

IDVA Launches Independent Investigation of Recent LaSalle Veterans Home COVID-19 Outbreak

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LASALLE – The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) released two reports today, in partnership with IDPH and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs that address the recent outbreak of COVID-19 at the Illinois Veterans' Home in LaSalle. IDVA is adopting all recommendations in the reports in all four of the Illinois Veterans' homes and is releasing the reports in their entirety to the public. The administration has also ordered the Acting Inspector General from the Illinois Department of Human

Services, to conduct an independent investigation of the circumstances surrounding the outbreak at the LaSalle home and will immediately address any findings from that investigation.

"As a proud Army Veteran, I take the mission of safeguarding the wellbeing of our Veteran heroes very personally," said IDVA Director Linda Chapa LaVia. "These brave men and women sacrificed everything fighting for the freedoms we so often take for granted. It is our moral obligation to care for them just as they have cared for us. The recent outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent loss of lives at the LaSalle Veterans' Home is a tragedy. My heart goes out to the families and loved ones of those who have become ill and those who have passed on. The IDVA is committed to a transparent review of the circumstances surrounding the outbreak and has adopted all recommendations from the IDPH, CDC, CMS and U.S. VA moving forward."

"Long-term care facilities, like our Veterans' homes, are at greater risk for COVID-19 spread," said IDPH Director Dr. Ngozi Ezike. "Increased spread of the virus in the community can also threaten residents in long-term care facilities as health care workers can be exposed to COVID-19 while away from work and then inadvertently introduce the virus into the facility. We can all help protect our honored heroes in our Veterans' homes by decreasing the amount of virus circulating in our communities by staying home as much as possible, wearing our masks, and watching our distance."

Upon receiving the reports, IDVA acted immediately to adopt all recommendations at the LaSalle Veterans' Home and the remaining three Veterans' homes where applicable. This included re-training staff on mask requirements, replacing one brand of hand sanitizer with a product more effective at fighting the virus, and strengthening the screening process for employees as they arrive for work and during periodic checks during the workday.

To ensure transparency and accountability, the administration has instructed the Inspector General of the Department of Human Services to conduct an independent investigation of the outbreak at LaSalle, aimed at uncovering any lapses in protocol and employee compliance with rules, which will enable IDVA to ensure best practices moving forward. Pending this investigation, all issues uncovered will be addressed expeditiously.

Since the onset of the pandemic, staff have been provided with full PPE. This has included N95 and surgical masks, shoe coverings, gowns, face shields, gloves, goggles and glasses. They have been educated on how to use this equipment and on steps they can take in their personal lives to limit their exposure to COVID-19. When observed, administrators and supervisors have immediately corrected improper use of PPE.

Residents and employees have been tested on a rolling basis, with testing significantly ramped up in recent months as the state testing infrastructure expanded. Before the positivity rate skyrocketed in LaSalle County, employees were tested weekly per IDPH, CMS and CDC guidelines and employees received daily temperature screenings before entering the building. Residents were tested periodically and upon discovery of any changes with employees testing results.

Since the current outbreak at the home, employees are tested with rapid-result antigen tests prior to every shift and residents are tested every day. Daily screening processes have been intensified by including a rigorous interview by an RN, VNAC, or supervisor. If residents or employees show symptoms, they are immediately isolated and tested. Employees found positive and/or experiencing symptoms are sent home to self-isolate while residents remain isolated and under strict observation.

Staff who care for veterans in the homes live within the communities they serve. When community spread of the virus is high, staff can fall prey to infection no matter how conscientious they are about following protocols, which is why rigorous testing and health procedures were put in place. As of today, LaSalle County's positivity rate currently sits at 20.8 percent, which is 163.8% of the statewide positivity rate.