

'Not acceptable': Internal email says many residents at Union Grove veterans nursing home are dehydrated

John DiedrichKatelyn Ferral
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel



Residents at the troubled Wisconsin veterans home in Union Grove are not getting enough water, resulting in dehydration and patients being sent to the hospital, according to an internal email obtained by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

The email, with the subject line "DEHYDRATION," was sent earlier this month, shortly after [a Journal Sentinel investigation](#) found a litany of problems in the facility, including veterans not getting enough water.

"Staff please be aware that we have been having a lot of members either be sent out or have labs completed here showing that members are Dehydrated!!" the

email stated. "We have along had several members with impacted bowels. This is not acceptable. We can do better.

"PLEASE make sure that members are being offered fluids often throughout the shift, especially with the weather getting hotter and members sitting outside. Nurses report to aides the importance of fluids. Thanks for all you do every day." Dehydration has been a chronic problem at the facility, which ranks among the worst state veterans homes in the country in terms of violations and fines, according to the Journal Sentinel investigation. The Union Grove facility was cited for 62 violations and received fines totaling \$250,000 since 2017, records show.

Following the newspaper's investigation, U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., and U.S. Rep. Bryan Steil, R-Wis., separately sent letters to federal authorities asking for outside reviews and additional oversight. U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., also called for an investigation. State Sen. Van Wanggaard, R-Racine, has sought hearings on the facility.

In addition, co-chairs of the Legislature's Joint Audit Committee last week asked Mary Kolar, secretary of the state Department of Veterans Affairs, for details about the violations, complaints, and staffing numbers since 2018. They gave Kolar, who oversees Union Grove and the two other veterans' nursing homes, until the end of this week to respond.

Union Grove and other veterans' homes like it across the country are run by states but funded with federal dollars.

Democratic Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers called the situation at Union Grove an urgent issue and said his administration has to do a better job. Evers said he would cooperate with any outside investigation into conditions at Union Grove. He did not offer new initiatives but vowed to continue efforts to address staffing shortages.

'No one should receive this kind of care: Lack of water.
Medication mistakes. Abuse allegations.

'Beyond troubling': Federal lawmakers from both parties call for more oversight of Wisconsin veterans' homes [s].

The internal email, sent by Amanda Ross, who works at the facility and evaluates the quality of care provided to residents, went to the facility's nursing staff. Ross did not respond to emails and calls.

Colleen Flaherty, a Department of Veterans Affairs spokeswoman, called emails like Ross' "fairly standard practice" and said all nursing homes must remain diligent about ensuring residents have enough water.

"As a skilled nursing facility dedicated to quality care, Union Grove staff is trying to ensure our members are comfortable and well-taken care of at all times," Flaherty wrote in an email to the Journal Sentinel on Wednesday.

Flaherty noted some medical conditions and medications can cause dehydration and that staff accounts for that.

"Currently at Union Grove, water pass is done three times daily with each shift, and members always have continuous access to water and ice," she said. "Any member who needs assistance is routinely offered fluids during care, during snack/activities, and with meals. This is best practice in long-term care."

Flaherty did not immediately respond as to whether this is a new hydration practice or about how many residents Ross was referring to when she wrote that "a lot of members" are dehydrated at Union Grove.

Staffing shortage affecting care

Flaherty said care at the Union Grove facility has been hampered by short staffing that predates the pandemic and has gotten worse. Among efforts to improve hiring and retention, the state in May extended a \$5-an-hour pay raise for nurses at Union Grove and other state facilities that started last year through at least next year. In addition, the state has closed a wing of Union Grove and also part of the veterans home in King to consolidate patients because of short staffing, she said.

The violations at the Union Grove home have included medication mistakes, failure to investigate allegations of patient abuse, poor food, filthy conditions, infection control, and a lack of water for residents.

Hydration for elderly people, especially in nursing facilities, is crucial.

Numerous medical studies conclude that older adults are especially vulnerable to dehydration, which can cause high death rates and other medical problems, including severe constipation, acute confusion, falls, and delayed wound healing.

It can be especially problematic in hospitals and nursing homes, where patients have complex medical conditions that make them more at risk, the studies show.

Failing to ensure residents were hydrated resulted in a violation at the Union Grove facility in early 2021. Months earlier, resident Randy Krall was rushed to the hospital after his wife, Luane, was told he had not had water for much of the day. He was so dehydrated, his wife said, that doctors had trouble getting a urine sample to diagnose what was wrong with him.



Randy Krall returned to the Union Grove facility and died on Dec. 19, 2020. Residents interviewed in May told a Journal Sentinel reporter they had problems getting water.

Veteran Gordon Voss, 91, said he has trouble getting enough water at night. By morning, "I am spitting cotton balls," he said. Flaherty, the veterans' affairs spokeswoman, said a search of records revealed no deaths or hospitalizations among residents in the last 90 days due to dehydration at the veterans' home.

Quran Qaasim, 75, also a resident, ended up in the hospital in April in part because of a lack of water at the veterans home, according to his daughter, Nyesha Qaasim.

She said her father was admitted to a Burlington hospital nearly in sepsis with severe kidney issues and a urinary tract infection that doctors attributed to a lack of water.



"It was abuse and negligence," said Nyesha Qaasim, who has filed a complaint with the state Department of Health Services. "It was unbelievable, really unbelievable because stuff like that is preventable."

Quran Qaasim, a Vietnam veteran who suffered a stroke before coming to the home, spent nearly a month in the hospital recovering and then returned to the veteran's home in Union Grove late last month, said his daughter.

"I believe he is in imminent danger there," she said.

But Nyesha Qaasim, who lives in Phoenix, said she is not his guardian; her brother is.

She said she learned late Tuesday that her father was again in the hospital. The cause, according to the doctor treating him? Dehydration.

Reporter Daphne Chen contributed to this report.

Contact John Diedrich at (414) 224-2408 or jdiedrich@journalsentinel.com.

Follow him on Twitter at [@john_diedrich](https://twitter.com/john_diedrich).