

Mary Kolar: Help protect Wisconsin's veterans from COVID-19

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If not for yourself, will you do it for them? Over 700 Veterans and eligible family members live at our Wisconsin Veterans Homes. Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, the dedicated staff at our Homes located in Chippewa Falls, King, and Union Grove, have work diligently to keep COVID-19 from infecting our residents. Throughout these months, thankfully only a few staff professionals have been infected (and recovered!). We have not had any residents with COVID-19.

Yet, as I watched the increases of COVID infections throughout our state, my concern for our Homes' residents and staff increased as well. As those who serve our veterans travel to and from their residences, put gas in their vehicles, and get groceries their chances of exposure have also been increasing. Wearing masks and social distancing, they know, is critical to ensuring their health and safety as well as that of the Wisconsin State Veterans Home residents.

With the efforts of those who have stayed home as much as possible, wore masks, and stayed more than 6 feet away from other people, the coronavirus was kept out of our Homes almost 100%. Just last week, Wisconsin was listed as one of only 15 states with no residents of State Veterans Homes having the virus. But the rate of infection in counties surrounding the Homes continued to grow. How long could we keep the infection out?

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Other State Veteran Homes and private nursing homes have had devastating cases of COVID-19. We have watched and learned as other nursing homes across the

country have grappled with how to manage a virus in a confined housing environment where nurses and others move from room to room among an at-risk population with underlying conditions. I made tough decisions and held fast to the strictest protocols in an effort to beat the odds.

I laid awake at night wondering how long would Wisconsin's Veterans Homes staff be able to protect our residents while the pandemic surrounds our campuses? I now know the answer. Five months. This week, two veterans who live at the Wisconsin Veterans Home at Union Grove – individuals who served our country honorably in the name of liberty and freedom – began showing coronavirus symptoms. We now have confirmed they have COVID-19.

Please, for those who have served our country and those who support them, stay home whenever you can, wear a mask when you're out, and try to stay at least six feet away from other people. We're in this for the duration and your actions will help us win the battle against the virus. And protect our state Veterans Homes staff and our veterans.

-Kolar is secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs.