

Legislative Audit to Uncover Problems at King Veterans Home

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Over the years, problems with the facilities and quality of care at the King Veterans Home have raised concerns across the state. This week, we approved a nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau investigation to consider both financial and quality of care issues at King.

MADISON - “There used to be a real nice coffee shop. But they turned it into vending machines,” David Wedde told the Joint Committee on Audit.

To many it might seem like an insignificant thing but it was not just a coffee shop. It was a symbol of comradely at the Veterans Home in King. Everyday veterans gathered in the shop to trade stories. Now impersonal machines have replaced the shop – a victim of budget cuts.

Tim Michael added, “Shouldn’t be so hard to get treatment for PTSD. Why do we have a surplus when we need these things?”

A few moments after the two Navy veterans from Waupaca County testified, the entire committee voted to approve a comprehensive performance audit of the King Veterans Home.

A Capital Times investigative report recently highlighted problems at the state-run facility. Stories of difficulties at King trickled out of Waupaca County for many years. Over the years, Senator Julie Lassa (D-Stevens Point) whose district is near King, made inquiries related to

problems at King. A year ago, Sen. Lassa requested the Joint Audit Committee co-chairs move forward with an audit.

Later, Senator Luther Olsen (R-Ripon) requested an audit and detailed what an investigation should include. The nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) included many of his suggestions in its scope for the proposed audit.

During the hearing, committee members (of which I serve as ranking minority member) heard conflicting testimony. State officials were quick to remind members the state administered Veterans Homes received four and five star quality ratings from state and federal inspections.

Yet allegations from residents, family members, and employees (both current and former), as reported in the media, paint a different picture. Employees and residents struggled with shortages but were afraid of retribution if they complained.

Committee members heard about administrative and financial problems. Staff shortages, forced overtime and inadequate wages led to high staff turnover and poor quality of care.

Budget cuts resulted in buildings without air conditioning, dilapidated equipment, and lost opportunities for residents like day trips to ball games. Volunteers testified that no doctor was on staff for the veterans, which meant anyone with medical needs was transported for care. Often veterans were not properly clothed for winter trips.

Administrators eliminated services that symbolized a high quality environment – like the coffee shop and pontoon boat rides on the lake – that gave King its home-like atmosphere.

Legislators, residents and advocates all asked how “surplus” money could be transferred away from the Veterans Home at a time when routine maintenance was delayed and staff were poorly paid.

State officials emphasized they created financial solvency from the deficit they inherited. They described the general fund tax dollars used by the administration to infuse the veterans programs and stated this was the first time since 1988 that state general fund dollars were transferred to bail out the ailing Veterans Trust Fund.

I found it difficult to reconcile the allegations of poor quality care, old equipment, worn out buildings, and untrained staff with administration officials' repeated reference to four and five star quality ratings.

Reading through documents and letters I received, it appears state officials sacrificed things that made King special to veterans in favor of budget cuts. Mysteriously, these cuts happened at a time when "surplus" monies were transferred to cover deficits in other programs. Getting to the bottom of this problem is exactly why we need a nonpartisan audit that follows both the money and the quality of care for veterans.

Problems at the state's veteran homes are not new. As a former chair of the audit committee, I joined co-chair Rep. Peter Barca (D-Kenosha) to approve a 2010 investigation that exposed many financial problems and led to recommendations on consistent rate setting; hiring and overtime costs; and resolving lax financial administration.

Senator Olsen reflected the feelings of many lawmakers, including myself, when he eloquently described the audit:

"If there are problems at King, we must shine a light on them and we do not rest until we figure out how to resolve them in a manner benefiting our veterans that demonstrates our utmost respect and gratitude for their selfless service to our great country."

To the state leaders: we can start with something simple but important like bringing back the coffee shop.

Senator Vinehout serves as the ranking member of the audit committee which unanimously approved the audit.

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