



## WDVA Sec. Mary Kolar and U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin: Keep Up the Fight to Protect Wisconsin's Veterans

About 350,000 veterans call Wisconsin home. They are our friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors who were willing to give their lives for us and our country. They fought battles around the world, putting themselves in harm's way. Now, when they should feel safe at home, veterans are once again on a battlefield, this time facing an invisible enemy. Sadly, it is taking a tremendous toll.

Many of Wisconsin's veterans are elderly and may have conditions such as diabetes or heart disease that put them in a high-risk category for complications from COVID-19. Some who served in Vietnam and were exposed to Agent Orange have faced long-term disabilities, and others who deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan were exposed to poor quality air and burn pits and now suffer asthma and other respiratory illnesses. Others have physical disabilities resulting from their service and sacrifice.

Often veterans in our state live in rural areas where Internet access for virtual medical appointments is unreliable and the distance to a hospital is too far when their conditions become emergencies. Sometimes, veterans are delaying doctors' appointments, including important preventative care, screenings, and treatments, to avoid leaving their homes and risking exposure to COVID-19. Others are homeless or in recovery and must stay in shelters, group homes, and other living situations where physical distancing is difficult. And, there are veterans who live at our Wisconsin's Veterans Homes, nursing homes where we fight every day to keep the most vulnerable of our state's veterans safe.

Perhaps one of the most alarming concerns is the effect of the pandemic on veterans' mental health. Veterans have reported experiencing the pandemic through the lens of their past military service, leading to heightened symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety, substance use disorder, and other mental health concerns. Social distancing, though necessary to reduce the spread of the virus, can isolate veterans and cut them off from their support networks in what is already a difficult and stressful time. While many groups have made significant efforts to provide virtual services, they cannot replace the opportunity to share experiences and bonds that form in face-to-face group therapy or activities through service organizations.

So, what is the battle plan for our veterans? The approval of the COVID-19 vaccine is certainly uplifting news, but broad distribution to everyone who wants a vaccine shot is going to take some time. In the meantime, our veterans remain at risk. Please, do not become complacent; we are still in this fight together and we all have a responsibility to do our part. We ask you to join us in staying home when possible, masking up, and staying six feet away from others when you must go out, and washing your hands frequently. Our precautions make everyone, including our veterans, safer. If there is a veteran in your life who may be feeling lonely or isolated, pick up the phone to check in and say hello, mail a letter, or drop off a care package. We **must** ensure we take care of those who have sacrificed so much in our defense.

*Mary Kolar is the Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs. Secretary Kolar was commissioned in the United States Navy in 1980, served on active duty for 28 years, and retired as a Captain (O-6). As Secretary, she is responsible for advocating for the approximately 350,000 veterans in recognition of their service and sacrifice to our state and nation.*

*U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin was elected to the Senate in 2012 and re-elected in 2018. Throughout her career in public service, including 14 years in the House of Representatives, she has worked across party lines to make sure our veterans, military families and wounded warriors receive the support and care that they have earned with their service and sacrifice.*