

Dept. of Veterans Affairs: Secretary-designee Mary M. Kolar testifies before Senate Committee on Transportation, Veterans and Military Affairs

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MADISON — Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary-designee Mary M. Kolar testified on Wednesday, February 20, 2019 before the Wisconsin State Senate Committee on Transportation, Veterans and Military Affairs to share her vision and plans for the Department. Governor Tony Evers has nominated Kolar to serve as Secretary, but she must be confirmed by the State Senate.

Below is Secretary-designee Kolar's full testimony:

Good afternoon Senator Petrowski and committee members. Thank you for having me here this afternoon.

At my very first staff meeting as Secretary-designee, I asked that every Department member, before taking any action, ask themselves, "How will this best serve Wisconsin veterans and their families?" Veterans and their families contribute to communities in many important ways, and it's our job at the WDVA to help them achieve their goals. Employment, education and quality of life, it's all attainable in Wisconsin, and I expect WDVA to help.

What led to me being here today? Please allow me to tell you a bit of the details.

My grandfather served in the Army, my father and 2 oldest brothers in the Navy,

one in the Air Force, and one brother with the Marines. My husband served in the Navy. Our oldest son is currently serving in the Navy. Our youngest is a Firefighter. My mother, who after the death of my father when I was a two-years-old, became a single-parent of seven children, was also committed to her community, country and service to veterans.

I grew up in Wilton, WI. It's about a 20 minute drive from the VA Hospital in Tomah. One way we supported the veterans there was to sing. My mother, sister and I would be accompanied by a Catholic nun as we sang songs the veterans of earlier conflicts would appreciate. "You are my sunshine" is still one of my favorites from that time and I appreciate the memories of the veterans singing along.

Though the percentage of women serving in the U.S. Navy when I joined was less than 10%, it was the promise of adventure and seeing the world that led to my commission as a Naval Officer. For 28 years I enjoyed serving and working with all facets of the Navy. I also had opportunities to work with all the U.S. military services. [I've shared a handout listing my tours in more detail](#), but I'd like to highlight some of my duties and responsibilities.

My first duty station after being commissioned was at a command where we tracked satellites and other objects in outer space.

I served as a Drug and Alcohol Program Advisor and Legal Officer in a Helicopter Squadron.

I was an Instructor and Company Officer for newly commissioned staff-corps officers including doctors, nurses, and lawyers. Also during that tour, I completed a master's degree in Adult Education during my off-duty hours.

Next, I was assigned to the War Gaming Department of the Naval War College as staff. I was then able to be a student there and earn my second master's degree - in National Security and Strategic Studies.

In Washington, DC, I was the Commanding Officer of the enlisted personnel assigned to the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS).

From there, my family and I moved to upstate New York to support Navy Nuclear Power Training. With subsequent moves between the Midwest and the East Coast, I was trusted with more and more responsibility. A highlight was to serve as the Executive Officer of Recruit Training Command Great Lakes. At the time, we trained

over 50,000 Recruits per year.

After 28 years and countless professional and personal experiences, my Navy Adventure ended when I retired in 2008.

My goal when my husband Scott and I moved to Madison was to be able to walk to work. For 7 years I was able to do so as the Director of Public Operations at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art. Most rewarding during my time there, working with the federal VA here in Madison, I was able to hire six formerly homeless veterans.

I also became more involved in Madison and Dane County activities and especially those focused on veterans. I was appointed to the Veterans Service Office Commission and eventually served as President of the Commission.

In 2013, I was elected a Dane County Supervisor and continued to focus on veteran issues. One I'm most proud of is working with Judge, and Navy veteran, Dave Flanagan and many others to create the first Veterans Treatment Court in Dane County to help fellow veterans get back on the right path.

During my interview with Governor Evers for a potential appointment to serve as Secretary, he asked me why I'd want the position. I said, "I believe everything I've done and everything I haven't been able to do in my life has led me here."

In my first weeks as Secretary-designee, I met some of the employees who care for veterans around the clock at our Wisconsin Veterans Homes. Whether it's nursing staff, food service staff, custodial staff, administrators or volunteers, they all play key roles in providing top quality care to the veterans who dedicated their lives to our country.

I met the employees who help veterans determine eligibility for benefits and navigate the federal claims process. I met our Wisconsin Veterans Museum staff who share our state's rich military history and the stories of our veterans. And at our cemeteries, I was impressed by our dedicated staff who work very hard all year round to give every veteran a dignified send off.

We know there are a great number of challenges we must address at the WDVA - ensuring access to mental health care, ensuring our Homes are meeting the ever-changing needs of veterans, and as you are all well aware, ensuring our finances

are sound so that we can continue to deliver the programs, benefits and services that have made Wisconsin a national leader when it comes to providing for veterans and their families.

While I have only been on the job for 45 days, I am so honored to have the opportunity to lead this agency with such a worthy mission.

I look forward to working with you and others throughout the state to continue to serve our veterans and their families. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.