

Wednesday, March 28, 2007

Dear :

On February 19, I declared 2007 as Armed Forces and Veterans Year during my annual State of the County address. With more than 70,000 veterans in our county and with the large number of individuals deployed from the county who serve on active duty, in the National Guard or Reserve, I wanted a special way to say thank you.

In addition to all of the deployments and a number of welcome home events, we are excited about many other events in 2007.

Early in June, we will celebrate our rich history at the Soldier's Home with the Reclaiming our Heritage weekend. I will join our County Veterans Service Office staff on the VA grounds that weekend.

The National Veterans Wheelchair Games will be held in Milwaukee County from June 18 to 24. I am proud that several of our parks and the zoo will host events.

During Independence Day weekend, we will once again honor our military personnel, their families and our veterans with Operation Freedom hosted at our Milwaukee County Zoo. Last year we had more than 17,000 enter for free. This year, we are working with the Military Order of the Purple Heart to organize the event.

Later in 2007, we will host the commissioning of the USS Freedom. It will be held at Veterans Park and my office is very involved with the US Navy on plans for the ceremony and visit.

These are just a few of the great events being held to honor our veterans and military personnel this year. In addition, we will participate in several other events – including Memorial Day, Armed Forces Week, Veterans Day, Patriot Day, Pearl Harbor Day and many, many more in 2007.

While these events are important, it is also good to look at what we are doing for veterans throughout the year.

Even though the county continues to face the financial burden of the pension and benefit enhancements passed on November 2, 2000, we are making progress. Last year, the original estimate for the cost of the contribution to the pension system was nearly \$60 million. The year before I came into office, the County Executive made no contribution into the pension system.

While other departments faced dramatic cuts over the past five years, we limited the impact on the Milwaukee County War Memorial to much less than many county departments. Special thanks to Dave Drent and his staff for accommodating the

changes and continuing to provide excellent service to our veterans. I am proud of the war memorial and took my Oath of Office inside it.

And at a recent meeting of the Allied Council of Veterans, I made it clear that as long as I am the County Executive, veterans will control the Milwaukee County War Memorial.

In 2006, we distributed over 29,000 flags for placement on graves. Currently, we have 48,000 flags in stock. That is prior to our 2007 purchase, so we have more than enough for this year.

Finally, the most important test is what are we doing to directly benefit veterans. Shortly after taking office, I met with the Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs. Together, we worked out a plan to provide more state staff to work with county staff to provide veterans with better access to local, state and federal benefits.

Later, we worked together to relocate the county veterans service office to the VA grounds. Now we have three state staff working with county staff. In addition, we worked with Interfaith to add two more individuals to assist in providing aid to veterans. *While our budget was tight, we found a way to provide more service to our veterans.*

By moving to the VA grounds (a move that was resisted in the past), we increased traffic into our offices by 97%. Our percentage of approved applications for state veterans programs increased by 19% since 2004. In the important area of Aid to Needy Veterans, our percentage of all approved applications increased from 14.4% in 2004 to 25.27% in 2006. *We are helping veterans get the support they deserve.*

Many of you know that I spoke out against the commercial development of the VA grounds. I expect that is why I was recently under attack. Still, I believe that these grounds should be limited to honoring the dead, serving veterans, preserving history and educating the next generation about the contributions of our veterans. Regardless of attack, I will continue to share those beliefs.

Our successes in serving and honoring veterans are a joint effort. We have great staff (one of whom is still deployed as part of Iraqi Freedom), super commissioners and wonderful partners (i.e. so many veterans organizations, Secretary John Scocos and the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs and the staff of the Milwaukee VA Medical Center). Thank you to everyone who helps us to support our veterans, their families and our military personnel from the area and their families and employers.

Please feel free to contact me with any additional questions or comments at 278-5262. Thank you for your time and thank you for your service.

Sincerely,

Scott Walker
Milwaukee County Executive