local veteran population.

According to the latest national data by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), every day about 20 veterans and active-duty service members take their own life. That number has remained consistent in recent years, despite increased public focus and funding from VA to combat the problem.

At the roundtable, panelists acknowledged the national suicide rate, but admit neither the VA, the New Mexico VA Health Care System, nor local officials know the rate in New Mexico. But they said it is a problem—and stress the need to recognize at-risk veterans before it's too late.

"We as veterans need to be alert to the well-being of our fellow veterans," said DVS VSO Youngberg—herself an Air Force veteran. "Chances are a troubled veteran isn't going to try and help themselves—they probably won't know what to do...or if they do, they won't know where to go for help."



According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Death Index data:

- The number of veteran suicides has exceeded 6,000 each year from 2008 to 2017
 - 17 veterans a day on average
- Including active-duty data, 20 veterans and active-duty service members a day take their own life
- The suicide rate for veterans was 1.5 times the rate for non-veteran adults
- Firearms were the method of suicide in 70.7% of male veteran suicide deaths
 - 43.2% for female veteran suicide

"One veteran a day is one too many," said Ms. Youngberg. "Veterans and veterans service organizations need to be proactive in the effort to help end veteran suicide. Don't be afraid to ask someone if you suspect they're struggling with something in their life. It may be the one gesture that could bring someone back from the edge of taking their life."

The VA has a 24-hour/365-day-a-year *Veterans Crisis Line* hotline for veterans or friends and family of veterans to call for immediate help: **1-(800) 273-8255**. Here in New Mexico, the VA has four VetCenters offering free counseling Monday-Friday from 7am-4:30pm:

Albuquerque (505) 346-6562
Farmington (505) 327-9684

Las Cruces (575) 523-9826
Santa Fe (505) 988-6562

Operation Soundstage Seeking Qualified Veterans for Behind-the-Scenes Jobs for Movies Shot in NM



The State of New Mexico and IATSE are offering new incentives to help qualified military veterans and Reserve members who want to work in the state's growing film and television industry, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham announced on February 10.

Operation Soundstage is a program to assist New Mexico's military veterans and reserve members who are interested in getting behind-the-scenes jobs with production companies shooting movies in New Mexico.

The program is administered through the Film Crew Advancement Program (FCAP), part of the Job Training Incentive Program (JTIP) for Film & Multimedia, through a multi-agency partnership, which includes the New Mexico Film Office (NMFO), the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services, and the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions, in collaboration with IATSE Local 480.

In her announcement at the annual *Film and Television Day in Santa Fe* during the Legislature, the Governor said Local 480 will waive the \$800 initiation fee—so veterans are only responsible for a \$100 processing fee. The union is also waiving the membership requirement of working 30 days in a covered craft, with some restrictions. Operation Soundstage will also offer one position on each production specifically to a New Mexico veteran participating in the program.

"Military veterans have given us so much. They have sacrificed and their families have sacrificed, and my administration will always do everything we can to assure them they are valued, recognized, and loved," Gov. Lujan Grisham said. "To that end, I am thrilled about this new program, which will help veterans who want to enter this exciting industry of film and television get a leg up and a foot in the door."

Currently, potential employers are incentivized by NMFO through training reimbursements for crew members that advance their profession. As part of FCAP, this sub-program will provide a 50% reimbursement of the qualified participant's wages to the company for up to 1,040 hours physically worked by the crew member. These funds are available for a limited number of positions.

"The film industry honors military veterans and we know they can provide an excellent pool of talent," Cabinet Secretary Alicia J. Keyes of the Economic Development Department said. "With this training, veterans and reserve members can gain valuable set experience and segue into more advanced industry positions, such as carpenters, electricians, sound technicians, makeup artists, costumers, and drivers."

IATSE Local 480 represents professional film technicians working "below-the-line" on TV and movie productions in New Mexico. "Local 480 represents 99 different craft departments from construction, art, hair and makeup, wardrobe, special effects, and production accounting," President of IATSE Local 480 Liz Pecos said. "Many veterans already possess skills that would be transferable to a film job, such as an armorer, who oversees how firearms are used during a production. We look forward to helping veterans fast track into the union so they can gain access to training and support in finding the right niche for themselves in the film and television industry of New Mexico."

For more information about the rules and benefits of joining Local 480, contact their membership coordinator, Morgan at membership@iatselocal480.com.

To learn more about participating in Operation Soundstage, contact Rochelle Bussey, Sr. Manager of Operations and Workforce Development Programs at the New Mexico Film Office by emailing rochelle@nmfilm.com or call 505-476-5604.

