

Lack of federal funding leaves proposed state veterans homes in limbo

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In 2015, the state budget included \$9.2 million for a new veterans state home in Yuma.

In 2017, \$10 million was designated to build a state home in Flagstaff.

However, construction is stalled on both projects because this state funding makes up only 35 percent of total costs. The rest of the tab must be picked up by the U.S. Department for Veterans Affairs and the federal funding has proven difficult to secure.

Now, the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services has asked for \$13 million more in their proposed 2018 budget for funding of another veterans state home in Mohave County. There are more than 25,000 veterans in Mohave County, according to 2015 census data. Almost two thirds of these veterans are over 65.

The three homes together represent a 228-bed increase in Arizona's veterans state home capacity, which is currently at 320 beds. Still that's only a portion of Arizona's 1,200-bed deficiency, identified by the VA.

The Flagstaff and Yuma homes have applied to the VA for federal funding and been placed on a national ranking list of proposed projects. However, there typically isn't enough money to fund everything on the list. In past years, Arizona projects have ranked in the 40s or 50s. Often only the top 10 or 15 get funded.

Wanda Wright, director of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, says the department proposed more new construction because there is a significant need, however she can't predict when federal funding will come through. She is hoping a potential change in how veterans home projects are ranked nationally could move the needle for Arizona's proposed homes. The longer they wait, the more inflation and increases in prices will devalue the state money they already have.

"We are kind of at the whim of the VA in their priorities, in how they decide that they want to construct these homes," said Wright.

Veterans state homes are similar to nursing homes, with one big difference –



The Arizona State Veterans Home in Phoenix, near Indian School Road and Third Street, is a 200-bed nursing care facility.

the majority of the patients are veterans. In addition, there is funding for care available to those who qualify.

Jamie Flatbush, Army veteran and military liaison at the Military Assistance Mission nonprofit, has made many visits to the Phoenix veterans home and spoke highly of the facilities. He says the experience of combat binds people together more than any other factor.

"Me as a vet, I would rather be in that environment with people I have in common," said Flatbush. "There's just some things you can't share, that I can't explain. The smell, the sounds, the feelings, the crunch of grass walking around on the field in Korea."

While Flatbush said he has observed high quality care in veterans state homes, flaws have been exposed in Arizona veterans care over the past couple of years. Across the country, the VA health care

system has come under scrutiny for long wait times and poor treatment.

The Phoenix veterans home is one of only two currently operating in Arizona. Wright worries that veterans from other parts of the state don't have access to this care without moving far from home.

Flagstaff Mayor Coral Evans has similar concerns. According to the 2015 census data, there are about 8,000 veterans living in Coconino County and more than 3,000 of these veterans are over 65.

Evans started the process of applying for a veterans home as a City Council member when she heard the story of one Flagstaff veteran who checked into Phoenix's state veterans home for care. He was left alone because the family was not able to make the trip down to see him.

"No veteran should have to die alone because the family doesn't have the money, or doesn't have the means to go visit them," said Evans. "The fact that we do not have a veterans home in northern Arizona, to me is an embarrassment"

The first step toward building a home in Flagstaff was to secure land, which has now been donated by the city. There is a clause however – if the home is not built by 2021 the lease says the land donation could be revoked.

Once there was a place to put the home, the city secured state funding. Applications to the federal VA that don't already have state funding are rarely successful, according to Wright. Together, these two steps took almost five years.

Evans comes from a military family, but she says this isn't just a military issue. It isn't a political issue. It's about quality of life for the people who have served for this country.

"Truly a community is measured on how you take care of those who take care of you," Evans said. "Our city, our state

reflects poorly that we don't have the necessary facilities for our veterans."

Whether the Flagstaff home Evans says is desperately needed is ever built is up to the federal VA. The current ranking system puts repairs and updates to existing

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Ducey headed to United Kingdom to tout Arizona business

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Gov. Doug Ducey is headed to the United Kingdom for a series of economic development meetings and to meet with tourism industry representatives at an Arizona Cardinals football game outside London on October 22.

The Republican leaves next week and will hold meetings from October 19-22. He plans to meet one-on-one with business leaders and tout the economic advantages of doing business in Arizona.

The state exported more than \$850 million in goods to the United Kingdom last year and total trade topped \$1.4 billion. Arizona's top exports overall include civilian aircraft components, copper, electronics and military hardware.

Ducey says his administration is positioning the state "to compete not just domestically for jobs and talent, but globally as well." [m](#)

homes at the top of the priorities list, followed by new construction in states with a 1,500 to 2,000 bed deficiency.

Evans says this gives an advantage to more populated areas. Rural places, such as northern Arizona, have trouble moving up the list. This year a change in the ranking system could have positive impacts on Arizona's projects. The change is meant to help rural locations have a fighting chance, but the exact provisions have not been released. The regulation is expected to be completed by the end of this year. [m](#)