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John A. Scocos Column: Serving Wisconsin Veterans a Great Honor

As I retire from public service, there are great many people to whom I owe a great many thanks.

Foremost, I thank our military veterans. As a veteran myself and an advocate for my fellow veterans, I am proud to have led the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs since 2011 as the department's first cabinet secretary and to have brought our agency fully into the 21st century in support of providing Wisconsin veterans the very best programs, benefits and services in the nation.

The great position of public trust to which Governor Walker appointed me five years ago has truly been a remarkable experience and capstone to a career of military and public service. I appreciate Governor Walker's thankfulness to our veterans, his confidence in me, and his steadfast support of the department.

Not too long ago, I closed out a 30-plus year military career as a U.S. Army officer. Just a short time later I now end my career as a Wisconsin civil servant.

My time at WDVA has been a time of great, essential change. When I was appointed, our Veterans Homes were operating millions of dollars in the red. Within a few short years the homes were operating several millions in the black due to the ability to make changes at an executive level without going through a politicized board. This improved situation with the homes also benefits the Veterans Trust Fund; revenue from the homes can be used to fund the numerous programs, benefits and services for which Wisconsin is known. This means WDVA receives much less general purpose revenue from the state and its taxpayers than would otherwise be needed.

Our Wisconsin G.I. Bill is one of the best in the nation. Our Veterans Homes are exceptionally rated. Our cemeteries do a beautiful job of honoring those veterans who have passed. I leave the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs in a much better condition than when I started as secretary.

Some of the job by necessity is facts and figures and knowing where the agency has been and where it is headed financially, but one of the most enjoyable things as secretary has been personally interacting with veterans from across Wisconsin and the nation and hearing their stories.

As secretary I have come to know many advocates from the veterans community at all levels; national, state, county and beyond. I have met veterans from Janesville to Superior and from the towns along the Mississippi River to the cities along Lake Michigan. I have also met veterans from across the nation through national meetings of each state's veteran affairs department and through national veterans service organizations. Every veteran I meet reminds me of why I chose to serve those who have served on our behalf.

Our veterans service organizations remain stalwarts in protecting veterans and gaining ground on their behalf. Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Vietnam Veterans of America, the Military Officers Association, the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, American Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart and others have all been friends, allies and comrades in assisting our veterans.

Our counties and their veterans service officers have been a contact for veterans in their local communities since after World War II – delivering on the state and federal promises to care for our veterans when they return home. These CVSOs connect county veterans with USDVA and WDVA benefits and programs and are an essential part of getting our older veterans the assistance they need.

Much has changed in 70 years since World War II. We have transitioned to new benefits, new processes and new technology. There is a new G.I. Bill for post-9/11 veterans along with the ability for veterans to sign up for it, and many other benefits, digitally. In fact, that first generation to use the G.I. Bill of Rights by signing up on a paper form is nearly gone. While we look back at that era with great respect and admiration for their monumental accomplishment, with younger generations come new ideas, new benefits and new ways to communicate – many of which the WDVA has implemented during my time here. Our department is now more accessible than ever and is the first, best stop for veterans seeking to use their benefits.

I would not have been an effective secretary were it not for the excellent mentorship I received throughout my career. The same is true of the exemplary staff I served with in state service. I appreciate the years of guidance and camaraderie from both those people for whom I worked and also those who worked tirelessly in the department on behalf of our veterans. Every day we came to work and did something great for the veterans of our state – of that I am proud.

I want to again thank all those who I have known along the way – all those who stood up and helped make Wisconsin the best state in the nation for our veterans.

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(John A. Scocos is Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs. He is an Iraq War veteran.)