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## **WDVA joins with the Simmy Foundation and the Wisconsin Convenience Store Industry to Increase Awareness of Veteran Mental Health Services**

STEVENS POINT – Secretary Mary Kolar of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs today announced that the state agency will be working with the Simmy Foundation, a nonprofit focused on veteran mental health, and the Wisconsin Petroleum Marketers & Convenience Store Association (WPMCA) to increase awareness and enrollment of veterans in the [Department’s Veterans Outreach and Recovery Program \(VORP\)](#).

“I am extremely proud of the effective and meaningful work done by the VORP staff,” said Secretary Kolar. “Every day, they are meeting Wisconsin veterans where they are and connecting them to vital services. I’m so grateful to the Simmy Foundation and the WPMCA for their partnership in getting the word out about this incredible program. More visibility on VORP could help so many more veterans, and likely save lives.”

“WPMCA is proud to join this private/public partnership to help Wisconsin veterans across the state,” said Matthew Hauser, WPMCA President and CEO. “Our industry operates over 3,000 convenience stores statewide where folks come to purchase fuel, buy food, and connect with their neighbors. Because of the role we play as a community hub—particularly in rural areas—we can help raise awareness about the VORP program among veterans, as well as with their families and friends.”

Anthony Perrine, owner of Lou Perrine’s Gas and Groceries in Kenosha, commented, “As a boots-on-the-ground operator, it makes me proud knowing that I can serve those who serve our country and sacrificed more than I ever could. None of us would be in business if it wasn’t for our veterans.”

“The Simmy Foundation seeks to promote holistic, non-pharmaceutical support for veterans’ mental health,” said Andrew Hysell, the Foundation’s Outreach Director. “The Simmy Foundation was established by Marvin and Linda Simcakoski, the parents of Jason Simcakoski, a Wisconsin veteran who died from an avoidable opioid overdose. While the Simcakoski family advocated for the successful passage of federal legislation in 2016 that reduced the opioids prescribed by the VA, the fact remains that veterans still need support. The VORP program is a Wisconsin-specific model that has proven to be highly effective.”



The VORP program has regional coordinators located across the state. The regional VORP staff actively seek out veterans in need and are constantly finding ways to connect directly with new veterans who may otherwise not be aware that help is available. The Evers administration has made veteran mental health a top priority, including a proposed budget that expanded the VORP program and a final budget that includes an annual \$100,000 investment in suicide prevention and awareness efforts among the Wisconsin veteran community.

WDVA and the Simmy Foundation will provide WPMCA and its members with training and materials to raise awareness about issues of veteran suicide, homelessness, substance abuse and other mental health-related conditions like PTSD, as well as what convenience store managers and employees can do to inform veterans about enrolling in VORP. In addition, partners will be available at WPMCA's annual conference and WDVA and the Simmy Foundation will distribute materials at the WPMCA trade show.

The partnership is being managed by the Simmy Foundation.

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