



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON

November 18, 2020

The Honorable Bryan Steil  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Steil:

Thank you for your August 28, 2020, letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regarding the rising number of COVID-19 cases and deaths at the Wisconsin State Veterans Home (SVH) at Union Grove. I appreciate the opportunity to respond.

As you mention, this is a state-run facility and VA is assisting the Wisconsin SVH at Union Grove so they can provide the best care possible to America's Veterans and their families. The enclosed information paper provides responses to each of your questions.

Should you have additional questions, please have a member of your staff contact Ms. Amanda Neumann, Congressional Relations Officer, at 202-226-9132 or [Amanda.Neumann@va.gov](mailto:Amanda.Neumann@va.gov).

Thank you for your continued support of our mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert L. Wilkie".

Robert L. Wilkie

Enclosure

**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)  
Information Paper for  
Representative Bryan Steil regarding the  
Wisconsin Veterans Home at Union Grove**

**Question 1: How did the outbreak begin at the Union Grove facility?**

**VA Response:** The Wisconsin State Veterans Home (SVH) in Union Grove, Wisconsin completed surveillance testing as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Two Veterans on a locked memory care unit had positive COVID-19 test results on August 3, 2020, and one staff member reported being positive on August 2, 2020, having last worked on the locked memory care unit on July 23, 2020. To prevent further spread, staff assigned to the memory care unit only worked on that unit and staff working on other units were not allowed access to the locked memory care unit. August 3, 2020 is considered as the date of the outbreak.

All Veterans on this unit and over 150 staff members were tested on August 4, 2020, and on August 7, 2020, all 153 residents were tested with 28 Veterans testing positive for COVID-19. Nine Veterans who were positive for COVID-19 died, four of which were on hospice care prior to infection; and 19 Veterans recovered. Additionally, 26 of 28 staff members testing positive for COVID-19 have recovered. The outbreak was contained within 30 days. Visitors have not been permitted to the home since early in the pandemic response. In March 2020, all staff members were required to wear masks before entering the home and residents were encouraged to remain in their rooms and wear masks. Most residents followed the recommendations, but the home reported that residents on the memory care unit had difficulty following the recommendations and were regularly redirected due to poor cognition and dementia.

**Question 2: What mitigation measures are in place to prevent further COVID-19 outbreaks at the Union Grove facility?**

**VA Response:** Milwaukee VA Medical Center (VAMC) is the VAMC of jurisdiction for this SVH. Milwaukee's VAMC Director designated the SVH VA Medical Facility Representative to maintain regular communication with the Acting Commandant and Director of Nursing at the SVH. Since March 27, 2020, the SVH VA Medical Facility Representative received daily updates about resident and staff member testing and infections. At the direction of Milwaukee's VAMC Director, the SVH VA Medical Facility Representative offered the Wisconsin SVH at Union Grove consultation and staffing support on May 27, 2020. At that time, SVH leadership declined this assistance until the outbreak in August 2020. Wisconsin SVH at Union Grove reported having adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) for the outbreak and accepted consultation with the medical center's long-term care nursing division manager to discuss management strategies for the memory care unit on August 5, 2020. The Milwaukee VA Emergency Management coordinator informed the SVH VA Medical Facility Representative that the

Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs' Secretary submits Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS) assistance requests to the governor. The SVH VA Medical Facility Representative shared this information with the Acting Commandant August 6, 2020.

The Acting Commandant completed the Resource Request for DEMPS support and by August 9, 2020, nursing DEMPS volunteers (five employees from Milwaukee VAMC, seven employees from Madison VAMC and one employee from Hines VAMC) arrived at the Wisconsin SVH at Union Grove to supplement staff. The team departed the home by September 10, 2020. Additionally, an Infectious Disease physician from Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 12 arrived at the SVH on August 11, 2020, and spent several days on-site providing further consultation to contain the outbreak. This individual departed the SVH on August 21, 2020. DEMPS supplemental nursing staff were no longer needed after 30 days. No COVID-19 positive residents were transferred to a VAMC for hospital care.

**Question 3: What is VA's plan to prevent and respond to COVID-19 outbreaks at other VA facilities?**

**VA Response:** Residents are still encouraged to wear masks and remain in their rooms to maintain physical distancing. Regular surveillance testing is completed as recommended by CDC, and staff members continue to wear masks, eye protection and additional PPE in the building when providing direct care. Staff members who test positive for COVID-19 are not permitted to work and must follow both CDC and state health department guidelines. VA's Office of Geriatrics and Extended Care, in collaboration with the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, held calls to all states in April 2020 to assess COVID-19 preparation, discuss how SVHs limit exposure and identify needs from all 158 State Veterans Homes SVHs. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Moving Forward Guidebook was developed to support VHA's Moving Forward Plan and included guidance to support states. It is a tactical guidebook providing VISNs and VHA facilities a centralized document for regulations, policy and guidance associated with expanding services at VA sites of care.

Regarding the Wisconsin SVH at Union Grove specifically, Milwaukee VAMC maintains contact Monday through Friday with the Wisconsin SVH at Union Grove Director of Nursing for updates on surveillance testing. The SVH VA Medical Facility Representative and the Director of Nursing at Wisconsin SVH at Union Grove have weekend communication if necessary.

VA's Fourth Mission is to improve the Nation's preparedness for response to war, terrorism, national emergencies and natural disasters by developing plans and taking actions to ensure continued service to Veterans, supporting national, state and local emergency management, public health, safety and homeland security efforts. This includes providing local and national support to SVHs during times of national emergency. VA has supported 86 SVHs across 38 states through Fourth Mission

activities, deploying 752 VA staff to assist with clinical care, testing, training, infection control consultation, quarantine/isolation requirements and space management. VA also provides PPE to SVHs, including hundreds of thousands of masks, gowns, gloves and other resources. All mission assignments and other support to SVHs during the pandemic are collated and captured by the Office of Emergency Management and the Healthcare Operations Center.

Local VAMC and SVH leadership engage in regular contact to ascertain the status of SVHs. SVHs may need assistance with activities related to COVID-19 such as procedures on reliable resident and employee testing, actual testing of supplies and equipment and recommendations on how to alter operations in the event of COVID-19 positive residents or staff. All SVH requests for assistance begin at the local VAMC level.

Department of Veterans Affairs  
November 2020