



Front row from left to right: Becky Edgren, Kerry Jett, Jaymie Noack. **Back Row from left to right:** Stephanie Loehrke, Jen Shaw, Jamie Petersen Johnson, Dee Sanchez, Ann Libbin, Nicole Bodenheimer, Lisa Wood. **Not pictured:** Chris Boehnlein, Courtney Lese and Penny Cain.

ADVOCATING FOR WHAT'S RIGHT

SOCIAL WORK TEAM AT KING WORKING FOR VETERANS

March 30, 2018 | By Chris Bucher

When she was a kid, Jennifer Shaw used to ride her bike a few miles down the road with friends and see military Veterans mingling outside an unknown building. Growing up in Waupaca, Shaw lived nearby the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs' Veterans Home at King and always had an interest in what was going on at the facility or across the street at the cemetery.

Little did she know that a couple of decades later, she'd be tasked with caring for our nation's heroes at the same place. Shaw, a social worker at the King, was recognized last year for her outstanding work when she was named the Social Worker of the Year by the Wisconsin Nursing Home Social Workers Association.

"I was very honored and touched," Shaw said of winning the award. "It's humbling, but it's also kind of embarrassing. I'm not really one to have attention on me. I look at my co-workers and think that they do the same or better than I do. I could say many things why everyone

(in King's social work department) should have been the Social Worker of the Year."

It's that same humility that inspired Shaw's co-workers to nominate her for the honor. With each residence hall on the King campus having its own social worker, Shaw is one of 13 on the team. It's the collaborative effort within the department that keeps things running smoothly.

"It's important for me to have a large group of social workers to bounce ideas off of and get their input," Becky Edgren, who works alongside Shaw at Stordock Hall, said. "There are people who have worked (at King) as social workers for 30 years, so they've got a lot more experience at King and in the field. They give me guidance on what they've done in the past or just give me insight. It's beneficial for everyone to have that."

Edgren served in the U.S. Air National Guard, 115th Fighter Wing in Madison. Unsure about which way she wanted her career to go, she knew that it had to involve helping others, and social work stuck out as an important way to give back. Edgren applied and was accepted as an intern at the King Home and quickly realized that was what she wanted to do – and where she wanted to work – for the rest of her career.

"Having been deployed, you relate to some of them with their service and the stories that they tell you," Edgren said. "You feel a connection when you meet

some of the members and you're in the military or you're a Veteran yourself; their eyes light up a little bit."

The same thing applied for Dee Sanchez, who's a social worker at MacArthur Hall on King's campus. Sanchez is a Veteran of the U.S. Navy and felt implored to do more to assist other Veterans with the care they receive. She got her bachelor's degree in social work and went back to school to earn a master's degree in the same field. When it came time to have an internship, she knew exactly where she wanted to go.

"I didn't want anything else, I wanted to go to King," Sanchez said. "My goal was to get here as an intern and then get a job full time, which I made happen."

Like many of the Veterans who are employed at the WDVA's three Veterans Homes, working with those who served and hearing their stories is something that allows a close relationship to build and continue growing.

"It was a calling, an awakening of sorts," Sanchez said. "I was just kind of floating at my job and wasn't being fulfilled. When I got my master's degree, I found out that (King) is where I wanted to be and this is what I wanted to do ... I wanted to help with the underserved Veteran population."

That rewarding feeling paired with having such a support system are things that motivate Edgren during her commute to work.

"Dee and I drive at least 45 minutes to an hour to come to work here and that's because I think it's a great place to work," she said. "I like our team and I don't think I'll ever work anywhere else."

For Shaw, there were aspirations of being a probation or parole officer during college. But with some sound advice from her father, she found social work.

"My dad said, 'No, you're too soft-hearted, you'll never make it,'" she said. "I'm not exactly sure what drove me into social work, but I fell into it and I knew it was the right fit. I loved learning about people and the ways to help them with different programs."

After working at several nursing homes to begin, Shaw found her way to King. She said that once she got to the facility, she felt right at home.

"When I came here I got to see what it was like, the things they offer and I had a chance to talk to the guys and thought this would be a cool place to work," she said. "It's just neat that the people you're taking care of are people who are willing to sacrifice so much for their country."

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While many have their own definition of what it means to be a social worker, Shaw said that the role of the social work department

at King is to be advocates for the hundreds of members at the home and carefully listen to their wishes and opinions.

"It's (the members') right to make a decision and remain able to do the things they want to do whether it's good for them or not," Shaw said. "They have the right to make a bad choice or be heard or do what they want to do."

"All of the social workers here are strong advocates and I don't think really any of us are afraid to voice our opinions ... we have a lot of strong personalities and a lot of people who are passionate about being social workers."