

Senator Ben Ray Lujan meets with Gallup Veterans Helping Veterans

Written by By Rick Abasta Sun Correspondent
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Senator Ben Ray Lujan, D-N.M. talked about vaccinations as well as housing challenges when he met with Gallup Veterans Helping Veterans June 30.

Lujan shared information on the American Rescue Plan Act. He said getting vaccines into people's arms and ensuring support for families facing challenges with rent and mortgage payments were primary considerations.

"I reached out to Dennis McDonough, U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs, for the deployment of mobile units for more access to vaccines," he said. "We have to get into communities where people live."

He said the American Rescue Plan Act includes \$17 billion for healthcare along with investments for telemedicine and the means to access online services — to meet challenges veterans face, many of them as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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“Telehealth doesn’t mean anything if there’s no internet in your community, especially affordable high speed internet,” Lujan pointed out.

Lujan said the Emergency Broadband Benefit offered by the Federal Communications Commission assists families with monthly internet bills. The funding amounts to \$75 per month for families living on tribal lands and \$50 per month for families that live elsewhere.

He said work continues on an infrastructure package to include 100 percent connectivity across the U.S., in addition to roads, bridges, water, wastewater, investments with satellite operations, modernization of schools and space investment.

Making the Child Tax Credit permanent is another initiative Lujan focused on, especially since some families with children were turned away because they did not make enough money and others were disqualified because they made too much.

The Child Tax Credit fund was increased from \$2,400 to \$3,600 for families with children under the age of six and from \$2,400 to \$3,000 for families with children up to the age of 17.

“We’re helping working families across America put more money back into their pockets,” Lujan said.

Lujan explained that President Joe Biden laid out important provisions that are reflected in the 2022 budget bill including increasing support by \$269.9 billion or 10 percent more than the 2021 budget for the Veterans Administration.

Also contained in the bill is the 2022 mandatory funding request, totaling \$152.7 billion, which is an increase of \$49 billion or 10 percent above 2021. Lujan emphasized that the VA’s 2022 funding request is in addition to substantial resources already provided by ARPA.

The FY 2022 budget includes \$18 billion as part of the American Jobs Plan to address VA

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healthcare infrastructure in the short term and long term, paired with \$260 million from the American Families Plan to support the Biden administration's commitment to provide supplementary support to veterans by offering a holistic, family-friendly approach to care.

A \$172.2 billion discretionary funding request includes \$2.2 billion to eliminate homelessness. It also addresses suicide prevention.

Also in attendance was N.M. Dept. of Veterans Services Cabinet Secy. Sonya Smith, who introduced her staff.

"Every day is Veterans Day at the N.M. Department of Veterans Services," she proclaimed.

Smith noted that a 100 percent teleworking model was being used to keep veterans and staff safe during the pandemic. She underscored the importance of staying connected from a state and federal standpoint to maintain a seamless process for veterans.

The department is now transitioning to reopen at full capacity.

"We have a Highly Rural Transportation Grant," Smith said. We want to make sure that our veterans who are living in those highly rural areas are getting to their medical appointments."

The DVS also hosted listening sessions over the past few months because women veterans felt underserved.

Smith told those veterans that military service entitles them to benefits and suggested that the department be innovative in its approach.

"A veteran can be just about anybody," she pointed out. "Yes, we appreciate those veterans that

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served 20, 30 years and who have retired, but we also have veterans that only served one or two years.

“They are also entitled to benefits and service.”

Joseph Baca, congressional liaison at N.M. Veterans Administration Health Care System talked about how the pandemic changed their business model over the past year.

“Telehealth benefited us well during this time,” he said. It was an eye opening experience because it showed us what to do with technology.”

The Video to Home Program provides veterans with iPads to connect with healthcare providers for mental or physical health concerns.

In addition, vacancies at the VA clinics, including the Gallup and Farmington service areas are being filled.

“We are using each and every incentive that we have to hire a provider here, including educational debt reduction, moving expenses, and bonuses,” he said.

The Veterans Transportation Service remains in service and the VA plans to hire a new drivers to reinstate the van route from Gallup to Albuquerque.

“Community care is the main goal and it has been hit or miss. It runs the gamut,” Baca noted. “I’m hopeful that some of the lessons we learned from [the pandemic] will help improve the process.”

The group interacted with veterans of the GVHV Post during the question and answer portion of

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the meeting. Discussions covered telehealth concerns and amending death certificates because of the incorrect diagnosis of COVID-19 as the cause of death for two Gallup veterans. The incorrect information has impacted dependent income for the surviving families.

“I think [these concerns] fall on deaf ears because nobody wants to deal with it,” CDR Dave Cuellar of the GVHV Post said. “But you need to, because you have to take care of our veteran families.”

Also at the meeting were: Deputy Cabinet Secretary Bryan Osterhage, Director of Benefits Ed Mendez, Director of Field Operations Larry Campos, Women’s Veterans Program Coordinator Robin Wilson, McKinley County and Catron County Veterans Service Officer Durrell Tsosie, Cemetery and Memorial Program Bureau Chief David Walker, and McKinley County Veterans Service Officer Benjamin Stewart.

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