

Supporting Veteran Opportunity

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 27 July 2022 08:45

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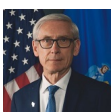


Jeff Smith writes about the Blue Ribbon Commission on Veteran Opportunity and what he has learned as a member.

BRUNSWICK, WI - United States veterans have made many sacrifices to preserve our freedom as Americans. Our veterans deserve recognition for their commitment of putting one's country over one's self. More importantly, our veterans deserve the assurance that the country they served will be there to offer unyielding support if and when they need it.

Veterans often face unique challenges affecting their mental, emotional and physical health after completing their service. These challenges can take a toll on the lives of veterans and their families, contributing to financial insecurity or long-term health issues.

It's critical that we address the immediate needs of our veterans and consider new solutions to fix the root causes of the issues facing our veterans. I'm very proud to be a part of a team focusing on this exact mission.



Earlier this year, Governor Evers established the Blue Ribbon Commission on Veteran Opportunity. With more than 20 members, most of whom have military experience, the

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commission is charged with developing comprehensive, long-term efforts to support Wisconsin's more than 300,000 veterans and address challenges they may face. I'm honored to work with such a qualified group to better understand the issues at-hand and deliver recommendations to reduce barriers to employment, healthcare, housing and more.

The commission has already met five times since May. In each of these meetings there are four key goals we are to accomplish: examine current issues facing veterans, hear from the public, discuss policy ideas and prepare proposals for the governor. There are different themes addressed in each meeting, but we've remained focused on these goals to best understand how we can help our veterans.

During our first meeting we learned about how we can further sustain the Veterans Trust Fund, an important program that provides support for veteran museums, outreach and recovery programs, county veteran service offices and more.

In our second meeting, the commission discussed long-term nursing quality and accessibility, including in our state's veterans homes. This is an issue of great concern to many, especially as we all know, we have an aging population with a shrinking caregiver workforce. We discussed how COVID-19 affected access to quality care and the effectiveness of the vaccine to protect residents. We looked forward to consider how new technology and specialized care can benefit veterans in care facilities.



Post-service education, job training and employment were the main topics of conversation at our third meeting. I was interested to learn about the systems currently available to support veterans' career paths and help them leverage their unique skills and specialties to new roles in the civilian workforce. We spent time thinking of ways we can improve ADA accommodations for veterans and develop employment on-boarding processes specific to veterans.

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We held a public hearing during the fourth commission meeting. In all of the past meetings, we had experts and invited members of the public speak on each topic; this meeting was insightful to learn from Wisconsinites about the challenges and solutions they've identified to support fellow veterans. We heard from residents in areas of the state including Fond du Lac, Ashland and Dunn County—I am grateful for their valued participation in this meeting.

Last week we had our latest meeting, which focused on housing accessibility and mental health. We learned about mental health support programs and the barriers experienced by veterans that affect their housing stability. These issues are top priorities for the commission, and I'm hopeful our work will prompt action and results to support our veterans.



The commission will continue to meet through the rest of the summer. Based on the presentations we've joined and in-depth conversations we've had, we will develop a report with recommendations for Governor Evers to be included in the 2023-25 biennial budget proposal.

As the son of a World War II Navy veteran, I am incredibly honored to serve on the Blue Ribbon Commission and do my part to support Wisconsin's veterans. My father's uniform hangs in my office to this day to remind myself of Americans' service to their country. Now it's our responsibility to support our brave veterans who truly exemplified the meaning of public service.