



June 25, 2022

Hand-Delivered

Reference: Wisconsin Veterans Home at Union Grove

Dear Vietnam Veterans of America, Wisconsin, Leadership Team:

Since my appointment as Secretary, I have appreciated and valued building relationships with all our state's Veteran Service Organizations. It is my privilege to serve Wisconsin's veterans, as you have also been called to do in your capacities. I look forward to continuing to strengthen our collective work to recognize and serve our brothers and sisters in arms.

When COVID-19 threatened the members and staff within our veterans' homes, I reached out to stakeholders and advocates to maintain open lines of communication. However, since late last year we've been aware of misinformation regarding our home in Union Grove, and of late there have been inquiries driven by recent newspaper stories. However, the media coverage does not accurately portray the story of our Veterans Home at Union Grove. There are so many dedicated caregivers and countless good deeds inside the walls of Union Grove. Staff have served tirelessly through the ongoing pandemic.

These caregivers and my entire leadership team remain deeply committed to providing the best possible living environment for our veterans.

As a licensed nursing home, Union Grove, like each of Wisconsin's Veterans Homes, is highly regulated and must comply with strict reporting standards and procedures. In fact, our homes are the most regulated nursing homes in the state, answering to two federal regulatory bodies – the VA and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) – as well as the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) Division of Quality Assurance (DQA). When an incident is reported, we conduct a thorough investigation, which includes interviewing staff, residents, family members and, in some cases, examinations by physicians and other clinical staff. If a regulatory survey reveals a shortcoming, we rectify with a plan of correction and take appropriate action as required by law. These reports are publicly available from DQA and the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services.

A level of training is required for new staff as well as annual continuing education for existing staff. We've also added more education and monitoring to specifically address certain issues, such as improving wound care, infection control, and COVID-related matters. Last year we contracted industry-leading wound care company Gentell to further improve our wound care practices and we sought additional infection control and prevention training from DQA and the VA.

A stable and competent workforce is the backbone of any nursing home. We work hard to maintain a quality workforce to care for our members. We also have procedures in place that invite ongoing feedback from employees and families and that also ensure concerns are addressed in a timely manner. We encourage the free expression of questions and concerns and offer methods to ensure when it is desired. We respond to all incidents, injuries, and concerns with the same thorough approach.

It is notable that Union Grove and our other homes are not distinct in the staffing issues they face, but rather reflect the painful trends seen statewide and nationally across the long-term care industry.

With many Wisconsin Veteran Service Organizations represented, on May 25th the Governor's Blue-Ribbon Commission on Veteran Opportunity was presented information describing the acute healthcare workforce shortage our country is facing and how this affects staffing at Wisconsin's three veteran homes. Some sobering take-aways from that meeting included:

- COVID-19 exacerbated the workforce shortage crisis in long-term care settings, and it continues to worsen.
- All long-term care providers report they are under-staffed, and the Kaiser Foundation reports the industry has lost more than 250,000 jobs since the pandemic began.
- Statewide, Wisconsin follows these national trends and continues to struggle to fill skilled nursing and caregiver staff positions.

Our plans and actions to meet our skilled nursing staffing needs include using targeted media campaigns. We have engaged the professional services of a marketing firm to bolster these plans. We are also focusing on efforts to retain our current employees, from retention pay increases to establishing a healthy work culture at all three homes.

I also want to point out that pay and benefits are legislated through the biennial compensation plan; WDVA is not authorized to unilaterally adjust hourly wages or other compensation for employees. However, we have worked with the Department of Administration and other agencies to create bonuses and additional pay for certain high-vacancy job classifications as permitted by the compensation plan. Specifically, WDVA has undertaken several initiatives to help retain and attract dedicated talent:

- Payment of staff sign-on bonuses in high-need career fields.
- Payment of Covid hazard pay for direct care staff.
- Increases to base pay for nursing staff.
- Adjustments to the staffing model to involve more RNs in providing direct care services.
- Payment of discretionary equity and retention awards (DERA) for LPNs to achieve market parity and reduce turnover.

More generally, the State of Wisconsin is also taking action to address our nursing shortage overall. Recently, DHS received federal approval to move forward with more than \$2.3 million in federal dollars to implement WisCaregiver Careers. Designed to add up to 3,000 nurse aides to the workforce, the program provides free training and testing for up to 3,000 students to become caregivers in Wisconsin nursing homes. Nurse aides will also receive a \$500 retention bonus from participating nursing homes after six months on the job.

After pausing because of the pandemic, we were thrilled earlier this year to restart admissions at all the Homes, albeit at a slower pace to match the staffing levels and vacancies we have. Per the current, standing CMS guidance of November 2021, our homes are open to all visitors and our corps of volunteers are again enriching the lives of members, though COVID-19 screening, and precautions are still in place.

For our agency to continue providing the quality-of-care veterans deserve at our Veterans Homes, we must work together to find ways to evolve through an always-changing climate. All mistakes and issues must be met with accountability and a plan of action. The pandemic laid bare the deficiencies in the national care system, and we continue to feel ripples at all levels at our homes. I appreciate your continued advocacy and support.

Sincerely,



Mary M. Kolar
Secretary