



**Secretary Mary Kolar's Opening Remarks
Stakeholders Teleconference
April 24, 2020**

Good morning. Thank you for joining me today. It has been a few weeks since the last time we had this opportunity. I want to update you on the WDVA's status during this COVID-19 pandemic and also hear from you how you and our fellow veterans are doing.

Many of you were on the Governor's Virtual Town Hall for veterans a couple of weeks ago and much of that information has not changed. But, I'll summarize it now.

We continue to function under the Safer at Home guidance. This means that for our central office in Madison, we've implemented teleworking.

Our Wisconsin Veterans Homes and Veterans Memorial Cemeteries continue to operate following new protocols from the Centers for Disease Control, the National Cemetery Administration, and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. I am exceedingly impressed and very grateful for the work that all of our essential workers are doing at our Homes and Cemeteries to keep themselves and everyone we care for safe and healthy.

I am also grateful to be able to report that we continue to have zero cases of COVID-19 at our Wisconsin Veterans Homes. This includes both staff and members. Over the past several weeks we have had some staff who have felt ill, who have not come to work, and have been tested. All were thankfully negative. We've also had some members who have gone to the hospital for unrelated illnesses who were tested as a precaution. Again, we are thankful none have been positive.

At the Homes, we continue to adhere to the guidance of the CDC, Department of Health Services, and others. This means we must continue to limit the number of people entering our facilities. Without a COVID-19 immunization or treatment, prevention is our primary tool to keep our members and our workforce safe. I understand this is hard on the members and their families, but we must do everything we can to keep everyone healthy.

The residents of our Homes, as with any long term care facility, are especially vulnerable. A contagious virus like COVID-19, despite best efforts, can quickly infect members and staff. I cannot overstate the responsibility we have to provide the safest possible environment for our members and staff. By limiting the number of people who come into our facilities, we are lowering the health risk for everyone. That said, I am looking forward to a time when we can bring back visitors and volunteers, the people who really make our Homes a great place to live and work.

At the Homes, we are also ensuring that we are prepared in the event we do get a case of COVID-19. There has been a lot of talk about Personal Protective Equipment in the news. At this time, we have an adequate supply of PPE for our staff, including masks and gloves. Current protocols require nursing staff to wear PPE. These protocols follow CDC requirements and take into account the lessons learned in other states with major outbreaks. We have the appropriate measures in place to request more PPE in the case of an outbreak. Further, we have taken steps to secure access to PPE to protect our supplies, but we have ample PPE available at this point.

Now, I'd like to briefly share with you what is happening at our veterans memorial cemeteries. We are following the lead of the National Cemetery Administration and observing their protocols. This means that we have temporarily discontinued committal services while continuing to allow families to witness their loved ones' interments. To ensure social distancing at the cemetery, we ask that there be no more than 10 family members at interments. Family and funeral directors are being asked to view the interment from their cars or the road very near their cars. They may approach the burial site once cemetery staff have left the area. We continue to work with families to schedule future memorial and/or celebration of life services.

When it comes to funeral honors, neither our state veterans cemeteries nor the national cemeteries are conducting full military funeral honors. That said, we can provide two uniformed service personnel to fold the flag and sound Taps with a digital bugle. However, if a family chooses, they can instead defer honors to a later date so that we can include the rifle detail. All veterans are entitled to honors and any family can request the service at a later date as part of a memorial service.

I wanted you to know this as we prepare for Memorial Day. Typically, we have a formal ceremony at each of our three cemeteries with hundreds of people attending. This year we cannot host that kind of event. Instead, we will be hosting a statewide online observance. Our goal is to have an observance that conveys the solemnity of the occasion and honors those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in a worthy manner. We are working out the details and will provide more information in the next week or so.

We are also working out plans for flag setting for Memorial Day. Our teams at the cemeteries are creating a plan to allow groups of no more than 10 volunteers in scheduled shifts to come out and set flags at the graves. That schedule will take into account the social distancing protocols that we are already observing at the cemeteries. We have about 15,000 flags for Southern cemetery, 3,200 for Northern, and 7,500 at the King cemetery.

Now to tell you about what is still to come.

Last week, Governor Evers released the Badger Bounce Back plan. This is a measured approach to reopening our state as soon as we safely and responsibly can. The phased approach of the Badger Bounce Back plan is, in part, informed by President Trump's "Guidelines for Opening Up America Again" that was issued by the White House on April 16th. To open, we have to meet three criteria:

- We need to see a downward trajectory of influenza-like illnesses reported within a 14-day period AND a downward trajectory of cases with COVID-19 symptoms reported within a 14-day period;
- We need to see a downward trajectory of positive COVID-19 tests as a percent of total tests within a 14-day period; and
- We need to be able to treat all patients without crisis care AND have robust testing programs in place for at-risk healthcare workers, with decreasing numbers of infected healthcare workers.

Based on these criteria, we are not ready to return to previous practices.

Initially, Wisconsin was projected to have 22,000 infections by April 8, which would have ultimately resulted in somewhere between 440 and 1,500 deaths. These numbers were based on projected significant exponential growth in positive cases. However, since the governor's "safer at home" order and Wisconsinites following social distancing practices, there has been a decrease in exponential growth in the number of cases. Wisconsin's rate of doubling of infections was 3.4 days in early March. Over the first two weeks of April, the rate of doubling is approximately 12 days. So while we are still seeing an increase of cases of COVID-19, we, all of us committed to do our part, are flattening the curve.

Because of this flattening, the extension of the Safer at Home Order does make some allowances for certain activities to start again and additional businesses to open.

I encourage you and the organizations you represent, lead and participate in to continue to follow the Safer at Home order. The more we can follow the order, the lower our risk is to ourselves and to others. As I mentioned earlier, our Veterans Homes are the home of one of the most vulnerable populations to this virus. We, and especially our Homes staff, are doing all we can to prevent the corona virus spread. We ask that you join us in this effort. We hope you are all staying safe and well.

At this time, I'd like to open it up for questions and comments. I'd like to know

- Are there problems or concerns you want me or the Governor to know about?
- Are there veterans or veteran families in immediate risk that you know about?
- What are some of the things your organization is doing to help? and
- How can we help?