

Seeks to Secure Adequate Funding to Improve Agency's Mission

SANTA FE— New Mexico Department of Veterans Services Secretary Sonya L. Smith who was appointed to the position in October, testified before the New Mexico Legislature's Legislative Finance Committee Nov. 16, seeking approval of the agency's proposed \$4.9 million budget for fiscal year 2022.

Secretary-Designate Smith testified that the amount is needed to carry out the vision for the agency's mandate of assisting the state's approximately 154,000 veterans and their families.

"Our veterans deserve our agency's very best efforts—especially after dealing with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic," Secretary-Designate Smith testified . "Now more than ever, we are determined to continue reaching out to our veterans and help them get benefits and services which could really make a positive impact in their lives."

To do so, she testified, will require adequate funding. Among the important immediate goals are:

Ensuring veterans know that DVS is still open for business, and our Veterans Service Officers are ready to assist them with claims and benefits information. Veterans or their eligible dependents can contact the agency's VSOs from the comfort of their homes via phone or email for their claims or benefits needs.

DVS will continue its advocacy by partnering with state, federal, and local agencies and organizations to increase the scope of services for veterans and their families. There are many agencies, in addition to the VA, that offer assistance which could greatly help veterans. DVS will work to bring these agencies into partnerships, and make sure veterans know about these important services.

DVS plans to enhance its messaging platform to improve outreach to veterans. With the

DVS Secretary-Designate Smith Testifies Before the Legislative Finance Committee

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COVID-19 pandemic spreading, the agency will schedule more virtual outreaches similar to its successful Veterans Day outreach—which saw veterans from throughout the state contact DVS VSO's via the Zoom application to get immediate benefits help.

“Veterans Day has reinforced in my mind that we need to do all we can for our veterans and their families, especially during this COVID-19 pandemic,” Smith said, “Every day should be treated as Veterans Day—and I want DVS to reflect this moving forward.”

As with all state agencies, the DVS budget faces approval during the 2021 Legislature scheduled to convene on Jan. 19. Smith also faces confirmation during the 60-day session, which is scheduled to adjourn March 20.