



Help Protect Wisconsin Veterans from COVID-19

Editorial by Vern Larson, Chairman of the Wisconsin Board on Veterans Affairs

By now I'm sure most of you have seen the staggering reports regarding the growing number of people with COVID-19 in our state and nation – a record high seven-day average for new cases, high rates in all 72 Wisconsin counties, and metro areas with alarmingly rapidly rising rates of the virus. All hospitals, including those in rural areas, are quickly approaching capacity.

As a Vietnam veteran and as someone who worked in the long-term and health care industries for 36 years, I implore you to follow public health guidance about ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to not only protect yourself and your loved ones, but also the men and women who have valiantly served our country.

Our veterans stood up to protect us. Now we must stand up and protect them.

Our statewide veteran population is aging, putting many veterans into a high-risk category for complications from COVID-19. We also know that many of our state's veterans live in up north and in rural areas, where the rate of COVID-19 is now quickly growing, and where the closest hospital can be hours away. There have been confirmed cases of COVID-19 at the Wisconsin Veterans Homes at King, Union Grove and Chippewa Falls, nursing homes where our aging and most vulnerable veterans live. Sadly, some of these veterans have died.

We have many essential workers, too, that are helping care for and provide services to veterans. At our Homes, we have nursing, custodial, laundry and other staff. At our state's veterans cemeteries, we have caretakers, groundskeepers, and those who are ensuring that our veterans receive an honorable send off. Remember that our workers must live their lives when they leave the workplace. They frequent the places we visit like gas stations, grocery stores, and childcare centers, among others. Our protection and precautions make them safer.

The battlefield we fight on today is a little different than the steamy jungles and hazy skies of Vietnam. Today, we are fighting an often symptomatic-free virus that can sneak up on anyone and cause great harm. We know the best course of action to stop this virus in its tracks. Stay home as much as possible, avoid public gatherings, wear masks when out, keep a safe distance from others, and wash your hands frequently. This is our battleplan. Follow it.

I am proud to serve as Chairman of the Wisconsin Board on Veterans Affairs and I join Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Mary Kolar in asking for you to observe all health precautions help protect our workers, the residents in our Wisconsin Veterans Homes, and veterans throughout Wisconsin. Thank you for your cooperation in fighting COVID-19!

Vern Larson, Oconomowoc, is the Chairman of the Wisconsin Board of Veterans Affairs. As Chairman, he advises the Wisconsin Secretary of Veterans Affairs on issues of importance to veterans. Before retiring, Vern had leadership roles at rehabilitation hospitals and senior living communities, where he worked for 36 years. He is a Navy veteran who served with the 1st Marine Air Wing for 28 months and in the Army Reserves for 23 years. He is President of Vietnam Veterans of America, Oconomowoc Chapter, a life member of the VFW and Disabled American Veterans, and a member of the American Legion.