Las Cruces Native Killed in Afghanistan



**U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class
Antonio Rodriguez**

U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Antonio Rey Rodriguez, a native of Las Cruces, was one of two U.S. soldiers killed in Afghanistan on February 8. He was 28 years old.

Sgt. Rodriguez was serving as a Cryptologist with the 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Airborne Group, based at Eglin Air Force Base near Ft. Walton Beach, Florida. According to the U.S. Dept. of Defense, Sgt. Rodriguez was among a combined group of U.S. and Afghan soldiers fired upon by a member of the Afghan Army who had been arguing with the American soldiers. The 2009 graduate of Mayfield High School had previously served as an Army Ranger—having been deployed eight times with the 75th Ranger Regiment, and twice with his current unit in support of Operation Freedom's Sentinel in Afghanistan. He was posthumously promoted to Sgt. 1st Class and awarded the Bronze Star Medal with an Oak Leaf Cluster, and a Purple Heart.

A memorial service was held on February 21 in Las Cruces at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (*right photo*). Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham issued an Executive Order lowering all flags in the state flown at half-staff for the day. He was buried March 3 at Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, D.C.

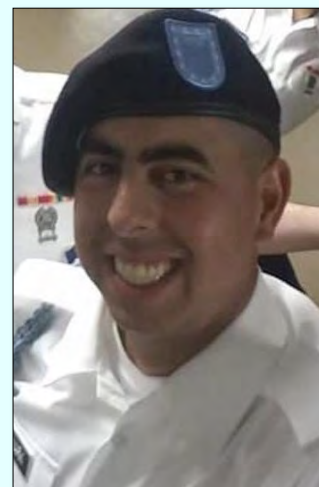
Sgt. 1st Class Rodriguez is survived by his wife Ronaleen, his mother Guadalupe Rodriguez-Jaramillo and her 'husband Javier D. Jaramillo, father David Hernandez and his wife Isela Hernandez, brothers Christopher James Rodriguez-Jaramillo and David "JR" Hernandez, Jr., and sister Valerie Hernandez.



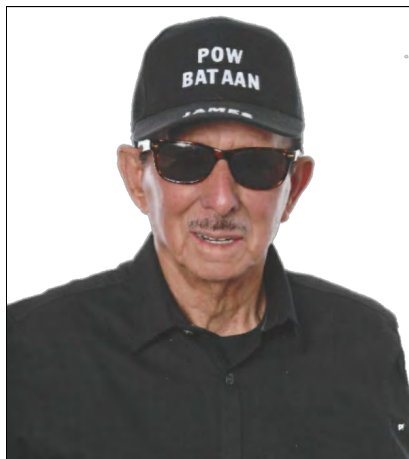
New Mexico Army National Guard Member Dies in African Nation of Djibouti

New Mexico Army National Guard Pvt. 1st Class Walter Lewark passed away on February 13 at Camp Lemonnier in the African country of Djibouti from what the Army is classifying as a noncombat-related death. Funeral arrangements are still pending.

The 26-year old native of Mountainair in Torrance County was among the more than 400 members of the New Mexico National Guard's Company A, 1st Battalion, 200th Infantry Regiment, 93rd Troop Command out of Rio Rancho that deployed to the western African region last fall in support of Operation Enduring Freedom-Horn of Africa. More than 4,000 U.S. service members are serving in the operation to combat militant insurgency and piracy operations in the region and in the busy shipping lanes in the Arabian Sea. PFC Lewark was also a member of the Mountainair Police Department. He is survived by his parents, Frank and Susan Lewark; wife Brandi; sons Ryder and Mason, daughter Lilly, brother Trever, and sister Becky Zuchowski.



Bataan Death March Survivor Santiago Lucero Laid to Rest in Albuquerque



Santiago J. Lucero
Jul. 24, 1920-Feb. 18, 2020

Former Bataan Death March Survivor Santiago James Lucero was laid to rest on February 28 at the Mt. Calvary Cemetery in Albuquerque.

The 99-year former U.S. Army Corporal passed away, surrounded by family and friends, on February 18 at his Albuquerque home. He was among 1,800 members of the New Mexico National Guard's 515th and 200th Coast Artillery Units who were taken prisoner by Japanese forces after Japan launched a surprise attack on the Philippines shortly after the December 7, 1941 surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. The guardsmen had been in the Philippines for an extended training exercise since arriving earlier that spring.

The guardsmen were immediately activated to join the fight against the much larger and better equipped Japanese invading force. After a gallant four-month defense, the combined American and Filipino forces found themselves trapped on the Bataan Peninsula--and were surrendered by U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Edward King on April 9, 1942.

More than 75,000 American and Filipino troops—including Cpl. Lucero and most of the 1,800 New Mexico National Guard members—were then forced to march 65 torture-filled miles, on what became known as the Bataan Death March, to their imprisonment in harsh prisoner camps. More than 10,000 allied soldiers died along the way.



Pvt. Lucero survived the march and endured a brutal 3-1/2 year imprisonment before he was freed shortly after Japan surrendered on September 2, 1945. He left the Army as a Corporal, working at the downtown Albuquerque post office until he was classified as 100% disabled due to health issues stemming from his Bataan imprisonment.

Santiago Lucero is survived by his wife Shirley, three sons, and several grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Only five New Mexican defenders of the Bataan Peninsula are now alive today.



Maj. Gen. Ken Nava, the New Mexico Adjutant General, presents an American flag to Shirley Lucero, widow of Santiago Lucero. The flag was used to drape Mr. Lucero's casket at his February 28 funeral.

Former U.S. Marine Navajo “Code Talker” Laid to Rest at the Santa Fe National Cemetery



Joe Vandever, Sr.
Feb. 5, 1923—Jan. 31, 2020

Former World War II Navajo Code Talker and U.S. Marine Cpl. Joe Vandever, Sr., was laid to rest with military honors on February 6 at the Santa Fe National Cemetery. He passed away at the age of 96 in the rural McKinley County village of Haystack on January 31.

Cpl. Vandever was born into the Red Running Into the Water People clan, born for Two Who Came to the Water clan on February 5, 1923. On March 26, 1943, he enlisted with the U.S. Marine Corps in Santa Fe.

Mr. Vandever became one of 420 members from the Navajo Nation to form a special “Code Talker” unit to devise a secret communication code—based on their Navajo language—to send information on Allied tactics, troop movements, and orders over the radio and telephone use against Japan in the South Pacific Theater of the war. This code proved to be unbreakable to expert Japanese code breakers and is credited with being a key factor in helping defeat Japan and bring an end to WWII.

He saw combat action in the northern Solomons, Bougainville, Emirau, Guam, Marianas Islands, Okinawa, Ryukyu Islands, the occupation of Japan, and the occupation of China. In 2001, he received the Congressional Silver Medal for his service as a Navajo Code Talker in World War II.

At the funeral, DVS Secretary Judy Griego presented a private Condolence Letter to Mr. Vandever’s daughter Sheila Nez (*below photo*), along with a state flag, in honor of Mr. Vandever’s military service and sacrifice.

“I am forever grateful to Mr. Vandever and his fellow Navajo Code Talkers for their incredible service to our nation in World War II,” said the Governor from the State Capitol on the day of the burial. “And I know all New Mexicans share that gratitude with me. My thoughts and prayers are with Joe Vandever’s family — may he rest in peace.”



Mr. Vandever’s wife Bessie passed away last September. They were married for 73-years. He is survived by eight children, 36 grandchildren, 55 great-grandchildren and one great-great-grandchild.

DVS data indicates there are only four Code Talkers alive today: Two in New Mexico, and two in Arizona.

COVID-19 Status Report from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs



**VA Secretary
Robert Wilkie**

For more news and benefits information from the VA, visit www.va.gov

The VA has a regional office in Albuquerque. For more Information: www.benefits.va.gov/albuquerque

For information about the New Mexico VA Health Care System: www.albuquerque.va.gov

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is working closely with The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other federal partners to monitor an outbreak of the COVID-19/Novel Coronavirus which was first identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China.

Nationally, as of March 12, 2020, the VA is tracking the following veteran patients with either a CDC confirmed or a locally, presumptively confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis. This is a rapidly evolving situation, and the VA will provide updated information as it becomes available and verified.

Positive

- 1 in Palo Alto - inpatient
- 1 in Southern Nevada – inpatient

Presumptive Positive (*Veterans awaiting CDC confirmation*)

- 1 in New Orleans - inpatient
- 1 in Denver – home quarantine
- 2 in Portland, OR - 1 in community hospital, 1 inpatient
- 2 in Puget Sound - 1 home quarantine, 1 inpatient
- 1 in Atlanta - home quarantine
- 1 in Fresno – home quarantine

Deaths: 0

The VA has been planning for this type of situation and is prepared to protect and care for veterans who receive their health care from VA. Veterans who have flu-like symptoms such as fever, cough and shortness of breath, to call before you visit your local medical center or clinic. In addition to calling first, consider using virtual care options such as telehealth or MyHealtheVet Secure Messaging.

