

**Joint Hearing of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees
regarding
The Quincy Veterans Home**

**Testimony of AFSCME Council 31
January 9, 2018**

AFSCME Council 31 represents nearly 350 Quincy Veterans Home employees. We appreciate the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees giving our union this opportunity to lift up three main points:

- Employees, as well as veterans, have experienced Legionella exposure and Legionnaires disease and remain committed to doing whatever it takes to make Quincy Veterans Home a safe place to live and work.
- We also experienced the impact of poor communication by DVA during the 2015, 2016 and 2017 Legionnaires' outbreaks, and hope this increased scrutiny by the General Assembly will encourage more transparency and cooperation to improve safety at Quincy.
- We are pleased that many officials who were initially calling for the temporary closure of the Veterans Home now realize that is not a workable solution and instead are joining our union in focusing on improvements at the home going forward.

Impact on Employees

As you can image, the occurrence of Legionnaires' disease at the Quincy Veterans Home has been a source of great anxiety for all involved. During the outbreak in August and September of 2015, the Illinois Department of Public Health reported 58 cases of legionellosis in the community of Quincy. At Quincy Veteran's Home there were 41 confirmed cases of Legionnaires' disease and 12 of Pontiac Fever. There were also five confirmed cases of Legionnaires' disease among community residents.

Six of those stricken with Legionnaires' disease at Quincy Veterans Home were employees. All of them recovered. Despite the dangers, during the outbreaks in 2015, 2016 and 2017 the employees at Quincy stayed on the job and continued to provide the dedicated care on which residents depend.

AFSCME staff have been in direct contact with the CDC since the first outbreak of the disease and have worked to educate all of our members at the home as to how best minimize the risk for both themselves and the veterans whom they serve. However, it's important to note that there are precautions that employees cannot take independently but that must be part of a systematic protocol implemented at all levels of the home.

Over these past few years employees have of course been fearful for their own health and deeply distressed by the deaths of the veterans for whom they care. So we very much appreciate the greater public and legislative attention that is being brought to addressing this problem.

Lack of Transparency

Unfortunately employees experienced the same lack of transparency by IDVA and facility management that has been highlighted in media reports. In all three of the outbreaks, including last year, our members and our union found out about the occurrence of Legionnaires' disease at Quincy Veterans Home through media reports. Moreover in 2015, despite the obvious impact the disease was having on employees, our union had to seek information from the CDC and the Adams County Health Department because both IDPH and IDVA were largely unresponsive to our phone calls and written requests for information over the course of the worst three weeks of the outbreak

In 2016, during the first recurrence, our union proposed a Legionella Committee at Quincy Veterans Homes which would allow input from staff, residents and families on ways to address the issue and provide an avenue for greater

information sharing by facility management. The administration refused to establish any such forum for ongoing input and communication. We are again asking management to establish that committee and hope lawmakers will support that initiative.

Closure Would Be Harmful

Finally, while most now seem to understand that even a temporary closure of Quincy Veterans Home would be bad public policy we want to review some of the reasons why this is neither right nor workable.

- There are not sufficient beds available at other Illinois Veterans Homes to care for the more than 300 residents at Quincy Veterans Home.
- State Veterans Homes provide high quality care. Not only are they required to meet IDPH standards for long term care, they are additionally monitored for quality by the US Dept. of Veterans Affairs, which funds the homes. Veterans Homes provide high staffing levels and long term and professional employees. Closing Quincy to avoid exposure to Legionella bacteria may expose veterans to something even more dangerous - poor quality care.
- Care quality aside, there are not sufficient beds available in the Adams County area in other long term care facilities to care for the residents of Quincy Veterans Home even if those residents wanted to transfer. Per the Illinois Health Facility and Services Review Board 2017 Long Term Care Bed Inventory there are only 112 vacant beds in Adams County and 133 beds in surrounding counties. So even on paper there are not enough vacant beds in the area. That's before considering the many complications of alternative care including: Can the home meet the care needs of the veteran and is it willing to provide that care? Does the home take Medicaid and is the veteran eligible? If not, can the veteran afford the home's private pay rate?
- Transfer Trauma refers to elevated mortality rates among patients following relocation. This has been observed and studied since the mid-1960s. Transfer Trauma is especially associated with the elderly and those with dementia, and so presents another risk that argues against closing Quincy.
- Closing Quincy by no means guarantees veterans would not be exposed to Legionella. Legionella bacteria can be found in many environments, including natural, freshwater environments. It is generally only present in sufficient numbers to cause disease in large plumbed water systems like those in large buildings including water heaters, storage tanks, and pipes. It can also be present in cooling towers of HVAC systems, and in other areas where water is aerosolized. A stay in a hospital or long-term care facility is considered a risk factor for contracting Legionnaires' disease because these facilities have water and HVAC systems and because the health conditions of the patients or residents may make them more susceptible to developing the disease after exposure. Travel is also considered a risk factor because hotels, resorts, and cruise ships also have large and complex water and HVAC systems.
- A CDC report released earlier this year found that 76 percent of reported cases of Legionnaires' disease were linked to health care facilities. So while there is a problem at Quincy, there are similar problems in other facilities around our state.
- For example, at the time of the 2015 outbreak at Quincy Veterans Homes, there were four other cases of Legionnaires' disease diagnosed in Adams County unrelated to the Veterans Home, including one death.
- There is a national increase in reported cases of Legionnaires' Disease. A CDC report, in discussing the increase, suggests many possible – and likely multiple – reasons including: 1. True increased frequency (due to aging US population, aging infrastructure, greater incidence of underlying illness or immunocompromising medications, and/or changes in the climate) as well as 2. Increased diagnosis and reporting.
- The CDC believes underreporting and underdiagnoses of Legionnaires Disease remains a national problem. Unlike private nursing homes, where cases of Legionnaires Disease may be overlooked as pneumonia, there are heightened observation, testing and reporting protocols at Quincy Veterans Home.

We appreciate the concern for the safety of veterans and employees expressed by your committees and look forward to providing any additional information that may help improve conditions at Quincy Veterans Home.