

Opening Statement of Senator Tammy Baldwin
*“Tomah VAMC: Examining Quality, Access, and a Culture of
Overreliance on High-Risk Medications”*
March 30, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Chairman Johnson, Chairman Miller, thank you for organizing this joint hearing today. To my Congressional colleagues from the Wisconsin House delegation, thank you for joining us today. I also want to welcome you, Congressman Walz and Congressman Abraham to Wisconsin.

I think the fact that there are members from both parties, from both the Senate and the House, sends an important message to this community that we share a bipartisan commitment to get to the bottom of the problems at the Tomah VA, and to work together across party lines to make sure they never happen again.

I hope I speak for all of us when I say that there is no room for politics when it comes to ensuring that our nation’s veterans receive the timely, safe, and highest-quality care that they have earned.

I would also like to take this opportunity to say thank you to the panelists for joining us here today. In particular I would like to say that I have a tremendous amount of respect for the courage of Candace, Ryan, Noelle, Marv and Heather, to tell your stories today.

Stories of a sacred trust we must have with our veterans and their families. Stories of how that trust has been broken. Tragic stories of loss.

Today, we are here to fix what has been broken and work together to restore that trust. I want you to know that the stories you give voice to today will help us do that for others veterans.

The problems at the Tomah VA are both sobering and have had tragic consequences. Going back to 2006, veterans who were patients at the Tomah VA have tragically lost their lives.

Veterans who served our country -Angela Colby, Michael Bobak, Jacob Ward, Derik McGovern, Kraig Ferrington, and Jason Simcakoski were under the care of the former Tomah Chief of Staff and treated with prescription drugs, and all of them subsequently died of a drug overdose.

In fact, according to his sister Kari, who is here with us today, Mr. Ferrington, an Army veteran from De Pere, Wisconsin, died from a lethal mixture of prescription drugs in 2007 while under the care of the former Chief of Staff. The same cause of death that would tragically take the life of Jason Simcakoski some seven years later.

These are six examples of a larger problem that is in desperate need of solutions today. As we all know, after two, decade long wars, a large number of our service members are coming home with the damage of combat.

Our veterans and their families are facing a difficult challenge of physical injuries and PTSD and other mental illnesses. We must confront these problems more aggressively and more effectively and help them meet that challenge.

I believe the VA's overreliance on opioids has resulted in getting our veterans hooked instead of getting them help.

Over-prescription of opioids at the VA is clearly a root problem, but we must not lose sight of the fact that it is growing into a weed of addiction whose impact is being felt beyond the VA walls. The devastation of addiction, on families and our communities, that is being grown at the VA is stunning.

Reports indicate that, six years ago, a Marine Corps veteran was stoned on painkillers and tranquilizers from the Tomah VA while driving and killed a 6-week-old child, Ada Mae Miller.

As the Center for Investigative Reporting wrote about the Tomah VA medical center,

“Ada Mae's death is one of dozens of tragedies that begin to hint at how the flood of narcotics from the VA scarred this region.”

The fact is the problem of overprescribing at the VA and the collateral damage of addiction is not unique to Wisconsin. We are not alone.

The ripples are indeed being felt across America, in communities we work for everyday in Washington.

The families we have a responsibility to represent are struggling with the loss of a son or daughter, a father or mother, a sister or brother to addiction whose root is planted within the VA system. It is our job to make sure they do not feel alone and I believe we have a shared responsibility to do everything we can to pull this root out.

I thank you for providing me an opportunity to join you today. I look forward to continuing my work with this community and my colleagues in Congress to address these problems and put solutions in place to prevent these problems and tragedies from ever happening again.