



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 17, 2016

Contact: 608-266-0517
WDVAMedia@dva.wi.gov

Secretary John A. Scocos Column: Wisconsin is a National Leader When it Comes to Veterans

Wisconsin is a leader in the country when it comes to investing in veterans and we have the best and brightest staff overseeing all these efforts. The Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) excels in providing modern tools to our nation's heroes so that veterans are able to reintegrate into civilian society with housing, education, health care and meaningful jobs.

The Veterans Trust Fund (VTF) has been the main source of revenue for providing these essential veterans benefits in Wisconsin since 1961. Maintaining a healthy trust fund is critical to our service mission.

Over the years the VTF relied on revenue generators like special taxes (liquor, tobacco, etc.) and, more recently, interest payments from loan programs administered by the WDVA. However, as the nation's economy changed, so did our ability to use loan interest as a source of revenue. Fewer and fewer veterans applied for our loans, instead turning to banks that were providing loans at interest rates that a small state agency could not compete with. That, coupled with the fact the loan programs no longer generated enough revenue to cover expenses, meant that it just didn't make sense for us to continue to invest resources in loan programs.

Seeing the decline in revenue generators, Governor Walker has provided the VTF with more than \$10 million since 2012, the first general fund appropriations that the VTF received since 1988. Additionally, the Legislature, with bi-partisan support, gave us the ability to transfer funds to the VTF from our main source of income, the Wisconsin Veterans Homes, which provide 24-hour skilled nursing care to nearly 1,000 veterans and their spouses.

That the Homes generate revenue sufficient to support transfer to the VTF is itself a success. In 2011, the Homes were operating nearly \$13 million in the red. Deliberate analysis and decisions led to reforms that turned the homes around. Today our Homes are some of the best in the country (with 5 star ratings per the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services) and we are operating about \$40 million in the black.

The VTF is the healthiest it's been in many years. Spending the VTF wisely is paramount, as it allows us to provide direct services to veterans and their families.

A primary service is claims assistance. In fiscal year 2015, the US Department of Veterans Affairs completed 43,670 Wisconsin claims for veterans. Of those, the WDVA represented veterans in 22,143 claims – over 50 percent. The impact of those benefits to veterans represented by WDVA was \$33.2 million in 2015. Claims assistance is an important benefit other states, like Ohio and Michigan - which boast significantly larger veterans populations than Wisconsin – do not provide.

-MORE-

The WDVA runs three veterans cemeteries, including 5th busiest state veterans cemetery in the nation. To date in fiscal year 2016, our staff has interred over 1,000 veterans and their spouses and our Military Funeral Honors Team has coordinated nearly 5,000 funerals.

We also operate the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, educating the public with the stories and history of Wisconsin's veterans. A Smithsonian affiliate, it is a unique treasure that welcomes more than 120,000 visitors per year.

These are just a few of the things we do. In Wisconsin, we have invested in the most generous collection of veterans benefits of any state in the nation – making us a national leader in veterans affairs. We have laid a strong foundation so that we can continue to provide the best quality programs, benefits and services to those who have served our great country. Wisconsin cares deeply about our veterans and the WDVA at the direction of Governor Walker will continue to work hard to make sure our veterans – who have given and sacrificed so much – have everything they need to succeed.

###