State government has a responsibility to take care of aging veterans, who answered a call to serve, and are now living out their twilight years in a state-run veterans’ home. But sadly, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the State failed the veterans living at the LaSalle Veterans’ Home. Overall, in October and November of 2020, 85% percent of the veterans at LaSalle contracted COVID-19, and 36 of them died. Dozens of staff members also got sick.

Illinois Auditor General Frank Mautino issued a blistering report on the outbreak on May 5. In it, he points to multi-level failures, and what can only be described as an attempted cover-up by the Pritzker Administration, which shielded Pritzker’s Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) leaders and his Deputy Governor who oversees Health & Human Services from culpability, even though it has now been determined that they knew about the outbreak and failed to act in a reasonable timeframe. Illinoisans should be outraged. I know I am.

In the weeks and months that followed the tragedy, Governor Pritzker repeatedly placed blame at the feet of the Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) and her Chief of Staff. In fact, Pritzker’s Director of Human Services Inspector General issued a report in April of 2021 that alluded to an “absence of any standard operating procedures in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak,” and a statement that “the outbreak was not being meaningfully tracked by the IDVA Chief of Staff.”

In his report, Mautino called that report “flawed,” saying, “Although the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) officials were informed of the increasing positive cases almost on a daily basis by the Illinois Department of Veterans’ Affairs (IDVA) Chief of Staff, IDPH did not identify and respond to the seriousness of the outbreak.”

It’s unconscionable that the Pritzker Administration waited almost two weeks to do a site visit at LaSalle after the outbreak was identified. During that time, the virus spread throughout the facility and it became the deadliest disease outbreak at a state-run facility in our state’s history. The IDVA Director and her Chief of Staff were forced to resign, but the IDPH Director continued to serve until very recently when she took a job elsewhere. Deputy Governor Sol Flores continues to serve in the Pritzker Administration.

As the ranking Republican on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, I demanded answers and accountability from the moment I learned of the LaSalle outbreak. Calls for action and hearings were ignored for months, as the Governor and his appointees ducked questions and did everything in their power to minimize their role in the tragedy.

At the same time, Senate Republicans filed a comprehensive package of legislation that would address many of the problems encountered at LaSalle. Bills that would have required IDPH to engage in an onsite visit within one day of the identification of an infectious outbreak at a veterans’ home, required facilities to conduct outbreak preparedness drills, and required past employees to cooperate in investigations by the Inspector General were all blocked by statehouse Democrats. To this day, not one of these bills has been assigned for a hearing or vote.

Twenty-seven families are currently suing the State of Illinois and the Illinois Department of Veterans’ Affairs for gross mismanagement of the situation. With the issuance of the May 5 report, I wouldn’t be surprised if IDPH is also named in the lawsuits. Governor Pritzker and his appointees must be held accountable for his role in this tragedy. The families of the veterans lost in the LaSalle outbreak deserve nothing less.

[Click here](http://www.auditor.illinois.gov/Audit-Reports/Performance-Special-Multi/Performance-Audits/2022_Releases/22-LaSalle-Vet-Home-Covid-19-Response-Perf-Full.pdf) to access the full audit report.

State Senator Craig Wilcox is the Senator for the 32nd Senate District in McHenry and Lake Counties, a retired U.S. Airforce Colonel, and the Republican Spokesperson on the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee.