

Paul L Evans
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
DISTRICT 20



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

For Immediate Release
June 15, 2021

For more information contact:
Evan Sorce 503-986-1420

Rep. Paul Evans Statement on the Passing of Former Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs (ODVA) Director James "Jim" Willis

SALEM— Representative Paul Evans (D-Monmouth) today issued the following statement regarding the passing of Former ODVA Director James "Jim" Willis

"Yesterday we lost a genuine hero.

James "Jim" Willis passed yesterday after fighting one last battle (a terminal disease). Jim Willis was a good man, a dedicated public servant, and the lone steward of veterans' issues during the early days of our response to 9/11. As the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs (ODVA) director, he found creative ways to keep a struggling agency afloat by building and maintaining relationships throughout the State of Oregon.

I had the honor of collaborating with Jim during my time working with Governor Kulongoski. We worked in common cause in navigating the Great Recession as well as performing the duties associated with implementing the Governor's Task Force on Veterans' Services -- these endeavors largely guided our efforts in strategic investments in veterans' policy ever since. In truth, Jim and I had a rocky relationship over the decades we knew each other, but we always found a way to put the mission first and develop mutual respect.

Although Jim Willis likely wouldn't believe it, I always appreciated him far more than I let him know. Jim Willis was an old-school warrior, something that I both admired and struggled with. He would fight like hell for what he believed to be the right course of action. That said, once a decision was made, he would salute smartly and put it into action.

We both loved the USAF -- the non-pilot -- part of the USAF. We were ground troops of the USAF during combat tours a generation apart. He spent a tour (and a little more) in Vietnam, while I spent time in Iraq/Afghanistan and a few places before 9/11. We shared an understanding of the price of freedom and the obligations involved with caring for the veterans of the wars we send troops to fight and the families impacted.

Over the past two decades, there were times Willis made decisions that made me shake my head. Jim and I had different views of personnel management and how to build support for veterans' homes. However, I want to be crystal clear about my friend and fallen colleague, Jim Willis: Oregon has never had an advocate like him. I have known every director since Staryl Austin; no ODVA Director fought as hard, as long, or as well for the men and women who served.

I mourn the loss of a real hero today, a man who invested his life in defense of our nation, protecting our communities, and caring for the men and women we sent into Harm's Way. Oregon is now less because of his passing."

###