

Vukmir campaign: Leah Vukmir keeps Tomah VA scandal front and center in race against U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin

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KEY TAKEAWAY: Since 2015, Baldwin has admitted her office initially mishandled their response to the whistleblower's allegations. "I owned up and said there were mistakes in communication and I fixed them," Baldwin said when asked about the issue at a recent debate.

Leah Vukmir Keeps Tomah VA Scandal Front And Center In Race Against US Sen. Tammy Baldwin

Hope Kirwan, Wisconsin Public Radio

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As the race for Wisconsin's U.S. Senate seat gets closer to the finish line, Republican candidate Leah Vukmir continues to attack Democratic U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin's response to the 2015 scandal at the Tomah Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

"The Tomah VA issue, in particular, really speaks to her character and whether or not people can trust her for another six years," Vukmir said at a recent campaign event in Tomah. "If she cannot hold our veterans in high regard and if she cannot be accountable to our veterans, then how will she be accountable to the rest of us in our state and how will she be accountable to lead in Washington?"

The issue has been the focus of Vukmir's race from start to finish, provoking sometimes emotional reactions from those with connections to the VA and from Baldwin herself.

The Tomah VA was thrust into the spotlight more than three years ago after veteran Jason Simcakoski died at the medical center in August 2014. An investigation by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General found Simcakoski died from a mixture of drugs prescribed by VA doctors.

But there wasn't a public outcry over the veteran's death until January 2015, when the Center for Investigative Reporting published a story about Simcakoski and the rising number of opioid prescriptions written at the Tomah VA.

Baldwin was one of several federal lawmakers from Wisconsin who responded to the story by calling for a federal investigation.

She was also criticized when news reports found she and other lawmakers had received complaints about overprescribing from a Tomah VA employee more than three months earlier than when the story broke. Baldwin also faced public scrutiny after it was discovered her office had a March 2014 report on the medical center's prescribing practices from an investigation by the VA's Inspector General since August 2014.

Since 2015, Baldwin has admitted her office initially mishandled their response to the whistleblower's allegations.

"I owned up and said there were mistakes in communication and I fixed them," Baldwin said when asked about the issue at a recent debate.

The whistleblower, Ryan Honl, has continued to criticize the senator. Honl did not respond to an interview request for this story, but he recently told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel it's "immoral" to vote for Baldwin in this year's election.