

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 3, 2021

Secretary Denis R. McDonough
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

We write to request urgent assistance for the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA) in light of an Illinois Department of Human Services Office of Inspector General's (OIG) report released last week, which documents a number of failures within IDVA leadership in addressing and preventing a fatal COVID-19 outbreak at the Illinois Veterans Home (IVH) LaSalle. During the time of the outbreak last fall, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) participated in inspections alongside the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), helping to identify a myriad of problems and detailing a full-time VA staffer to provide technical assistance to the State on pandemic concerns and protocols. We urge the VA to return to Illinois once again to ensure that IDVA has the appropriate protocols in place, as well as training and support it needs in order to continue to protect Illinois Veterans from COVID-19 or any future infectious disease outbreaks.

We understand that the risks associated with the deadly coronavirus are only increased in long-term care facilities. However, as the OIG report indicates, the proper implementation and execution of infectious disease protocols can help control outbreaks. By fall 2020, the potential effect of COVID-19 on such facilities was well-documented, and as the pandemic surged across the State, including in LaSalle County, more than 200 Veterans and staff at IVH LaSalle had tested positive for COVID-19, resulting in 36 Veteran deaths.

The OIG report ultimately found a lack of preparation, poor communication and training, and a serious lapse in infectious-disease protocols. The report also noted that IDVA failed to implement a number of basic Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations, including formalizing a COVID-19 preparedness and response plan, resulting in actions that were "inefficient, reactive, and, at times, chaotic." The report also notes that IVH Manteno and IVH Quincy faced related, fatal outbreaks. While the death tolls were smaller at these two facilities, the urgency to take corrective action remains the same.

We appreciate that the VA has provided technical assistance to the State of Illinois over the years, including during a deadly Legionnaires' outbreak that took place at IVH Quincy between 2015 and 2018. Today, while we recognize that Governor Pritzker has taken a number of proactive steps—including personnel changes to replace the IDVA Director and oversight efforts such as requiring this OIG investigation—we remain worried about IDVA's future preparedness against both the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and other infectious disease outbreaks.

Countless families have entrusted the care of their loved ones—Veterans who have served and scarified for this country with honor, and deserve the highest standards—to the State of Illinois. We urge the VA to help ensure that our State is up to the task in the face of challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator