



August 23, 2017

Joe Chrisman, State Auditor
Legislative Audit Bureau
22 East Mifflin St. Suite 500
Madison, WI 53703

Dear Mr. Chrisman:

Thank you for the Legislative Audit Bureau's thorough evaluation of operations and performance at the Wisconsin Veterans Home - King.

I am pleased to see that your staff's outside review confirmed much of what I have found in my seven months as secretary – member care at King far exceeds the norm. King staff are truly providing a great service to our most vulnerable Veteran population.

Significantly, your review confirmed the quality and dedication of King's workforce. The ability of staff to persevere and deliver top-level care, despite the challenges faced by the skilled nursing industry both locally and nationwide, is a tribute to their skill and professionalism.

Being very concerned with member care, I am pleased you confirmed that King's per patient nurse contact hours exceed state and federal standards. Where other nursing homes may reduce nursing staff to save money, King continues to provide the highest level of personal care to our members. Additionally, you confirmed that nurse retention at King exceeds local and state averages over time despite the statewide and national staffing crisis afflicting the industry. With regard to regulatory citations, you found that King's facilities were cited by multiple regulating agencies at a much lower rate than similar facilities statewide.

The federal Five-Star Quality Rating System objectively evaluates nursing homes to enable consumers to make informed comparisons regarding the quality of care delivered to patients living in the licensed nursing homes across the country. Your report points out that all four of King's homes exceed, now and over time, local and state averages in *Overall Quality* as determined by this federal rating system. A rating area for improvement noted in your report relates to the *Health Inspection Measures* sub-category. This is something on which we have placed emphasis and will continue to do so. While we have seen improvement we are not yet satisfied. Our research reveals two additional points that your report does not mention: First, King also far exceeds the national star-rating averages for *Overall Quality*, now and over time. Second, all King homes are currently rated as 5 stars in the *Quality Measures* sub-category, a significant accomplishment uncommon in the industry.

Your report aptly captures the largest personnel-related challenge facing King – an industry-wide shortage of nursing staff that has caused overtime hours worked to increase significantly over the past few years. This has placed an unsustainable burden on the employees as well as the department budget. Thank you for mentioning the numerous things we have done recently and over time to combat this crisis, such as protecting new hires from mandatory overtime, increasing the number of weekends off for certified nursing assistants, hiring a nurse recruiter, and protecting days surrounding vacation from extra hours worked, to name a few. It is my focus to eliminate all forced overtime and reduce all voluntary overtime to acceptable, affordable levels as quickly and efficiently as possible. Your report notes the DHS incentive program for new CNAs with a recommendation the department further pursue these recruitment tools. Next month our staff will attend a DHS informational webinar detailing how our facilities can ensure bonuses are available to WDVA nursing staff under the newly created Wisconsin Caregiver Career Program which will further assist us in staff recruitment and retention.

The department has already taken steps consistent with many of the recommendations in the report and will continue to make improvements. In addition to your recommendations related to staffing issues, your report makes several recommendations generally related to member and employee interpersonal communications. While the department will report specific progress to the Joint Committee on Audit, it is important to note that I have an open-door policy for employees to meet with me one-on-one and many King staff have taken advantage of this. Immediately following my appointment in February, I established an office at King and I have spent numerous hours meeting with staff and listening to their concerns.

I would again thank you and your staff for the comprehensive review of operations and performance at King. While the report identifies some areas where we can continue improvement, it most significantly confirms many of the positive things we already knew. I look forward to providing a full report to the Joint Committee on Audit on or before January 8, 2018.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Zimmerman", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Daniel J. Zimmerman, Secretary