



## Statement by Secretary John A. Scocos To the Joint Legislative Audit Committee Wednesday, September 21, 2016

We believe that caring for our veterans and their families is an honor. It is our duty to ensure that we provide the safest and best quality care to our nation's heroes. We want veterans and their family members to experience a high quality of life at King while also receiving the highest quality care that they deserve.

That said, if any member is not satisfied with the care they receive, then we have more work to do. Our mission is to provide the best care in the country. As you will see, we accomplish this by employing staff who are equally dedicated to their service to our veterans and our veterans families. Some of our staff are second generation on the King campus, growing up themselves around our world class facility, filled with our nation's heroes.

Any concerns raised at one of our facilities is taken with grave seriousness and action.

The fact is, we are highly regulated by both state and federal entities, and undergo regular inspection and we have demonstrated that we provide five star care to our veterans. At the direction of the Governor and legislature, we have a permanently placed Ombudsman at King to provide immediate access for quality or care issues.

Since January 2015, the Wisconsin Veterans Home at King has undergone eight regular inspections and surveys by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services Division of Quality Assurance and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. These unannounced inspections take several days to complete by teams of specialists whose job it is to understand and ensure compliance with the many regulations that affect the care that each of our members receive at our Homes.

These entities have said that our Homes are among the best in the country. And when issues do arise during these inspections, just as they do in any 24-hour skilled nursing facility across the country, corrective action plans are put in place urgently so that we may make improvements.

At the Wisconsin Veterans Home at King, there are three buildings that are rated five stars (out of five) and one that is rated four based on quality of care delivered, direct care staffing levels, and the results of annual healthcare inspections conducted by our state department of health. Only 15 percent of homes in the country receive a five star rating! This is an improvement over our ratings from 2011 when our facilities at King were rated at 3, 3, 4 & 5 stars. Just yesterday, I learned the Wisconsin Veterans Home at King were once again rated at five stars out of five for three buildings and one at four stars.

Most recently, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs found our facilities at King to be in full compliance with all VA standards during its 2016 survey which was just completed in June and its 2015 survey.

This point is critical! King is a 24-hour skilled nursing facility with 721 beds, the largest nursing home in the state, serving an increasingly older population. And in spite of our large size and the challenging medical conditions of our elderly population, we are still one of the best in the country. Let me repeat this, we are still one of the very best in the entire country.

We have not only increased our quality ratings, but we have also undergone a financial turnaround. This is a good thing. In 2011, financial statements reflected a \$12.8 million deficit at Wisconsin Veterans Homes. In 2016, due to this IMPRESSIVE financial turnaround, the homes are solvent now and through the foreseeable future.

In addition, we have reinvested \$150 million in building and maintenance projects in all veterans homes since 2011, Governor Walker along with the legislature provided the VTF with more than \$10 million in GPR since 2012, the first general fund appropriations it received since 1988, and, in 2014, Governor Walker authorized the construction of a new \$80 million state of the art facility at King to replace some of the aging buildings.

Let me be perfectly clear, the funds are used strictly and solely for veterans programs, benefits and services, and do not go to any other state programming. These funds are not re-distributed to other agencies. We are talking about programs and services that help veterans such as funding our Claims Office that helps Wisconsin veterans navigate the federal VA system to get their claims paid, or grants to Veteran Service Organizations like the American Legion, DAV and the VFW to work directly with veterans throughout the state programs to help homeless veterans, and even our funeral honors program that ensures that we pay our final respects to our nations heroes before they are laid to rest.

Finally, let me close by saying that our Wisconsin Veterans Homes have some of the most caring and dedicated professional staff in the nation who work, very, very, very hard each and every day, 24/7 to ensure that our veterans and loved ones are cared for in a dignified and first-rate manner. Like all health care providers, we are faced with a nationwide shortage of LPNs and nurse aides. In the face of that shortage, at King, staff retention rates for full-time RNs, LPNs, and nurse aides are better than the statewide rates by about 20 percent due to WDVA efforts to raise wages, offer competitive benefits and alter scheduling practices. Because of the hard work of our dedicated staff, our quality of care remains excellent.

It is our top priority to ensure that we provide the safest and best quality care to our nation's heroes. We have a lot to be proud of in this regard. We welcome an audit to help underscore our accomplishments at the Wisconsin Veterans Home at King.