Cases have been identified in the United States and other international locations. This new strain belongs to a group of viruses called *coronavirus* which can cause symptoms like fever, cough and shortness of breath. The VA has activated its emergency management coordination cell (EMCC) and is implementing an aggressive and collaborative public health response to protect and care for veterans. The United States is actively screening everyone who has traveled in China for this new disease. Americans who come back from the part of China where the number of infections is very high are required to limit close contact with other people and report changes in their health.

What precautions to take

Currently, there is no vaccine to prevent the COVID-19 infection and no medication to treat it. CDC believes symptoms appear 2 to 14 days after exposure. Avoid exposure and avoid exposing others to an infection with these simple acts:

(Continued)

- Learn to use VA Video Connect through the VA Mobile App Store: (<https://mobile.va.gov/app/va-video-connect>) or by contacting your VA care team, before any urgent problems arise.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. An easy way to mark the time is to hum the "Happy Birthday" song from beginning to end twice while scrubbing.
- Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home when you are sick or becoming sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue (not your hands) and throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.
- Getting a flu shot is recommended.

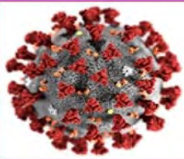
What to do if you have symptoms

If you have a fever, cough, and shortness of breath and have either recently returned from China, Italy, Iran, South Korea, or New York City...or have direct exposure to others diagnosed with COVID-19...call before visiting your local VA medical center to seek care or sign in to MyHealthVet and send a secure message. VA telehealth options may be able to offer a prompt diagnosis and comprehensive care.

What precautions to take when traveling

The U.S. government has imposed travel restrictions for all non-essential travel to China. Additionally, U.S. citizens returning from the region will undergo enhanced screening procedures. Generally, foreign nationals (other than immediate family of U.S. citizens, permanent residents and flight crew) who have traveled in China within 14 days of their arrival, will be denied entry into the U.S. If you have international travel plans, review the specific guidance for travelers: <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/warning/novel-coronavirus-china>

COVID-19: The New Mexico VA Health Care System



COVID (2019-nCoV) Announcement

Gate Procedures -

As a precaution to our Veteran patients, on Tuesday, 17 March 2020, we will begin to implement some changes, as the COVID-19 virus has been confirmed in New Mexico and Colorado. Several changes will take place. We will now have the San Mateo gate as an EXIT ONLY gate and the San Pedro gate as an ENTRANCE ONLY gate between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. The San Mateo gate will be closed from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. Monday through Friday and closed on weekends.

Entry into the NMVAHCS main campus will be through the San Pedro gate. Patients, visitors, vendors, and public transportation will also utilize this entrance. After 3:00 p.m. traffic can enter and exit through the San Pedro gate.

Alternative Healthcare -

We will also begin screening patients who have appointments on our campus and will also offer alternative methods of healthcare, such as VA's telehealth, virtual care options as well as phone calls.

For more information about the Coronavirus, please visit: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html> or for questions about being tested please contact the Department of Health at 855-600-3453.



From the Governor's Office: Ten Presumptive COVID-19 Cases Identified in New Mexico



Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham and the New Mexico Department of Health (DOH) announced on March 12 that ten New Mexico residents have tested presumptive positive for COVID-19/Novel Coronavirus.

According to DOH, six of the presumptive-positive cases are from Bernalillo County (all of whom had visited in New York City), two (a married couple) from Socorro County who recently returned from a trip to Egypt, and two people from Santa Fe County (one person returned from Italy; the other was in NYC). As of March 13, two are hospitalized and are listed as "stable"; eight are self-isolated and show no flu symptoms.

The governor has issued a public health emergency, as other states have, in order to maximize the resources available to the state in order to fight the potential spread of the virus and minimize public health. The Governor, in consultation with DOH, also issued enhanced public health advisory steps that New Mexicans should take to protect themselves, their families and New Mexico communities from the potential occurrence or spread of the disease in our state. The governor and Department of Health have directed New Mexicans to:

- ***Avoid large public gatherings**, particularly if you are a high-risk individual
 - High-risk individuals are older adults and people who have severe chronic medical conditions like heart, lung or kidney disease
- ***Avoid all non-essential travel to affected out-of-state areas**; and exercise extreme caution with all out-of-state travel
- ***Stay home ("self-isolate") if you are sick** and call the Department of Health at 1-855-600-3453 if you are exhibiting any of the symptoms of COVID-19. Those symptoms include fever, cough or trouble breathing
- ***Continue taking precautionary steps** to protect your individual health, such as:
 - Washing your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
 - Clean "high-touch" surfaces daily with regular household cleaners
 - Avoid sharing personal household items

The governor and DOH have directed state government and local governments across New Mexico to cancel events with large crowds through at least the end of April.

