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Minnesota Association of Professional
Employees (MAPE) Member



My name is Laura Heezen. I am a behavior analyst with the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs and a member of MAPE. Minnesota has five state veterans' homes and I work at the one in Minneapolis.

Before I started in state service, I had no idea how much I'd love working with veterans. Working with our elders in the last years of their lives is a privilege. I admire their military service and how much they sacrificed. It feels very significant to be part of a team that is working to ensure the last years of someone's life – especially an American hero's – is going to be as fulfilling as possible.

I am part of the behavioral health services unit – we have the only psychology department within the veterans' homes in our state. We have about 300 veterans in our Minneapolis home alone – most are elderly and have some form of cognitive impairment or mental illness.

As a Behavior Analyst, I provide specialized care to veterans with dementia. I work closely with our inter-disciplinary team to develop non-pharmacological approaches. In other words, we look at what we can do without having to add mood altering medications. I am proud that our program is a national model.

Living in a state veterans home is supposed to be a benefit for our veterans because of the sacrifices they made. Staff members caring for our veterans also made sacrifices when COVID-19 came into our facility. Every day during the pandemic, MAPE members came to work to care for veterans who were scared, sick, and missing their loved ones. We put our clients' health above our own because they needed us. I, along with other MAPE members, caught COVID as a result.

Some of my fellow members are now living with the long-term effects of COVID-19. We are tired and looking for relief for ourselves and our clients.

I am glad to know that this taskforce is considering how to support those who have been on the frontlines this last 18 months. I hope that you keep our veterans, and those who have been serving them in your thoughts. I also hope that you consider a recommendation to increase the amount of money for frontline workers. I know that there are thousands of facilities that have kept going this last 18 months – all with nurses, therapists, janitors, food service workers and more. Let's not forget any of them.

It is critical we serve all veterans across our state in facilities that are fully staffed with people who have found relief and recovery after COVID-19. We can – indeed, we must – do things better. We are responsible for ensuring that the hundreds of elderly veterans in our care lead the best lives they can. They risked their lives throughout the world to make it a safer place for all of us. We owe them this.

Thank you.