



STATE OF WASHINGTON

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

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February 2, 2022

Dear Veterans, Family Members, and Representatives,

As COVID-19 became a reality in early 2020, the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs made a commitment to being transparent with how it was affecting our Homes, staff, and programs. Since that time, hundreds of Resident and Family letters, press releases, and staff messages have shared information on the number of Residents and Staff diagnosed with COVID-19, the status of PPE and testing supplies, how to access vaccines and boosters, and other topics. This information is available to the public at www.dva.wa.gov/covid.

In addition, the agency holds an emergency operations meeting Monday through Friday to check in with all locations and discuss topics such as staff call outs, infection rates, immediate needs, and to share best practices from other locations.

The State Veterans Homes have struggled with staffing since the pandemic began in March of 2020; however, a number of issues are causing the situation to worsen. Two of our Homes have officially moved into a contingency staffing phase, allowing for some staff to return to work after being diagnosed with COVID-19 or having a close exposure in five days rather than ten. These changes follow the most current CDC, DOH, and local health jurisdiction guidance.

Issues impacting staffing levels include:

- Unusually high number of vacant positions.
- Unplanned call outs (due to COVID-19 infection in staff or family, or other issues).
- Competition from other facilities offering sign-on and other bonuses.
- Lack of Certified Nursing Assistants, in part due to school and testing shutdown early in pandemic (national issue).
- Lack of applications for multiple direct care positions.

WDVA actions to address these issues include:

- Certified Nursing Assistant recruitment and retention incentive pay, and all-staff ambassador incentive pay (starting in early 2022).
- Temporarily closing units and consolidating Residents and staff.
- Hiring Certified Nursing Assistants at a higher pay step.
- Temporarily increasing Certified Nursing Assistant pay, particularly on weekends, nights, and evenings to deter call ins.
- Assigning staff to alternate shifts and modifying duties of non-clinical staff to address gaps.

- Using WDVA staff to perform non-clinical tasks.
- Recruiting for Registered Nursing Assistants.
- Contracting with additional temporary staffing agencies.
- Using emergency state contracts and requesting staff from the State Emergency Operations Center, the Office of Financial Management, and other agencies.
- Adding a second recruiter, attending multiple hiring events, and pushing 60,000 emails to Nursing Assistants certified in Washington inviting them to apply for positions.
- Creating a WDVA recruiting video and purchasing additional advertisements.
- Modifying the scheduling process in some Homes.

In addition to these actions, we continue to work on other ideas such as creating a nursing assistant tuition reimbursement program, piloting a screening kiosk to free staff up from screening duties, and creating a new Hospitality Aide classification to assist our clinical staff.

We know these actions can present challenges for our staff members. Changing schedules and requiring overtime make it extremely difficult to manage school and daycare schedules among other things, and we do not make any of these decisions lightly. However, in order to provide care to Veterans and their Families in our Homes, sometimes we must make these changes.

We also know that taking actions such as temporarily closing entire units has a profound impact on the Veterans community. Our mission of Serving Those Who Served cannot be carried out if we do not have enough staff members. Pausing admissions means we are not available to veterans who need our care following hospital stays, injuries, or because they simply cannot safely stay at home any longer. We are focused on attracting and retaining staff members so we can begin admitting residents to our Homes and fulfill our mission.

We will continue working with our WDVA Team and labor representatives to ensure they are aware of the steps we're taking to better serve them and our Residents. And as we do that, we will look for more creative ways to attract new staff members. We welcome healthcare providers to visit www.careers.wa.gov and search "WDVA" to find opportunities.

Thank you



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