

Letter from Annie Wittenmyer to the Soldiers' Aid Societies of Iowa Ladies, 1861

Weekly Gate City

Keokuk: 1861

Monday Morning, Nov. 25

Report of Mrs. Wittenmyer, to the Soldiers' Aid Societies of Iowa Ladies

Having been delegated by the Keokuk Aid Society to visit the hospitals of the West, for the purpose of ascertaining their arrangements, and the wants of the sick and wounded among our volunteers, I am instructed to lay before you a brief report of their condition, and to furnish you with a list of articles needed to promote the comfort and secure the convalescence of the sick soldiers, from our State, who are now in hospital.

That there has been great distress among our troops on account of sickness, and that a lack of hospital stores and comforts has aggravated their sufferings, I may not conceal.

That there should be a lack of such hospital furniture and stores as the Government proposed to supply, may be a matter of surprise to some, but when we matter of surprise to some, but when we take into consideration that the Government, at the commencement of this war, was almost in a state of disorganization, and that within the compass of a few months, a vast military campaign has been set on foot, involving millions of dollars, and the health and comfort of hundreds of thousand of men, and that the Government has had to contend with an injured credit and hordes of dishonest army contractors, there is little cause to wonder that the supplies are not more bountiful.

But some of our soldiers have still more serious difficulties to contend with, — their surgeons have not made the necessary requisitions, are lacking in moral character, addicted to intemperate habits, or are overbearing to their men and exhibit but little concern- for their health, comfort, or cleanliness. We may not be able to remedy all of the evils connected with the hospital arrangements of our brave Iowa volunteers; but we have done, and are still doing a great deal to ameliorate their condition, and we hope that very soon, aided by the societies throughout the State who are cooperating with us, we will be able to render their condition very comfortable.

I am requested by our soldiers to express to you, ladies, their deep and heartfelt gratitude for the substantial testimony you have given them, in the way of comforts and delicacies, of your interest of their welfare and your high appreciation of their services; and I have been assured that the consciousness that hundreds of ladies in their own State were thinking of them, and laboring for their comfort, has cheered many a sick soldier, through dark hours of pain, suffering and neglect. The ladies of our State have done nobly — let us continue our efforts — much still is to be done.

We hope to be able to place in each Regiment, at least two good and efficient female nurses, who will labor for the comfort of our sick, and have charge and take care of our hospital stores. We are fully

convinced of the importance of this measure and have secured the services of some of our best ladies for this work. Some of them are already in the field, others will soon follow. Most of the nurses heretofore have been taken from the ranks and are distressingly awkward and rough in their approaches to the men, and know little or nothing about taking care of the sick. A woman of intelligence and character could do more to inspire confidence and render the sick comfortable than a half dozen such men, for women are peculiarly adapted to the kind and delicate offices of a sick room.

Women, weak and dependent as they are, are the most efficient agents for doing good, either as nurses or visitors among our hospitals. They are received with a degree of confidence and cordiality that no man however great his military or medical reputation, can command, and with womanly hearts and womanly tact, they can lay hold of influences that men cannot reach.

Several instances of this kind have recently transpired under the supervision of our society, demonstrating this fact beyond controversy, and proving to us the importance of having female delegates frequently in the field. And the importance of such a measure is still more apparent when we reflect that, the medical and nursing departments of our army are fraught with a ten-fold interest, as regards the saving of valuable life, above any other department.

Another very serious difficulty that our sick soldiers have to contend with, one which they feel as bitterly as an other is, the impractical plans of the Sanitary Commission. St. Louis has been made by them the great rendezvous of the sick of the Western divisions of the army, and it is their plan to draw away the sick from their regiments for a distance of from 100 to 200 miles, and concentrate them at that place. Very extensive preparations have been made there for their accommodation, and, already, there are nearly three thousand sick soldiers in St. Louis.

While we can but speak in terms of praise of the Sanitary Commission, as regards the St. Louis hospitals, the impracticability of their plans will appear, when we take into consideration the fact that, most of our troops are at remote distances from that post, and any attempt to transport very sick men to that point would be hazardous to human life — if not very sick, it would be a needless expense and trouble. Besides, our sick soldiers are decidedly opposed to being separated from their regiments and companions, (who are ready to stand by them to the death,) and placed in a promiscuous crowd of strangers in a General Hospital.

The consequence is, that while large sums of money are being expended in St. Louis for hospital purposes, the regiment hospital are grossly neglected, and our sick are left to choose between staying with their regiments, and suffering the privations and dangers consequent upon a lack of suitable hospital stores and nurses, and of going to St. Louis at the hazard of their lives. They mostly choose to stay with the regiments and suffer; and the depths of anguish and despair which have wrung with agony many a noble spirit, God alone can fathom.

Many of our Surgeons are noble men, who will do their duty in the camp or in the field, and are doing all they can for the comfort of their men; but there are others who will best secure the interest of themselves and their men by resigning their positions immediately.

It is painful for me to speak of these things and I do it only from a sense of duty, and for the purpose of showing how many difficulties our sick soldiers have to contend with, and the importance of laboring for the regiment hospitals.

As far as my observation extended our troops are well clothed and well fed, and but for the disabilities under which they labor with regard to hospital supplies, &c., &c., the comfort of the men would be

tolerably well secured. But the miasmatic districts in which some of our regiments have been quartered, has been very fatal to their health.

This is especially true of the Iowa 2d, 3d, and 7th.

The Second, which has suffered more severely on account of sickness than any other, has been brought up from Bird's Point to St. Louis to recruit, and the health of the regiment is improving slowly.

There are at this time about 200 out on furlough, 200 to be prescribed for daily, in camp, and 80 in the General Hospital. Some of the sickest of the men were left behind, in Cairo.

The Third, which has been in Quincy for the last six weeks recruiting, has been ordered to St. Louis and is now considered fit for duty.

The Seventh Regiment had two hundred of their sick-list before the battle of Belmont; as they suffered severely in that conflict their number has been greatly increased.

The health of our regiments is comparatively good — being more recently called into the field and at a more favorable season of the year, they are not likely to suffer so severely.

The articles needed for hospital use are —

Bed-shirts and drawers, made of Canton flannel, bed-sacks, pillow-sacks, and cases, size for cot, sheets and comfortables, size for cots, yarn socks, slippers, or cloth shoes, towels, lint bandages, and old linen or cotton clothes, wines, jellies, dried or canned fruits, farina, corn starch, &c.

Any one, or all of these articles will be most acceptable, and if forwarded here, will be taken immediately on to where they are most needed. We are in correspondence with the various regiments and hospitals, and we will frequently visit our hospitals and we pledge ourselves that, whatever stores are sent to us will be taken to where they are most needed, and used for the comfort of our sick soldiers.

We make no appeal to your patriotism or generosity, for we are persuaded that you will heartily cooperate with us in our effort to make them comfortable.

Banded together as we are for a high and noble purpose, let us, true to our country and humanity, and trusting in God, go forward in the prosecution of the work before us with zeal and courage, and may civil and religious liberty crown our efforts.

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Annie Wittenmyer
Corresponding Secretary
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