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INDIAN AFFAIRS
BUDGET

August 4, 2023

The Honorable Dennis R. McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

As the first anniversary of the historic *Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act* approaches, I am writing to request that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) act to extend the enrollment deadline for veterans applying to receive retroactive healthcare benefits under the *PACT Act*. While there is no formal date for veterans to apply by to receive these benefits, veterans who file claims on or before August 9th, 2023 may receive benefits retroactive to the date of August 20th, 2022.¹ Although the VA has promoted outreach to make sure veterans are applying, I've heard from a number of elderly and rural veterans that were unaware of the upcoming deadline. Therefore, the VA must reconsider the enrollment period deadline for retroactive benefits to ensure our elderly and rural veterans are not left behind.

New Mexico has a long story of serving our country in uniform with bravery and distinction. I am committed to ensuring that each of the more 150,000 veterans living in the state of New Mexico has access to high-quality healthcare and opportunities to thrive when they return to civilian life. In our rural areas, which is home to over 47,000 veterans, the ongoing challenges of limited broadband internet access has made it difficult for outreach to reach these communities.² Additionally, according to the VA, 55% of VA-enrolled rural veterans are 65 or older and 44% of enrolled rural veterans earn an annual income of less than \$35,000³. Given the VA's role as one of our nation's largest health care providers, it is vital they provide an extension of enrollment benefits to ensure our veterans have the accessibility to file a claim.

Our nation's veterans deserve the highest level of care, I am committed to supporting New Mexico's veterans and working with the Biden Administration on implementing the efforts of this critical legislation that provides 3.5 million veterans health care coverage. I urge the

¹ <https://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/>

² https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/States_by_rural_urban.pdf

³ <https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/aboutus/ruralvets.asp#:~:text=There%20are%204.4%20million%20rural,2.7%20million%20enrolled%20in%20VA.&text=Rural%20Veterans%20enrolled%20in%20VA's,over%20the%20age%20of%2065.>

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Department of Veterans Affairs to extend the August 9th, 2023 deadline so every veterans has the opportunity to apply for their PACT Act benefits and receive retroactive compensation for the past year.

Sincerely,



Ben Ray Luján
U.S. Senator