A 6-Point Plan for the Future of IDVA

Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs

1. Restructure senior leadership

To ensure senior leadership can best manage our dedicated staff, our roles and chain of command must be clearly structured and defined. The Chief of Staff role will focus on staff management while the Senior Home Administrator will provide overarching leadership on clinical and administrative decisions at the homes in coordination with the Director and Assistant Director. Central to this restructuring is prioritizing internal communication and senior leadership visibility in everything we do. I plan to be a consistent presence in all of our veterans' homes, hearing directly from staff on the ground, and I will expect the same from my senior team.

2. Improve culture and communication

Communication in our department must be a two-way street. In the same way I plan to be a presence at our homes communicating with staff, I want staff at any level of the department to feel comfortable bringing their suggestions or concerns to me and my senior team. A simple and important way I plan to further this goal is providing every member of our staff with a work email. This will allow leadership to disseminate information to all staff at the same time and will allow staff to better communicate with leadership and each other.

3. Prioritize infection control

Infection control has been a consistent challenge for veterans' homes here in Illinois and those across the country. This must be a top priority and constant focus in our work going forward, not just when there's a crisis, but in everything we do. To immediately begin this work, we are establishing Infection Preventionist positions at each home as well as an Infection Control Director to oversee those positions and ensure consistency across the homes. Each home will have an Infection Control Committee consisting of the Infection Control Director, Infection Preventionist, staff and an administrator. This committees will focus on infection control and infection control only. This will begin with COVID-19 before transitioning to broader infection control work at all of our homes.

4. Hire experts in key roles

We will move as quickly as possible to fill key roles such as the Senior Homes Administrator and the Lasalle Home Administrator to bring an end to staff members having to play double or triple duty. I will also ensure that our Medical Directors fill the department's need for consistent guidance and policies related to caring for our veterans' medical needs. It is imperative these roles are filled with individuals with strong backgrounds and expertise who can bring best practices to our department.

5. Implement clear plans and policies

In my first month, we have implemented new policies for overall infection prevention as well as COVID-19 policies related to prevention, testing, PPE, masking, cleaning and disinfection, staff health checks, and hand hygiene. Over the coming weeks, I will continue a thorough review of the department's policies in consultation with senior staff and those on the frontlines at our homes to determine additional areas where clearer policies are needed. I will also draw from tried and true methods from my previous experience and begin testing new programs and procedures in our home. Essential to this is staff training. All staff must receive quality training on a regular basis on both new and existing policies.

6. Enhance department technology

It is imperative that we are able to monitor and contact trace infections at our veterans' homes, especially given the vulnerable populations we care for. I hope to bring video technology, similar to what is used at Walter Reed and the Ohio Veterans' homes I previously oversaw, to allow for monitoring of communal areas. This will help better ensure safety and security in our homes and allow experts to trace diseases and more effectively manage an infection.

Message from Acting IDVA Director Terry Prince:

"As a veteran of more than 30 years with deep experiences in military and veterans' healthcare, there is nothing more important to me than ensuring veterans served by the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs receive the highest quality care. In my first month on the job I have visited all of our veterans' homes, met with staff at all levels of the department, and seen firsthand their deep commitment to caring for our heroes. We no doubt face enormous challenges, but one need look no further than our dedicated teams who care for our veterans day in and day out, to feel incredible hope.

"Recognizing both the challenges and opportunities facing the department in this moment, and drawing from my own experiences in Navy medicine, at Walter Reed Medical Center, and running veterans' homes in Ohio, I am putting forward a 6-point plan to build a better future for the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs. It's a plan that will restructure senior leadership to ensure we bring out the best in our team, hire experts in key roles, enhance department technology, put infection control front and center in our work, and improve culture and communication at every level of the department. In the weeks ahead, I will be working closely with our dedicated staff and stakeholder community to implement this vision with the urgency and precision that this work requires. Our veterans deserve the highest quality care and that is the level of care our department will provide."