

More Accountability Needed for Taxpayer Funds at King Nursing Home
By Senator Jon Erpenbach, 27th District

Caring for our veterans is one of the most sacred duties we work to achieve as a state. We have been entrusted by the Federal government to care for elderly and disabled veterans and their spouses at our veteran nursing homes. These facilities should have the gold standard of care. Unfortunately, like many other operations of the state, infrastructure and maintenance delays and failures have affected the lives of those in our nursing homes, most notable at the Veterans Home at King. This is NOT a money problem. Even when state finances were tight just after the recession, the veteran nursing homes have been building surplus of funds.

While the federal government has decided not to limit how states can spend surplus revenues, we can still make the right choices here in Wisconsin and invest in our veteran care with money that was paid to care for veterans. The first step in that process is taking back control of transfers out of the veteran nursing home surplus fund. Currently about \$35 million of revenue sits in this surplus fund. This money can be transferred out of the fund at any time not by the Legislature, but by a political appointee, the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. The only way the Legislature even knows about the transfers are because of a statutory required annual report to the Legislature on the Veterans Fund.

Why does the veteran's nursing Home fund have a surplus? These revenues are derived from an exemption from the nursing home bed tax, the federal per diem paid to facilities for the care of veterans, federal service related disability payments made for the care of disabled veterans, the higher state rate for reimbursement for Medicaid, and private payment from veterans and their families.

The 2013 budget included language that allowed for unlimited transfers from the veterans nursing home fund into the Veterans Fund without Legislative approval. The Legislature added JFC passive review, but the Governor vetoed it. DVA can now transfer, at any time, surplus from our state veteran's nursing homes facilities. Unfortunately, turning back the clock and granting facility upgrade requests is not an option. \$18.5 million in facility improvements in the last state budget were zero funded by Governor Walker. Our only choice as a Legislature is to move forward. That is why I am proposing a bill to reestablish Legislative oversight of all funding for the veterans homes. The DVA will transfer a total of \$21 million away from the Veterans Nursing Homes just this biennium. Passing the buck on financial oversight is wrong.

A state that supports their veterans spends state money for programs for veterans and does not use money meant for the care and comfort in nursing homes for agency administration and rent. Funds provided by families and the federal government for the care of our nursing home residents should be used at the veteran nursing homes first. **For more information on the Veterans Fund please contact my office at sen.erpenbach@legis.wi.gov or 608-266-6670 or 888-549-0027.**