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Ensuring Best Possible Care at Veterans Home at King

A column by John A. Scocos, Secretary, Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs

A recent news article questioning our care of veterans at the Wisconsin Veterans Home at King missed a very important point: we have shown by our actions that we are committed to ensuring that the home at King remains one of the nation's finest examples of veteran care.

It is true we have struggled with some of the same problems facing all the nation's nursing homes: a shortage of nursing professionals; new and complex federal health privacy and reporting regulations; and a rapidly growing population of seniors requiring substantially more care.

It is also true, like every nursing home in the state, that we have experienced violations of state regulations (though significantly fewer than the national average). We know about these intimately because we're the ones who reported them to the state. We're also the ones who corrected them under the approval of state regulators.

As the new Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, I am absolutely committed to ensure that problems of any type are kept to a minimum – and that we do everything possible to ensure the highest standards of care for our veterans. We've taken the right steps to making sure that's the case.

But let's let readers judge for themselves. Here's what we've done in the past year – and in the past few months since I've been secretary:

- We named Bill Crowley to head the facility as Commandant. Like previous Commandants, he has an extraordinary background in management and finance. Like almost all nursing home administrators, he comes from a management rather than a medical background, which serves him well as he oversees the combined operations and infrastructure for the four separately licensed nursing facilities at the Home.
- The Home's expertise in the medical aspects of long-term nursing care is extensive. The King Home's medical director is Dr. Paul Drinka, a nationally known and nationally published geriatrician. He is supported by a host of contracted physicians who provide specialty care in the Home's facilities, which also provides an added benefit of residents being seen by the same doctor should they require additional treatment at the local hospital.
- To address the nursing shortage, we've already requested 44 additional positions, almost all of them nurses to supplement our current nursing corps of 400. We have four programs in place to recruit, retain and train new nurses at all levels, and almost all of our vacant nursing positions will be filled by August.
- We have worked with the state, with U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, physicians and pharmacy consultants, laboratory staff and our nurses to put in place a number of new procedures, medication protocols, and training programs to improve care.

(Page 2)

The home at King is a unique place. It's a community where more than 700 veterans and their spouses live in four large homes and individual cottages on Rainbow Lake near Waupaca. It has its own theater, bowling alley, post office and library. Unlike the seniors living in most of Wisconsin's nursing homes, our residents are mostly male. They average 10 years younger and many are fairly independent, and some don't require much care, at least for now.

Like all large institutions, problems do occur. And, with more than 800 employees, we obviously have occasional staff conflicts. But overall, we feel we have an excellent relationship with our employees at King. They do an excellent job – and we're extremely proud of the work they do.

When questions of health care arise, the new federal reporting law prohibits us from commenting on individual cases. But our last inspections by the state regulators indicate that we have performed at – or exceeded – all state and federal regulations.

For myself and our veterans leadership, caring for aging veterans isn't a state job or a bureaucratic program. It's my deep personal commitment, and, I believe, my solemn duty as Secretary. As our veterans age and need more intensive care, it also remains my duty to ensure that our veterans who choose to reside in Wisconsin's Veterans Homes receive the best possible care, a duty that I will continue to ensure is fulfilled.

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