

Jon Erpenbach: Time to work smarter as we fight veteran suicide

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Everyone knows the statistic, 22 veterans are victims of suicide each day in our country. The reality that those who have served us risking life and limb are struggling to point of taking their own lives is a failure of our nation. While many policies that address veterans issues, like health care and duty disability are Federal policies, there are many programs and policies administered by the State of Wisconsin that affect veterans. Our goal as we seek to address the crisis of veteran suicide should be meeting the needs of those veterans in crisis in a nimble and effective way.

Spreading the word about existing programs and making sure veterans are receiving all of the support they deserve is our most important first action. After attacks on our County Veterans Service Officers in the recent past, most Legislators now understanding the true value of a face to face connection point in every county of the state. Having an officer at the County Veterans Service Office is invaluable. No one knows more about how to connect veterans to services they need and deserve than a CVSO. Make sure the veterans in your life know they can make connection points, not just for earned service, but also for local organizations and groups that support veterans at their local CVSO.

Protection of programs that are only in Wisconsin that are meeting needs where Federal programs fall short is another essential goal. The Wisconsin GI bill has stronger college support for veterans and their children than the Federal GI. Our universities have worked to understand and support our veteran community better and it shows. The Needy Veterans Program is another Wisconsin specific support that is very valuable to our veteran families in need of medical equipment or emergency financial support. My hope is to expand the Needy Veteran Program to support emergency mental health services for veterans and their families.

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Once again this year, I have introduced (with Representative Gordon Hintz) Senate Bill 631 that would expand the use of the Needy Veteran Program to include mental health and substance abuse services. Using an existing program and spending money already set aside to help veterans make this a bill that can be seamlessly adopted now. The bill requires action on the veterans request in 48 hours to meet needs quickly. We know that the average wait time for an initial mental health appointment at the VA is 26 days. Being able to get substance abuse treatment and mental health services as veterans wait for treatment from the VA is the kind of nimble smart support we should be exploring in Wisconsin. I am also drafting a bill to pilot a text message veteran's crisis line so we can offer an option for counsel and support without having to talk, using texting technology.

Finally, I will continue to work to support the Department of Veterans Affairs with general purpose tax dollars just like most other state agencies. Our financially failing Veterans Fund will not survive unless we make some smart decisions. The people of Wisconsin want to support our veterans and most people think they already do. In Wisconsin we value military service and our veterans. For more information on proposals affecting veteran's in Wisconsin contact my office at 608-266-6670 or sen.erpenbach@legis.wi.gov

— *Erpenbach, D-Middleton, represents the 27th Senate District.*