

VA Clinic saved

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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Federal legislators shoot down committee reviewing clinics for closure

Veterans in Gallup, Las Vegas, N.M.; Raton, N.M.; and Española N.M. can breathe a sigh of relief today after a bipartisan group of senators said they won't support appointments to the committee studying closure of their VA community-based outpatient clinics, effectively scuttling the mission.

“From day one, I’ve been clear that the process to close four veteran health clinics in New Mexico didn’t have my support,” Sen. Ben Ray Lujan, D-N.M., said. “It’s not what’s best for our veterans or those who support them. I’m proud to announce the Senate won’t be moving forward with the process. Our CBOCs will remain open.”

The clinics were among 35 Veterans Affairs medical clinics across 21 states that were on the chopping block as part of a planned nationwide “rebalancing” of VA health care resources.

Veterans Helping Veterans and local legislators vowed to fight for Gallup’s clinic and the nearly 2,000 veterans who depend on it as their first contact for health care. Sens. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., and Luján, along with U.S. Representatives Teresa Leger Fernández, D-N.M., and Melanie Stansbury, D-N.M., New Mexico Department of Veterans Services Secretary Sonya Smith and Gallup’s city council objected to recommendations the VA provided for the Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission.

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While veterans will still have to travel to Albuquerque for more complex services, the clinic will continue to provide primary care and specialty health services, including cardiology, laboratory and pathology.

“I am so grateful to our U.S. legislators and senators who listened to our pleas for help in keeping our local veterans clinic open,” City Councilor Fran Palochak, Dist. 4, who is a veteran herself, said. “We are eternally grateful for a favorable outcome. This clinic not only helps local vets, but veterans who live more than 100 miles away in the rural areas of McKinley County and the Navajo Nation.”

Dave Cuellar, founder of Veterans Helping Veterans, spent Tuesday afternoon meeting with Gallup Mayor Louie Bonaguidi, Heinrich, Smith and U.S. Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough at the UNM-Gallup Student Services & Technology Center.

“All I’m interested in is treatment, service, care for veterans. That’s what I worry about. The politics, the other [stuff], I don’t worry about,” Cuellar said. “They have a budget to work with and give us the best care, but don’t let the bean counters control how the providers provide medical care. That’s what’s been going on.”

Cuellar met McDonough before the forum. He said the two of them shook hands, and he said he put a lot of meaning behind that handshake.

“I told him, ‘that’s a sign between us that we respect each other and I won’t lie to you and you won’t lie to me,’” Cuellar said. “I also challenged everybody else there to keep their word. Talk is cheap.”

Smith applauded the community’s work to keep the clinic open.

“We need to congratulate our congressional leadership and our governor for speaking up and saying the recommendations from the VA were not going to work in New Mexico, for obvious

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reasons,” she said. “I want to thank the community for speaking up and letting us know their thoughts, not only to share their concerns but to let us know what their recommendations are from the community. The first word in CBOC is community.”

Luján and Heinrich joined Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester (D-Mont.), and senators Joe Manchin (D-W.V.), Mike Rounds (R-S.D.), Shelley Moore Capito (R-W.V.), Maggie Hassan (D-N.H.), John Thune (R-S.D.), Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), Patty Murray (D-Wash.), Steve Daines (R-Mont.), and Rob Portman (R-Ohio) in opposition to the AIR Commission process approved by Congress and then-president Donald Trump in 2018.

Among other things, the MISSION Act required the Department of Veterans Affairs to research, develop and publish a list of recommendations to modernize VA medical facilities and health care delivery, including through facility expansions, relocations, closures or changes in services. Without the Senate’s approval of the nominees, no commission will be established and the process as outlined by the Act will not move forward.

“We share a commitment to expanding and strengthening modern VA infrastructure in a way that upholds our obligations to America’s veterans. We believe the recommendations put forth to the AIR Commission are not reflective of that goal, and would put veterans in both rural and urban areas at a disadvantage, which is why we are announcing that this process does not have our support and will not move forward,” the group said in a joint statement. “The Commission is not necessary for our continued push to invest in VA health infrastructure, and together we remain dedicated to providing the department with the resources and tools it needs to continue delivering quality care and earned services to veterans in 21st century facilities, now and into the future.”

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