



PRESS RELEASE

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Leave No Veteran Behind...the Mission Continues America's Aging Veteran Population and the COVID-19 Pandemic

(Washington, D.C.)—Vietnam Veterans of America is proud to announce the release of our report, [*America's Aging Veteran Population and the COVID-19 Pandemic*](#), the findings of our five-month-long investigation into the circumstances contributing to the over 1,010 fatalities in 47 State Veterans Homes,” said VVA National President John Rowan.

“The idea of not abandoning a fallen soldier on the battlefield is a tightly held credo,” noted Rowan. “Images of overflowing emergency rooms, body bags stacked on loading docks, refrigerated trucks for morgues, and stories of patients dying without their families triggered memories of our own wartime experiences, and we recognized that, today’s battlefield is the COVID-19 pandemic.”

“We realized that veterans in State Veterans Homes are often overlooked, disenfranchised, or without family. They have little or no voice in determining their care. VVA refuses to leave these veterans behind,” said Rowan.”

“We were disturbed that VA officials, including VA Secretary Wilke, have denied having any authority or responsibility for veterans in the homes,” noted Rowan. “In truth, VA’s Geriatric and Extended Care Programs offer a continuum of services and programs--which include the State Veterans Homes. We were dismayed that VA leadership had chosen to view this group of veterans as part of VA’s 4th Mission--to assist civilians in times of emergency.”

As VVA’s Subcommittee on the Aging Veteran Experience (SAVE) began to monitor State Veterans Home COVID-19 deaths, the rising numbers called into question the entire spectrum of the State Veterans Home/Department of Veterans Affairs relationship, including funding, organization, and oversight. In addition to tracking the deaths, SAVE examined the federal regulations which assign explicit authority and responsibility to the VA to ensure that the State Nursing Homes follow a set of specified regulations. The Committee identified areas of concern and formulated recommendations.

“The VA and State Veteran Homes are complex systems that intersect in providing care to our aging veterans,” said Rowan. “Understanding how these systems interact is vital if we are to improve the quality of life and care for those who use them. It is important to note that VA relies heavily on State Homes to provide the bulk of long-term care for our elderly veterans.”

The challenge is here. VA estimates that nearly 55 percent (10,881,049) of America's veteran population is 65 years or older. The needs of these veterans are rarely discussed and often overlooked. We need to address the kinks in the systems now. None of the adjustments can be achieved solely by the VA or the State Governments. Progress can only be achieved through a committed partnership. Each has an ethical and moral responsibility to do so.

