

Vukmir campaign: Tomah VA whistleblower says it would be 'immoral' to support Baldwin

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Dan Bice writes in the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel on Thursday morning that VA Whistleblower Ryan Honl, whose dogged persistence helped make the opioid crisis at the Tomah VA public, says it's "immoral" to vote for Tammy Baldwin.

[Read the full story here.](#)

[Bice: Tomah VA whistleblower says it would be 'immoral' to support Sen. Tammy Baldwin](#)

Dan Bice, Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Oct. 4, 2018

Tomah whistleblower Ryan Honl is putting himself front and center in the U.S. Senate race.

Honl, who helped shine the spotlight on the problems at the Tomah Veterans Affairs Medical Center, is urging voters to oppose Democratic U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin. She is being challenged by GOP state Sen. Leah Vukmir.

"It is immoral to vote for Tammy Baldwin in this year's election," Honl, a 46-year-old Gulf War veteran and West Point graduate, said in a statement to the Journal Sentinel.

Honl's intervention in the race caused a stir in the two campaigns, with Vukmir saluting his remarks while Baldwin all but dismissed them.

In an interview, Honl accused Baldwin of mishandling the response to the 2015 scandal at the Tomah VA, which had been dubbed "Candy Land" for its widespread distribution of opioids.

Honl said he is letting his opinion be known now in response to two new TV spots in which the parents and widow of U.S. Marine veteran Jason Simcakoski, who died at the Tomah VA facility, come out in support of Baldwin. His death in August 2014 was due to "mixed use toxicity" while being treated by doctors at the Tomah VA.

"It really bothers me that (Baldwin) used the family," Honl said, adding that members of the Simcakoski family earlier told him they would be sitting out the race. Honl said he believes Baldwin will probably be re-elected given her double-digit lead in the polls, but he said, "I thought the public needed an alternative point of view."

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The problems at the 266-bed facility in rural Tomah bubbled beneath the surface for years but burst into public view with a January 2015 series by the Center for Investigative Reporting, which was tipped off by Honl, a former Tomah VA employee.

The series accused the Tomah VA of rampant overmedication of patients, retaliatory management practices and preventable overdose deaths. The number of opiates prescribed at the Tomah medical center more than quintupled over the past decade, despite a drop in patients.

Honl was one of several whistleblowers to raise concerns with members of the Wisconsin congressional delegation over problems at the facility. He spoke with staffers for Baldwin, U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson and U.S. Rep. Ron Kind, a Republican and a Democrat, respectively.

Baldwin came under intense criticism because she did not make public a report from the Department of Veterans Affairs' inspector general that said particular physicians at the medical center were "prescribing an unusually high total opioid amount."

Later, after nearly two months of silence, Baldwin acknowledged her office had made mistakes, leading her to fire one staffer, demote another and dock the pay of her chief of staff.

In his statement, Honl said he is upset that the U.S. senator fired Marquette Baylor, her former deputy state director and chief of her Milwaukee office, in early 2015 for a range of issues, including her handling of the Tomah crisis.

Honl was extremely critical of Baylor at the time, noting that she even discouraged him in late 2014 from going to the press with his concerns.

But he said this week that Baylor's later ethics complaint to the U.S. Senate showed she tried to alert Baldwin and her chief of staff to the Tomah VA problems. Baylor's complaint was dismissed.

Honl also chided Baldwin in his statement for leaving the Senate Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs Committee, which has been investigating problems at VA hospitals and medical centers.

"She didn't want to be a part of a committee investigating other VA scandals because it would keep her failures front and center," Honl wrote. "Too big of a minefield for an impending political campaign."

Baldwin did move to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. But as a member of the Appropriations Committee, she has remained on the subcommittee dealing with veterans affairs.

Honl asserted Baldwin's staff wouldn't meet with him in 2017 when he visited Washington, D.C., to testify on a veterans bill named for a Tomah psychologist who committed suicide after raising concerns about the medical facility.

"In Ryan Honl's opinion, having been there directly involved, it's been a political cleanup from day one for Tammy Baldwin," Honl said Tuesday, referring to himself in the third person.

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Vukmir said in a statement that Honl's remarks confirm what she's been saying.

"As a military mom, it pains me to know Baldwin knew about the opioid crisis at Tomah and refused to take action to help our veterans because she had more concern for her political career," Vukmir said.

[Read the full story here.](#)