

Honoring Our Aging Veterans

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Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about the importance of honoring Wisconsin veterans by providing quality care at our state veterans' homes and the work the LAB did to investigate staffing problems and maintenance issues at the King Veteran home in Waupaca.

ALMA, WI - "How are things at our veterans' homes?" the Korean War vet asked me at a forum on veterans' issues. The man was particularly concerned about what he heard about care at our Veterans Homes.

Veterans issues are personal for so many, including my family. Both my parents were veterans. My nephew serves now. My dad was a medic who flew rescue missions into Korea. Like so many, his experiences haunted him. He never talked about the trauma until he was dying.

On July 27th, we will celebrate the 65th anniversary of Korean War Armistice Day. Wisconsin is required by law to issue a proclamation for the observation of this day, asking the public to contemplate the sacrifices members of the U.S. Armed Forces made during the Korean War.

This commemoration, and a similar recognition for Vietnam Veterans Day on March 29th, exists because of the efforts of Alan Wright and many others who worked with me in 2009 to establish these important commemorations.



Veterans served us and it's our obligation to serve them. When we strive to provide the best service to our veterans, we show our deep gratitude for their service. Correcting the deficits at our state veterans' homes is a moral imperative in our service to veterans.

Wisconsin has three veterans' homes: King in Waupaca County, Union Grove in Racine County and Chippewa Falls. Through these homes and other programs, Wisconsin made a commitment to care for our veterans. State officials are not keeping our promise.

Several audits, conducted by the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB), including one released in the past year, provide details on what must be done to improve care at our homes, especially at King.

Our veterans are more in need. For example, over nine years of the audit study, there was a 28% increase in the number of residents at King with dementia and a 262% increase in the residents diagnosed with PTSD. Staffing, although increased a few years ago, hasn't kept up with the increased needs of seriously ill veterans. Neither has staff training. Vacant positions are increasing. Mandatory overtime may be causing unsafe conditions.

Regular staff shortages pulled caregivers to other areas, leaving veterans without the consistent care they needed.

LAB conducted a survey of staff. Among those who participated, eighty-six percent of staff said they "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that King was adequately staffed; three-quarters of staff reported morale as being "poor" or "very poor." Almost forty percent said they planned to look for another job in the next six months.

These results indicate very serious management problems. At the audit committee hearing, members pleaded with leaders to take these issues seriously. I left the hearing unconvinced changes would happen.

Auditors looked at concerns related to deteriorating facilities and found the Department of Veterans Affairs did not develop a systematic process for comprehensively identifying and assessing building projects. Auditors detailed a long list of needed projects including several related to potential resident safety.

Auditors documented money transferred from King to other programs. A lack of funds likely led to delayed maintenance, poor salaries and staff vacancies.

Especially serious was the way potential abuse, neglect and misappropriation of residents' property were handled by management. In the LAB survey, thirty-seven respondents said they experienced negative consequences when they reported neglect, abuse, or misappropriation of property. Over one-third of respondents who witnessed abuse, neglect or misappropriation of property did not "always" report it – likely because they were afraid of negative consequences.

State and federal laws exist to protect our residents. Wisconsin must protect veterans and their families by protecting workers from retaliation when they report problems. We must better train managers so they understand the legal and moral problems of retaliating against workers who speak up. We must discipline and remove managers who retaliate.

To fix our veterans' institutions, officials must stop treating King like a "cash cow" and siphoning money away from the home. Instead, wages should be raised, more staff should be hired, and facilities should be repaired.

We must engage staff, residents, and family members in finding solutions, by creating councils or regular, decision-making bodies that involve everyone in problem solving.

We face solvable problems. As stewards of our veterans' sacrifices we must fix them.

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