

We must continue to support Wisconsin's veterans

GUEST OPINION

By Rep. Deb Andraca

The men and women who serve our country make many sacrifices for the freedoms we enjoy each day. So it was an honor for me to serve on Governor Evers's Blue Ribbon Commission on Veteran Opportunity and learn more about how Wisconsin can improve our state services.

Made up of advocates for veterans, leaders in the military community, and most importantly, veterans and their families, this commission allowed folks to share their lived experiences and input to find real solutions to help and support Wisconsin's veterans.

Unfortunately, some of Wisconsin's 300,000 veterans face steep challenges when their service concludes and they must re-adjust to civilian life. Long-term health issues, lack of affordable housing, access to higher education or job insecurity affect not only the veteran but also his or her family and loved ones. We owe it to our veterans to do everything we can to reduce barriers to the services they are entitled to in order to help them thrive.

While Wisconsin has a proud history of taking good care of our veterans, even one veteran in need is too many. Our veteran population is also changing rapidly and with it the scope and type of services they require. While the recommendations of the commission will potentially be included in the Governor's budget, he is also taking action to support veterans now. That's why based on our recommendations from the commission, Governor Evers has kick-started a veterans' rental assistance program to address veteran housing insecurity and homelessness. The last thing our veterans should have to worry about is whether they can afford to keep a roof over their heads at night.

I am also advocating for veteran-oriented suicide prevention programs, including the Be There Wisconsin program and its safe firearm storage initiative. Intended for veterans but available to anyone experiencing a mental health crisis, the program provides training for staff at a firearm retailer or range on how to recognize a person who might be considering suicide, plus

educational materials and funding for voluntary, temporary firearm storage. Putting time and distance between a person and a gun during a time of crisis can save lives.

We must keep working to ensure our veterans have access to affordable housing, mental health services, and the education and skills training they need to be successful when they return to civilian life. At a time when our state has a record-shattering budget surplus, there has never been a better time to invest in the health and wellbeing of our hometown heroes, Wisconsin's veterans. Because while we may not know them all, we certainly owe them all.

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