

Sonya L. Smith unanimously confirmed as DVS Secretary

Written by Staff Reports

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DVS' first African American agency head

SANTA FE—Sonya L. Smith was unanimously confirmed by the New Mexico Senate Feb. 17 as secretary of the New Mexico Department of Veterans' Services.

The vote was 38-0, officially naming her as the fifth DVS secretary—and first African-American to serve as head of the agency. She had been serving on an interim basis since her nomination for the position by Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham last October after the retirement of then-Secretary Judy Griego.

Smith comes to DVS from the New Mexico Department of Health, where she served as a special projects coordinator--specifically helping guide the efforts of the agency's COVID-19 testing team. Prior to that, she served as director of compliance at Southwest Care Center in Santa Fe, and before that, as director of primary care at the University of New Mexico Medical Group.

As a medic with the United States Air Force Reserve, Smith was activated to serve in Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Upon receiving her honorable discharge, she earned a Bachelor's Degree in Health Services Management from Norfolk State University in her hometown of Norfolk, Va., and a Master's Degree in Health Care Compliance from Argosy University.

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During the senate floor confirmation vote, senators from both sides of the aisle were quick to praise the nomination, citing Secretary-Designate Smith's strong background.

"I rise in strong support of Secretary-Designate Smith," Senate Majority Floor Leader Peter Wirth, D-Santa Fe, said. "She has the skill-set that is really important for this job. She also said something that really resonates with me—that every day is Veterans Day to her. My door will always be open to her for any help."

"I stand here in strong support of Secretary Sonya Smith," Senate Minority Leader and U.S. Navy veteran Greg Baca, R-Belen, said. "She has a kindness and the spirit to lead the department of veterans' services. I'm happy to know that they will be under her guidance, and I look forward to working with her to serve our state's veterans."

In her preliminary virtual Senate Rules Confirmation hearing on Feb. 12, Smith testified her three immediate goals as DVS secretary would be raising awareness for the prevention of veteran suicide, helping end veteran homelessness, and getting veterans registered for the COVID-19 vaccine.

"I'm proud to be the first African-American to lead the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services," she testified via Zoom. "Never did I ever imagine that when I came to New Mexico seven years ago that I would have the opportunity to serve as secretary of this agency. But I think back to what my grandmother always told me when I was growing up: 'What's for you ... is for you.' And she was always right. I really look forward to helping our veterans and their families."

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