The Governor has also instructed EXPO New Mexico to postpone the 37th Gathering of Nations Pow Wow in Albuquerque, which had been scheduled for April 23-25. She said she will also postpone or cancel any other forthcoming large public events under her administration's purview.

The Department of Health will update its guidance on out-of-state travel and large public gatherings as conditions warrant. The Governor has also directed all agency cabinet secretaries to suspend out-of-state work travel for state employees. She's asking state employees to exercise extreme caution with all personal out-of-state travel—and report this travel to their cabinet secretaries. The Department of Health also advised local governments and school districts to also suspend out-of-state employee work travel. State agencies are also asking all non-essential employees to work from home for the foreseeable future.

The governor addressed the above information in two public news conferences at the Capitol alongside DOH Secretary Kathy Kunkel, Human Services Secretary Dr. David Scrase, Dr. Chad Smelser of the state Department of Health and Aging and Long-Term Services Secretary Katrina Hotrum-Lopez.

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"These measures reflect an extreme abundance of caution," the Governor. "As we learn more about COVID-19, we can be certain about a few things: It can spread quickly and it can be particularly dangerous for certain populations. We are confident in the preparedness measures we have taken as a state, but I don't think we can be too cautious. This is a rapidly evolving situation, and New Mexicans should follow best practices to minimize the risk of community exposure."

"So I am giving stronger proactive guidance to New Mexicans about how to minimize those risks and how to keep our state as prepared and ready and safe as we can be for the potential of community spread. As I have said: Prepare, don't panic. We are prepared to use any and every vehicle to protect New Mexicans. We will do whatever it takes to ease this burden, to protect you and protect New Mexico."

SCHOOLS: The Governor has ordered all schools in the state, effective Monday March 16, to close for the next three weeks. School districts will arrange for students to continue online instruction.

NURSING HOMES: The Department of Health is urging New Mexicans to exercise caution in visiting relatives in nursing homes. On Tuesday, state surveyors from DOH's Division of Health Improvement, responsible for broad review licensing surveys of nursing homes, began unprecedented investigations of all nursing homes infection control protocols to ensure the homes are compliant with newly released CMS guidance. This action is undertaken to address the risk posed to the elderly by COVID-19. DOH has also deployed its health care survey team to conduct onsite visits of the 269 licensed assisted living facilities statewide."

State survey staff will focus on providing COVID-19 related infection control guidance, written visitor protocols and to address staff, family and resident questions or concerns. Facilities will receive: An onsite visit by a state long term care survey team member; observations and provide feedback on current infection control surveillance from DOH; written instructions and signage for visitors and residents on infections control protocols; direction to websites that can provide up to date information on CDC and state of New Mexico COVID-19 protocols; and ongoing support and guidance to all facility staff, residents and family members.

In addition to surveillance of vulnerable populations and other preparedness measures, such as expanding testing this week to a wider group of symptomatic patients in accordance with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance, DOH has tested almost 90 individuals from across the state through as of March 10. DOH has also been working with TriCore Reference Laboratories to establish additional testing at select locations across the state, which the department hopes to have operational by next week.

(Those test numbers are updated and displayed on the DOH website: www.cv.nmhealth.org.)

PREPAREDNESS: DOH has activated the Bureau of Health and Emergency Management's Department Operations Center at level 3 in support of on-going pandemic-readiness activities related to COVID-19.

The agency continues to monitor asymptomatic travelers from China, South Korea, Iran and Italy during the time when they might develop disease if they were exposed to the virus; and is supporting screening and infection control procedures in health care settings to identify illness in travelers or contacts of known COVID-19 patients. DOH is also actively monitoring the hospital bed capacity in New Mexico and the availability of facemasks, respirators, and other personal protective equipment needed for infection control.

For additional up-to-the-minute information about the state's COVID-19/Novel Coronavirus situation: <https://cv.nmhealth.org/faq/>

Toll-free COVID-19 Call Center:

1-(855) 600-3453 (*for health-related inquiries*)

1-(833) 551-0518 (*non-health related inquires: Schools, businesses, shut-downs, etc.*)

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